

Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

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Babel

A Girl Embarks on a Journey of Words



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A Girl Embarks on a
Journey of Words

Her journey across this new, mysterious world was about to begin.

She couldn't imagine what might happen or what was waiting for her.

However, moving forward was the only option if she was to have any chance of getting home.

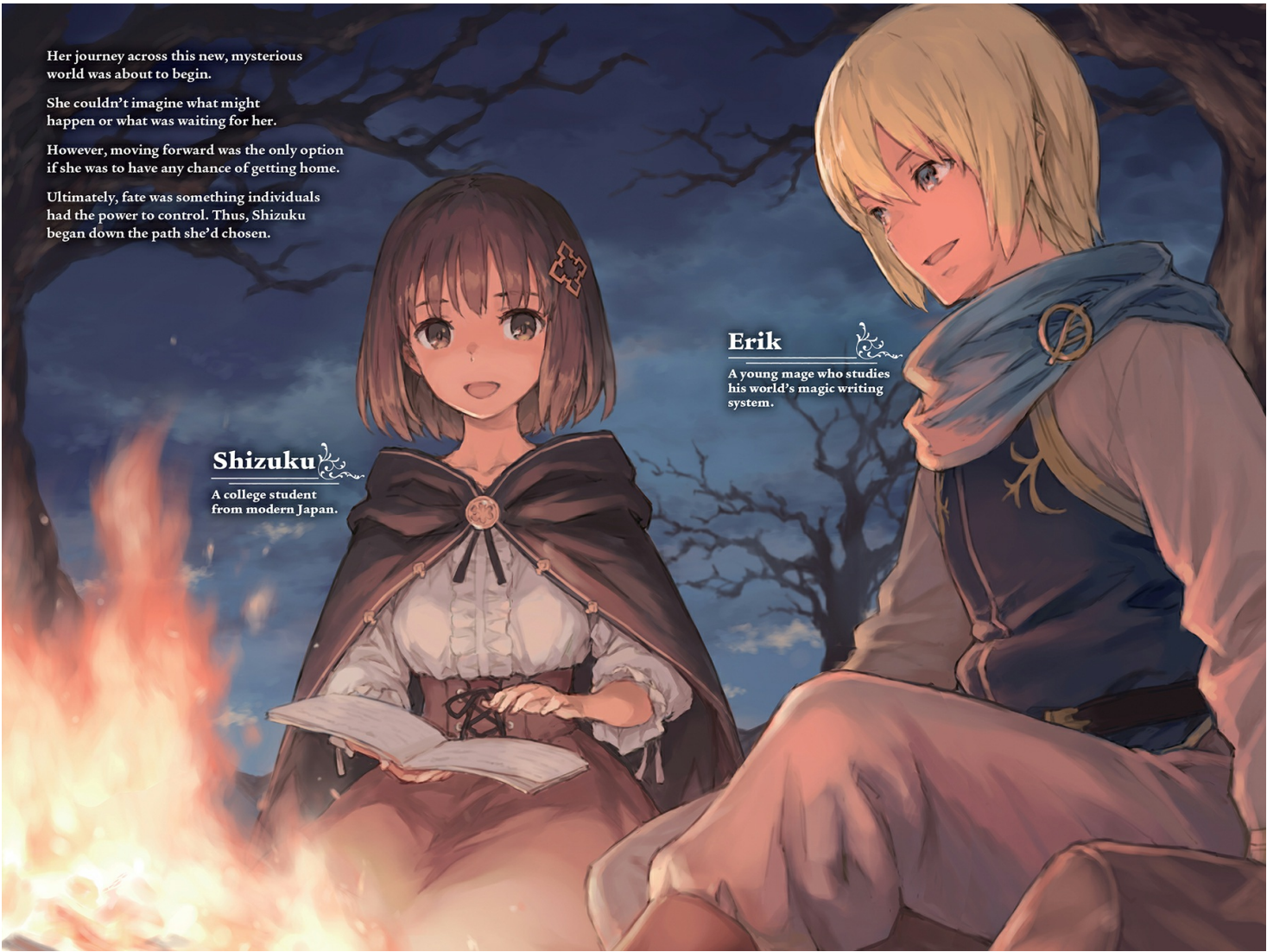
Ultimately, fate was something individuals had the power to control. Thus, Shizuku began down the path she'd chosen.

Shizuku

A college student from modern Japan.

Erik

A young mage who studies his world's magic writing system.





“I have been
awaiting
your return,
princess.
The king is
expecting you.
Come with
me.”

Mea



A demon girl whom
Shizuku meets in a castle
at the bottom of a lake.

Babel

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A Girl Embarks on a Journey of Words

Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa


NEW YORK

Copyright

Babel 1

Kuji Furumiya

Translation by Amelia Imogen Mason Cover art by Haruyuki Morisawa

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Babel

A Girl Embarks
on a Journey of Words



Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

1. The Language of Beginnings

2. The Water Droplet

3. The Lost Princess

4. Towering in the Sky

5. The Forbidden Dream



Main Characters

Shizuku Minase

A college student who was suddenly transported to another world from modern-day Japan. She embarks on a journey to search for a way to get home.

Erik

A peculiar young mage who studies the magic script in a remote town. Accompanies Shizuku on her journey.

Mea

A demon girl. She meets Shizuku after waiting centuries for a princess to return to her castle at the bottom of a lake.

Tarkis

A mercenary who works all over the continent. Travels around searching for trouble and opportunities to offer his services.

Lydia

A female mage and a friend of Tarkis. With a wealth of experience under her belt, her skills would give court mages a run for their money.

Kaito



A dagger-wielding boy who joins the group that sneaks into Candela Castle. A twisted individual who enjoys killing people.

Aviella

An enigmatic woman. She possesses a mysterious book detailing forbidden curses that were supposedly erased from history.

Idos

The royal chief mage at Candela Castle. He gathers a group of mages to construct a large-scale curse.



The Lands of *Babel*

Current Year: 1960 (Year 832 by Farsas historical reckoning)



Once upon a time, this continent suffered during the terrible Dark Age.

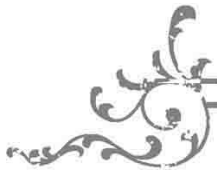
Nowadays, things couldn't be more different.

Even the long Age of Witches has passed into legend.

Everything remains at an ignorant yet peaceful standstill.

Until a powerless young girl from another world finds herself there, that is.

1. The Language of Beginnings



It had started with a hole. A hole that, for no logical reason, opened right in front of her.

After appearing from nowhere, it quite resembled a nonreflective, full-length mirror.

There had been nobody else around. No other humans could've taken her place.

Whenever she thought back on it, she found herself helpless to do anything but scratch her head in confusion.

Why in the world had that wormhole linking two worlds chosen her of all people?



"It's so hot..."

Blistering sunlight poured down from above.

Shizuku Minase lugged her heavy, black bag back onto her shoulder. It lurched to one side, pulling her along.

It was the first day of summer vacation. Much to Shizuku's contempt, it was exceedingly hot, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The temperature rose year over year. Soon enough, just taking a stroll outside would be akin to burning.

The first-year university student trudged along the scorching hot sidewalk.

"This weighs a ton..."

No sooner did Shizuku say the words than she frowned. What if speaking the thought aloud made her bag feel even heavier? She tried telling the bag that it

was light instead, hoping to make it so.

In addition to her two dictionaries, her bag also contained several other bulky books. As if her own possessions weren't weighty enough, she'd borrowed some materials from the study room to help with her summer vacation report. The English-Japanese dictionary and German-Japanese dictionary that she carried with her everywhere certainly weren't helping the problem, but they were necessities.

When she happened to look up, Shizuku saw the straight road had become distorted by heat haze. The shimmering in the distance caught her attention.

Shizuku wiped the sweat from her forehead. It was when she brought her hand back down again that she noticed it.

"What's that?"

A hole had appeared before her without her noticing until now.

The large, floating aperture had shown up without warning or realistic explanation, rather like a magic door springing from nowhere. Pitch-black and elliptical. Shizuku stopped in her tracks to examine it.

"Maybe I'm seeing things..."

Perhaps it was heatstroke. If so, she needed to find shade before passing out and inconveniencing someone.

Intending to do just that, Shizuku tried to walk past the hole. However, when she caught a glimpse of it from the side, the sight of it shocked her.

"...A line?"

From the flank, the hole became a singular line, almost perfectly flat. This thing was just like one of those wormholes that showed up in old movies.

Shizuku felt incredibly frightened yet undeniably curious.

She gently extended her hand toward it, almost near enough to touch its black surface. As close as she was, she couldn't sense any differences in temperature or pressure.

The very next moment, she was struck by a sudden gust of wind.

There'd been no change in the weather. The hole had abruptly started pulling in the air that surrounded her, as though to swallow her.

“What?! W-wait!”

Panicked, Shizuku tried desperately to keep her feet firmly on the ground. She looked behind her, frantically searching for something to hold on to, but she found nothing that would help. The street was empty, and no one had noticed what was happening to her.

Shizuku's mind went blank save the instinct to escape. She outstretched an arm behind her.

She wanted to scream but could produce no sound. Despite its weight, her bag was pulled into the hole, followed by her left hand, then half of her body.

“Somebody, please...,” Shizuku begged, but her strained cry floated up and away into the hot summer air.

She made one last grasp with her right hand.

With that, Shizuku Minase silently vanished from the world without a trace.

※

White space stretched on indefinitely.

Shizuku couldn't see a thing. She couldn't even open her eyes.

She had the feeling she was floating in some kind of thick substance.

Everything was there—silent.

Unrestrained power. A detached perspective.

Shizuku shuddered slightly. Something used this as an opportunity to weasel its way into her. It sneaked its way in then settled.

It was an overwhelming change. Her very existence was being warped out of shape.

For a moment, she grasped everything, but then she forgot it all again.

※

“O-oh...”

Shizuku heard the noise escape her lips, but it didn't sound like her at all. She

placed her hand on her neck.

Her recollection of what had happened felt uninterrupted yet fractured.

Shizuku squinted against the overwhelming heat. When she looked up at the sky, she saw something soaring high above. Its shape wasn't quite avian, and it wasn't big enough to be a plane. It slowly beat its wings as it glided into the distance.

"A dragon?" Shizuku muttered idly; however, she soon realized how stupid that was and shook her head to dismiss the idea.

It was *really* hot now, even more than before. Shizuku picked up her bag with a sweat-damp hand.

It was only then that she finally took a look around.

She'd noticed things were different before, of course, but she'd hoped to ignore that.

The asphalt beneath her feet was gone. She was standing in a desert. A dry breeze blew past.

"...A desert?"

The sand stretched out for as far as the eye could see.

Shizuku had never seen anything like it in movies or on TV. It was the very definition of surreal.

There were no shadows. She couldn't locate a point at which the desert came to an end, and this realization made the situation real at last.

"This isn't good..."

The wind tossed a bit of sand against Shizuku's face. That sensation was genuine, at least. She had no idea what was going on, but she knew standing around wouldn't help.

Shizuku looked down at her clothes. She was wearing a sleeveless white shirt and a pair of cropped fitted pants. As someone with minimal experience in the great outdoors, Shizuku wasn't sure whether this outfit was apt or ill-advised for a desert.

After scanning her surroundings in all directions, Shizuku spotted the edge of the desert on the distant horizon. Beyond, she spied a few short plants scattered around. Maybe that was where the sandy terrain gave way to a grassy plain. It didn't take long for Shizuku to decide what to do.

"One bottle... I wonder if I'll make it."

She had one half-empty bottle of water in her bag.

Shizuku had never found herself lost in a daydream before, so she couldn't even say for sure that this was real.

She could have pinned her hopes on this being an illusion and stayed put, but that would be gambling her life on a chance this was all fake.

"I just hope I haven't walked out into the road in real life," she said to herself.

Shizuku took her long-sleeved jacket out of her bag and placed it over her head before slinging her heavy bag back on her shoulders. She considered taking some of her books out for a moment but quickly decided against it. Leaving behind her own books would've been bad enough, but tossing aside the ones from the library was unthinkable.

Remembering that she had her phone with her, Shizuku retrieved it from her bag, only to discover it had no signal. She smiled awkwardly, then looked back up.

"Okay. Here goes."

If she'd found herself standing somewhere other than in a desert, she might have been upset and struggled to bring herself to move for a while. However, it turned out that her quiet fear of death pushed away any needless distress to the back of her mind.

While applauding herself for staying astoundingly calm, Shizuku took her first step into this new world.

She tensed up her toes to steady herself. With every stride, her feet sank into the sand, the gritty particles seeping into her sneakers. The hot breeze buffeted her, urging her forward. From the moment she inhaled, the dry air scorched her throat.

“Ouch...”

Shizuku walked and walked, but the grassy plain didn't get any closer. Every now and then, she took a sip of water. It was lukewarm, but she found it quite pleasant considering the circumstances.

Sensing her confidence waning, Shizuku shook her head in an attempt to snap out of it.

“I wonder if everyone's going to worry about me...”

Shizuku lived in a university dormitory. How long would it take for her family to realize something was amiss?

She was the middle child of three sisters, having grown up alongside her easygoing older one and her reliable yet ruthless younger one. Shizuku acknowledged that she was more realistic than her older sister and milder mannered than her younger one. Still, when she looked at herself outside the context of her family, she struggled to identify what kind of person she really was.

She'd gone to the same elementary, middle, and high school as her siblings, and she'd always been compared with them. Even when she tried to reflect on her experiences, she had a habit of comparing herself with her sisters first.

There was, however, one thing she knew for certain. When it came to looking for a job—a process she'd heard a lot about—having such an ill-defined sense of self was going to have disastrous consequences.

Even if she managed to avoid calamity, she knew that being so unsure of herself wasn't going to do her any favors.

That was why she'd chosen to leave home and attend a women's college in a different prefecture.

The Faculty of Humanities offered a wide variety of liberal arts classes to choose from, and every day was enjoyable. She hadn't joined any clubs, but she still had time to pick one, and she liked the idea of getting a part-time job as well.

This summer vacation had been teeming with promise and potential. But in

reality, she'd now found herself in a desert.

"A desert... Why a desert...?"

The only such place in Japan she could think of was the Tottori Sand Dunes. She didn't know how she'd wound up in Tottori, considering it was hundreds of kilometers away. However, if she was truly there, then at least she'd be able to get home with some work.

"If this *isn't* Tottori, then..."

Shizuku paused there and spent a moment collecting her thoughts. In an extreme situation like this, it was best not to let her mind run wild. For now, she just needed to keep her eyes fixed on her immediate goal. It wasn't like she could see anything else.

Her head began to spin, and her vision distorted. Soon, her body felt heavy.

Despite this, Shizuku pushed ahead, thinking that if that hole was to appear again, she'd jump straight inside.



The horse-drawn stagecoach made its way down a street too narrow to be called a main road.

Several merchants sat comfortably inside the coach. Having finished buying what they needed in the big city, they were on their way back to their own town.

"Cotton fabrics have gone up in price slightly, haven't they?"

"You can bet the uncertainty in Anneli is to blame. If anything happens there, cotton production will take a heavy blow."

"You're not wrong about that. It's why I stocked up a little. There will always be women who want to get their hands on some."

As the men continued with their quiet conversation, the young man at the back of the carriage opened his book.

He had brown hair so light that it appeared nearly golden, and his eyes were a deep shade of blue. He wore a single-piece outfit and possessed androgynous facial features. The beautiful, expressionless young man quickly became

engrossed in his thick tome, ignoring his fellow passengers' discussion.

The merchants' topic of conversation meandered elsewhere.

"Come to think of it, I've heard that there's a strange disease making the rounds to the west."

"A strange disease? Could I catch it?"

"Doubtful. I hear it only affects children. Your skin will crawl when you hear the details. You see..."

At that moment, the stagecoach abruptly slowed its pace. A *clunk* soon followed, and the vehicle came to a complete stop.

One of the passengers rolled back the drapes and looked outside. They hadn't reached the town yet. A different man called out to the driver, "What's the problem?"

"Someone's collapsed," the driver replied tersely.

The merchants exchanged glances. Two of them exited the carriage to have a look. Just as the driver had claimed, somebody was lying down on the grass ahead of them. As the men ran toward them, they realized it was a young girl. They bustled over to check on her.

"Do you think she's a traveler who passed out while she was walking?"

"She's covered in sand. She must have come through the desert."

"Surely not. She never would've made it dressed like that."

The young girl sported unusual attire. The men had never seen anything like it before. She had black hair with a slight brown tinge. Judging by her face, she was probably from abroad. That made it hard to judge her precise age, although they could tell she was young. One of the men placed his hand on her forehead.

"Is she alive?"

"...Seems like it," replied a monotone voice from behind.

The merchants turned around to find the young man who'd been sitting at the back of the carriage slipping between them and kneeling on the ground. He placed his hand on the young girl's neck to feel for a pulse.

“Are you a mage? Just the man for the job.”

“I am indeed, but not the healing sort, regrettably. She’s breathing, so do me a favor and carry her back to the stagecoach to help her cool down.”

“O-of course.”

“Somebody fetch some water!”

The men leaped into flustered action and carried the girl over to the carriage. The wives of the merchants, who’d been waiting inside, wet their flannels and used them to wipe the girl’s face. They also dripped some water on her black hair, which was still hot from the sun. While the young mage issued orders, he occasionally examined the item he was holding—a cloth bag that belonged to the girl. It was strangely shaped and extremely heavy. It wasn’t the kind of luggage someone would carry with them through a desert by any means.

He gazed down at it for a short while, then deposited it in one corner of the carriage and sat down.

With this new, unexpected consignment now on board, the stagecoach resumed its journey.

By the time Shizuku woke up, night had already fallen, and they’d reached their destination.



“...Leaving already, Shizuku?”

Shizuku spun and saw her younger sister, Mio, standing at the entrance.

She had big eyes and naturally long eyelashes. Her pretty face and can-do attitude made her something of a celebrity at her school. Shizuku gave her sister, who was two years younger than her, an awkward smile, then slung her bag—which contained a change of clothes—over her shoulder.

“What do you mean, ‘already’?” Shizuku replied. “If I don’t leave soon, I’ll be late for the dorm entrance ceremony.”

“Why couldn’t you just stay home and commute to college?”

“It’s three hours each way. I’ll be back for Golden Week.”

Shizuku’s parents and older sister had offered to see her off at the station, but

she'd turned down their proposal. Her things had been shipped in advance. Plus, it was a weekday. She would be perfectly fine on her own.

The sight of her sister leaving so unceremoniously made Mio frown. "Why did you decide to leave home, Shizuku?" she asked.

"Huh?" Shizuku looked over her shoulder, hand still on the door. Why was Mio asking that now? It felt like Mio was peering right through Shizuku. She couldn't help but feel guilty...



Shizuku's eyes fluttered open.

"Mio?"

The room was dimly lit. Shizuku stared as hard as she could at the raised ceiling above.

There were no lights on, but bluish-white moonlight filtered through the window. Shizuku hefted herself up and gazed around the small room. There was nothing in the shabbily boarded-up place but a small, western-style wardrobe and the bed Shizuku was in.

"Wh-where am I...?"

Shizuku shook her head in disbelief, then reflected on the events of that day.

She recalled trying as hard as she could to keep plowing through the scorching sand. She thought that might have been a dream, but when she absentmindedly ran her fingers through her hair, she felt grit stuck to the strands. Looking down, she saw white sand on her fingers.

"Huh? That was real?" she muttered to herself. The sound of her own voice made her shudder.

Where was she? Evidently, she'd evaded death in the desert, but she couldn't remember what had happened afterward. Shizuku slowly stepped out of bed. She put on her sneakers, which were sitting by the wall, and made her way over to the door. However, someone else opened the door before she got the chance to. Warm light came streaming in, causing Shizuku to shield her eyes with her hand reflexively.

“Oh, you’re awake. That’s a relief.”

The voice sounded like it belonged to a gentle woman. Shizuku’s eyes widened slightly when she saw its owner.

She seemed to be in her thirties, and she regarded Shizuku with a warm, kind smile.

Shizuku apprehensively responded with a question of her own. “Ummm, are you the person who saved me? I suddenly found myself in a desert, and I...”

“Did you think you’d survive the Souit Desert dressed as you are? You collapsed while making your way across.”

“The Souit Desert...?”

That didn’t sound familiar. Shizuku couldn’t help but feel disappointed. Still, she needed to thank this woman. She gave her a deep bow.

“Thank you very much for helping me. I wouldn’t be here without you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s not like we could’ve left a young girl like you to fend for herself. Where were you headed?”

“Well... That’s a good question.”

Shizuku wished she knew. Where was that desert? There definitely weren’t any places like that near the college she attended. She pressed a hand against her stinging, sunburned neck.

“I’m sorry, but could you tell me where exactly I am?” she asked.

Shizuku remembered being confronted by that black hole and walking through the burning sand. If none of that was a dream, then...

Shizuku looked at the woman square in the face. She definitely didn’t seem Japanese. If anything, she appeared white. The woman smiled at Shizuku again, her face the picture of genuine kindness.

“You’re in a town called Wanope, in western Tarys.”

“Tarys...?”

“That’s the name of this country. You really don’t know? It’s a small nation on the east side of the continent.”

“The continent...”

Shizuku didn't know the name of every country in the world, but if this wasn't Japan, then how had she managed to get here?

More importantly, though, something else didn't feel quite right, something she couldn't get out of her head.

“Ummm...,” Shizuku began, trying her best not to seem apprehensive. “You speak very good Japanese.”

“‘Japanese’? What's that?”

Suddenly, everything seemed to go dark. Feeling dizzy, Shizuku pressed her hand against her forehead.

“The language you're speaking right now,” Shizuku clarified. “It's the one they speak in my country...in Japan.”

“‘Japan’? I've never heard of that. Is it in the west?”

Shizuku didn't answer, unsurprised by the woman's reaction. The moment she'd seen this woman, she'd been baffled by how fluently she spoke Japanese. As their conversation continued, Shizuku became more baffled by it. And that had led her here. Shizuku posed another inquiry, hoping to determine whether there was still a sliver of hope left.

“What continent are we on? Eurasia?”

“The continent's the continent. It doesn't have a name.”

“R-right...”

Shizuku's knees almost buckled. She closed her eyes.

She was able to communicate, yet she still didn't know where she was.

“So I know I'm not in Japan, at least. And...”

“Hold on, are you lost? Do you know where you came from?”

Shizuku knew that much. Unfortunately, telling this woman wouldn't bring her any closer to the answers she wanted.

She met the woman's eyes. “I want to see a map. The biggest map of this

country that you can find.”



Shizuku didn't know much about the paranormal phenomenon of teleportation.

She'd only encountered the idea in fantasy novels she read as a kid—stories where people wound up lost in a totally different land or another era. Those stories, however, were entirely fictional, not the sort of thing Shizuku would've experienced herself.

Shizuku's mind raced as she rushed through the town at night. The merchants, who were shutting up shop for the evening, were startled by her hurry and unusual attire, but she didn't have time to fret over what others thought. Shizuku kept her gaze fixed straight ahead as she sprinted as fast as she could down the street and into the big building on the corner.

It was pitch-black inside.

“A map? There's one of the continent in the entrance to the library. It should still be unlocked at this time of night,” the woman had told her. Yet now that Shizuku was here, she realized the place was closed. There were no signs of other people, and the lights were out.

Still, Shizuku was desperate. She had to know, and it couldn't wait.

Shizuku whipped her phone out of her pocket and used it to illuminate her path.

The entrance hall was about the same size as a school classroom. She found the thing she'd been looking for on the back wall—a world map measuring roughly three meters wide. Shizuku held up the weak, electronic light to examine it.

There it was—the continent, surrounded by water.

Were she pushed to describe it, Shizuku would've called it oblong, almost rectangular.

There were no continents of that shape on the world that Shizuku knew.

“No way.”

Her phone slid out of her hand, hitting the wooden floor with a harsh *thud*. Shizuku staggered forward, feeling like she might join the device at any moment. She clasped her hands over her mouth to stop a building scream.

“...Ah.”

That was the only sound she managed to muster. It felt like there was something hard stuck in her throat, blocking anything else from getting out.

Her body felt weak. She couldn't move. The blood drained from her head. Her body suddenly went cold.

What was happening? She didn't have a clue where she was or why she was here. Worse yet, she was all alone.

Dumbfounded, Shizuku stood rooted in place.

“Ah... Ah...,” she whimpered, wringing her throat just to make a sound.

She shifted her focus away from her overwrought and fragile emotional state for a moment and forced herself to take a breath in.

As hard as it had been to squeeze out, the sound of her own voice made Shizuku feel a little more grounded. She clenched her fingers and exhaled.

“Hah...”

Aware that she could end up hyperventilating if she wasn't careful, Shizuku let out a long breath that echoed through the dark building. Shizuku took a deep breath in again, then released another audible exhale.

Anxiety welled up inside her. Confusion threatened to become terror at any moment. She knew she needed to calm down before that happened. Either that, or...on the off chance that this *was* a dream, somebody needed to hurry up and wake her.

Noticing her voice was starting to tremble, Shizuku gasped for air. Slowly but surely, the whole thing was beginning to feel real. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, and she felt her throat constrict.

“Th-this can't be real...,” Shizuku whispered. “Why is this happening to—?”

Before she had the chance to finish, the voice of a young man interrupted her,

causing Shizuku to all but jump from her skin.

“Be quiet, would you?” the voice chided, sounding exasperated.

Shizuku had assumed she was alone. Trembling with fear, she turned in the direction of the speaker.

A young man emerged from the shadows silently.

He had brown hair with hints of gleaming gold. His deep-blue eyes gave off an unusual sincerity, and his facial features were androgynous.

He lit the candle he was holding and picked up Shizuku’s phone.

“What’s this? A magic implement?” he asked as he walked over to pass it back. Shizuku had never heard such a term before. “The way you’re dressed is certainly very interesting. I don’t know which country you’re from, but you should know that making noise in the library is frowned upon. Understand?”

He spoke to her as a parent would to an ill-behaved child, but Shizuku found herself nodding obediently anyway. She took her phone back and gazed down.

“Th-thank you. I’m sorry.”

“You’re the girl who collapsed earlier today, aren’t you? I’m glad you’re okay, at least.”

“You know about that?”

Shizuku looked the man in the face for the first time. Much like the woman she’d met earlier, he didn’t seem to be Japanese.

His appearance suggested he was in his early twenties, and his face was strikingly handsome. However, he seemed somewhat unapproachable, perhaps because of his disagreeable expression.

The man nodded in reply to Shizuku’s question.

“I was a passenger on the stagecoach that found you. Where did you come from? Are you lost?”

“I don’t know if I’m lost, exactly...,” Shizuku answered. “I came from Japan. Do you know of it?”

“No.”

She'd been prepared for this answer, but the incongruity of hearing it still made her gasp involuntarily.

If *lost* was the right word for it, then she was hopelessly lost, more lost than anyone had ever been before. She was eighteen years old, yet she had no idea how to get home.

To make matters worse, she wasn't sure whether getting back was even a possibility. As this doubt crept into her mind, Shizuku felt a cold shiver of terror. Tears formed in her eyes again. She shook her head frantically to fight them back.

Crying and screaming wasn't going to help anything.

Shizuku had made it through the desert. Back then, she'd kept herself calm and fierce. She simply needed to return to that mindset. She needed to do whatever she could, no matter how insignificant. Otherwise, she wouldn't get anywhere.

Shizuku clutched her phone and gently raised her hand.

"I'm sorry, but could you give me a minute to compose myself?"

"What?"

After asking the young man for his permission, Shizuku closed her eyes. She placed her hands on her knees and did some deep breathing. She wanted it to be audible to reassure herself, but that was out of the question. Instead, she pictured a person in her mind and watched them charge ahead.

As a kid, there was one thing that Shizuku fell back on to cheer herself up.

Whenever she felt unsure how to continue, she envisioned a person marching forward.

When Shizuku was little, it had been her older sister. She was a flexible person—the kind that kept smiling and never lost heart, no matter what came her way.

As Shizuku grew older, she sometimes found herself imagining her younger sister doing the same thing. Nothing daunted Mio or caused her to lose her confident attitude.

But now Shizuku only had herself. Thus, she envisioned herself striding forward this time. It felt as though she was trying to catch up to a different version of herself. One that was already several steps closer to her goal.

Shizuku lightly slapped her knees and looked up. She straightened her posture and gave the young man a firm look.

It was time to take her first step.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Shizuku Minase. I’m eighteen years old and a first-year student of humanities at my college. I’m from twenty-first-century Japan,” she announced. “Who are you?”

Shizuku’s unprompted self-introduction made the young man’s eyes widen in surprise. However, judging by his composed response, he seemed to pull himself together quickly.

“I’m Erik, a mage from Tarys. I’m twenty-two. I work here as a librarian. I specialize in magic lettering...I suppose.”

“...A mage?”

Shizuku had noticed him using a peculiar term that she didn’t understand earlier, too. Shizuku took a moment to process exactly what he’d said, then asked, “You’re not a magician, are you? Is this *that* kind of world?”

“I don’t see what’s so surprising. There are plenty of mages all over Farsas,” he said. “My work focuses on research, though, so I confess I’m not especially powerful.”

The young man then scratched the side of his head, evidently unsure how to act around this strange visitor.

Shizuku, on the other hand, simply kept her gaze fixed on his deep-blue eyes.



There were times when Shizuku had wished to escape to a distant place where no one knew her.

Still, she hadn’t expected to end up in a magical world. When she’d dreamed of being swept away, she’d been thinking more along the lines of Tottori.

Once the two departed from the library and started making their way back up

the street, Shizuku stifled a sigh.

“A different world?” said the young mage, repeating what she’d just told him.

“Yeah...”

Now that Shizuku had introduced herself successfully, she was returning to the home of the merchant who’d taken her in.

She understood now that she was in a different world, but that was where her comprehension of her predicament ended. She’d left her bag at that merchant’s house, and the woman had probably started to worry. It had been a while since Shizuku dashed out, declaring that she needed to see the map.



There was just one problem—she could barely remember where the house was. As a result, Erik had decided to walk with her.

This was a small town where everybody knew one another, and as it was nighttime, there were very few people in the street. There were no streetlights, so even if Shizuku knew the way, she wouldn't have wanted to walk alone. The lantern Erik carried only faintly illuminated the way ahead.

For as nervous as Shizuku was in this unknown land, she kept walking down the dirt path. Earlier, she'd run down the street propelled by a singular goal. She would need to be more careful in the future, though. After all, this new world was totally unfamiliar to her. The logic she knew didn't apply here.

On the topic of common sense, the young mage next to her seemed to be especially lacking in conventional wisdom.

"I'd understand if you told me you were from another continent...but what do you mean by 'another world'?"

"I wish I knew... Is there a kind of magic that transports you from one place to another?"

"You can go anywhere you want on the continent as long as you know the coordinates. I've never heard of anybody transporting to another world, however. Are you sure you're not imagining things?"

"I'm not! I mean, look at this device. Everyone has them in my world. You can take photos and everything."

Shizuku took her smartphone out of her pocket. Erik, however, seemed hung up on the word she'd just used.

"'Photos'? What are those?"

"This device captures a still image of what's in front of you and reproduces it on its screen. It's like a more detailed version of a painting... Well, maybe that's a misleading way to describe it, but still."

As Shizuku explained, she took a picture of her hand. When she showed Erik the screen, he looked astounded.

"Fascinating. How is that possible?"

“...Good question.”

Shizuku had no idea how a smartphone actually functioned. She had a vague idea of how a pinhole camera operated, but that was probably different. Shizuku switched her phone off and returned it to her pocket. There wouldn't be any opportunities to charge it, so she needed to save as much battery as possible.

“I need to go back...”

“To that other world?”

“Yes, if I can. I want to return to my old world, and the era I came from...”

She needed to be specific. She didn't want to wind up in the Middle Ages or something. It was doubtful that Erik would be able to help her, but keeping the right mindset was important. Shizuku never knew when or where that black hole might appear again.

Erik scowled, distorting his handsome features. “This is all very strange. I've never even read anything like it. Hmm... But Shizukuminase is certainly an unusual first name. It's not surprising to hear that you're from another world.”

“Minase is my last name,” Shizuku clarified. “My name is just Shizuku. It means ‘water droplet.’”

Shizukuminase would have been a weird first name in Shizuku's world, too.

Since their last name meant “shallow water,” the three Minase sisters had all been given water-inspired names. Shizuku's older sister Umi's name meant “sea.” And her younger sister Mio's name meant “waterway.”

With their coordinated names and matching surnames, it never took long for people to realize they were sisters. Shizuku smiled awkwardly as she recalled how unfamiliar upperclassmen approached her in her early high school days, exclaiming, “*You must be Umi's sister!*”

“What?” said Erik, frowning. “Your name was Shizuku all along? You should have told me so from the beginning.”

“I'm pretty sure I did.”

“No, you didn't.”

Erik's rebuttal almost brought a sullen look to Shizuku's face, but deep down, she was just grateful he understood her.

Shizuku then decided to ask him a question of her own.

"Do you have a last name, Erik?"

"The only people who have last names are nobles or those from historic families. It's why the members of the royal family all have such long names. But I, for one, am just Erik. Not having a last name is the norm here."

"Maybe I can just go by Shizuku, then..."

She didn't want to create any more misunderstandings by using her last name. As Shizuku cocked her head in contemplation, Erik gave her a bemused look. A moment later, he pointed at a nearby house.

Once Shizuku saw the single-storied stone building, it struck her as familiar. She offered Erik a shallow bow to show her appreciation.

"Thank you for showing me the way. Is it all right if I ask you some more questions?"

"About you coming from another world? I'm sorry, but I don't think I'd be much help."

His reply was curt, but his reluctance was to be expected. Anyone would've been flummoxed if someone appeared from nowhere claiming to be from another world. Most people wouldn't have even believed her.

Although disappointed, Shizuku forced a smile.

"Okay, I understand. I'll try doing some research of my own when I get the chance."

With that, Shizuku's first day in another world came to an end.

Much to her frustration, she hadn't gotten closer to finding out what had happened to her.



Morning sunlight poured in through the window. The first thing Shizuku saw upon opening her eyes was the stone ceiling.

“I’m still here...,” she muttered as she sat up.

This was the same room she’d awoken in the previous day.

After Erik had guided her back, she’d received a warm welcome from the merchant couple inside.

They’d encouraged her to have dinner and take a bath before going to bed. All throughout, Shizuku couldn’t help but notice how many things were different in this new world. As far as she could tell, there were no electronics or mechanized appliances of any sort inside the house.

The presence of a bath and washroom, combined with how conscious people seemed about keeping themselves and their clothes clean, suggested they knew how to prevent disease. Metal utensils were present in drawers, and glass panes were set in windows, although the latter weren’t as clear as what Shizuku was used to. If this home was representative of a standard household, then this civilization was situated in a time akin to the early modern period. Shizuku wasn’t especially knowledgeable about cultural history, though. She only understood the basics from the liberal arts classes she’d taken at college.

“I should have chosen some proper cultural-history lessons, too... But how much would that help me when they have magic here...?”

She could try to compare this world with her old one, but they were fundamentally different. Studying this land with a fresh perspective was likely the best place to start.

Shizuku donned a set of clothes she’d borrowed and left the room. The woman who’d helped her the day before was already in the kitchen, making breakfast.

“Good morning, Shisea,” Shizuku greeted.

“Good morning, Shizuku. How are you feeling?”

“Totally fine, thank you. Oh, let me help with that.”

Shizuku went and stood next to Shisea in the kitchen. Once they’d finished preparing the food and sat down to eat together, Shizuku used the opportunity to gather some information.

Apparently, there were Four Great Nations on the continent.

The first was Medial, which ran along the north. Next was Gandona, situated near the center of the continent. Kisk in the south was third. Last of all was Farsas, the kingdom of magic that stretched from the heart of the continent to the west, commanding a substantial expanse of land.

Shizuku had appeared in Tarys, a small nation in the east. Apparently, there were many other small countries on the continent. Farsas stood above all others for its superior command of magic, hence why it was dubbed the kingdom of magic.

“Farsas... Is it far away?”

If it truly was a land of magic, then perhaps Shizuku might find some clue to help her get home there. She tried recalling the map of the continent she’d seen the previous day.

Shisea chuckled.

“It’d take you almost three months to travel there, and that’s if you managed to ride in a stagecoach for the entirety of the journey. A transit ring would get you there quickly, of course, but it’s nearly impossible for ordinary folks to receive permission to use one in Tarys. If I were you, I’d start by asking Erik what he thinks. You can always find him in the library.”

There were three mages in the town, one of whom was a doctor. According to Shisea, Erik—whom she described as an oddball who kept himself cooped up in the library all day—was more of an academic than a mage.

“You’d think the girls would love him, considering his good looks, but his cold personality spoils their hopes.”

“I see...”

He hadn’t seemed that cold to Shizuku. In fact, he’d been very kind to her.

It was true that he barely smiled, and he didn’t seem to bother with flattery or consolation. Now that Shisea had mentioned it, Shizuku understood why people might be intimidated by him. In some ways, he almost reminded her of a few graduate students she’d met. The thought brought a bittersweet smile to

her face.

That had to be set aside, however. For now, Shizuku had no choice but to focus on surviving her predicament.

After she'd finished her breakfast, Shizuku addressed Shisea.

"I'm sorry. The truth is, I have no idea how I got here or how I'm supposed to get home. But I do want to pay you back for all your help. Do you know of any places where I could work?"

Getting to Farsas would undoubtedly be costly. With no other clues to go on, that was Shizuku's first step.

Her serious expression prompted confusion and sympathy in Shisea's eyes.

"You don't know how to get home? Well, I suppose everybody has their circumstances. Don't worry, I've got a shopkeeper friend I can introduce you to."

"Really?!"

"Yes. His business has undergone some staff changes, so he's seeking extra help. And you're welcome to stay here."

"Th-thank you so much!"

A flustered Shizuku bowed her head. Not only had she been rescued after collapsing by the road, but she'd also been offered a start toward her objective. She would get back to her world, no matter what it took.

Shizuku braced herself for the challenge, then got ready to take on her second day in this new, unfamiliar world.

Shizuku's new part-time job was at a small bakery.

She looked around as the smell of freshly baked bread drifted through the air. There were only about five different items on display, including bread loaves, round buns, and breadsticks. There were no sweet buns or rolls stuffed with other ingredients in sight, which Shizuku assumed to be due to lack of demand.

"...Just do that, and you'll make a fine shop assistant. Got it?"

"Got it. I'll give it my best."

After briefly explaining what to do, the shopkeeper retreated back into the kitchen. Once he was out of sight, Shizuku examined her notes.

“All right. I just have to focus...,” she said to herself.

She’d written out a numerical conversion table on the little piece of paper. The writing of this world looked like gibberish to her. Shizuku’s ability to speak with people had gotten her hopes up about reading, but indecipherable letters were hardly surprising. Thus, before coming to the bakery, Shizuku asked Shisea to help create a number-conversion chart.

Fortunately, most of the baked goods were the same price, so as long as Shizuku kept calm, she’d be fine. She looked up from her notes just in time to see two middle-aged ladies enter. It nearly felt like they’d timed their visit perfectly.

“Oh, you must be new,” one of the ladies remarked. “You don’t look like you’re from around here.”

“My name’s Shizuku. It’s nice to meet you!”

“You’re full of energy. Having a young girl working here will really brighten this place up.”

The two ladies chuckled among themselves, then bought some loaves of bread. Shizuku handled the transaction, frantically trying to recall what she’d been taught, then wrapped the purchases in paper.

Every customer who followed looked surprised to see Shizuku, but they welcomed her kindly. Some of them even told her what they usually bought and urged her to commit the orders to memory. It was the first time since Shizuku’s university entrance exams that she’d been forced to remember so many things at once.

Work kept Shizuku so busy that the time flew by. Once almost all the bakery’s goods had sold, she glanced around the shop and let out a sigh. It stood to reason that if bakeries played such an essential role in the townsfolk’s lives, they’d predict how much they’d be able to sell each day.

“All right, good job,” said the shopkeeper. “Go and eat with Shisea.”

“Thank you so much!”

“And here are your wages. I’ll see you again tomorrow.”

The owner of the bakery dropped five coins into Shizuku’s hand. One bronze coin was roughly enough to buy three bread rolls. Shizuku thanked the man and started to make her way home, mumbling to herself as she gathered her thoughts.

“I think I did about five hours of work today... That means for each hour I work, I can buy three bread rolls. I can probably survive as long as I work hard enough...”

Naturally, Shizuku was far from having all the things she needed, but this would allow her to carve out a humble, uneventful existence if she kept at it. Resigning herself to such a fate meant she’d never get home, though.

After Shizuku returned to her temporary home, she helped Shisea sort out some pieces of fabric her husband had bought. While doing so, Shizuku announced that she would start paying board and assisting with the housework, too. Initially, Shisea insisted that was unnecessary, but Shizuku hated the idea of taking advantage of the woman’s kindness. Ultimately, Shisea gave in.

“I don’t want you to feel like you’re under any pressure. Take your time getting used to things while you look for a way to get home.”

“Thank you.”

Shisea’s warmth and empathy helped Shizuku relax.

Shizuku had really gotten lucky. Although barely an adult, she was mature enough to know not everyone was so kind.

Still, she was careful not to forget that there were some lovely people out there, too.

If not, the world would be sad and dreary. Fortunately, Shizuku had wound up in a bright and colorful place, which she was quite grateful for.

For the next two weeks, Shizuku spent her every waking hour working and helping around the home.

In time, she gradually felt like she was growing accustomed to her new life—

her new world. And that's when things took yet another unexpected turn.



"It's nice to see our guest from another world so cheery," the young mage said as soon as he entered the shop.

Shizuku went agape and stiffened.

When she finally came back to her senses, she favored him with a wry smile.

"Yep, that's me. Welcome to our bakery. What can I get for you today?"

"Bread, please. Wait, do you have anything besides bread?"

"I guess I could offer you a cheesy grin... It comes free of charge," Shizuku replied, forcing a smile. Unsurprisingly, Erik didn't seem to get the joke.

Her attempt at humor ignored, Shizuku ended up sulking with a big smile plastered on her face.

"What happened to returning to your own world?"

"I still want to, but I don't know how. No matter what happens, though, I'm going to need some funds and basic knowledge to help me on my way."

"I can't tell whether you're being realistic or reckless about this."

"Keeping busy is a good way to distract myself," Shizuku added, her true feelings seeping out.

Erik raised an eyebrow, but the thoughts behind his deep-blue eyes were impossible to read.

He sighed, then took a coin out of his breast pocket. While paying for his purchase, he spoke to Shizuku in a manner that reminded her of a college professor reading a piece of text.

"I checked all the books I could after we spoke, but I couldn't find any records of anybody visiting this continent from another world. The closest thing I came across was when high-ranking demons appeared from different realms. There are, however, a few historical records concerning events that contravene the conventions of this world. They're basically just legends, but perhaps those stories hold the key to sending you home."

Shizuku looked up, still clutching the bag with Erik's order inside. She stared at him, her eyes wide with astonishment.

"...You believe me?"

"Why would someone I'd never met before have any reason to lie?" Erik responded as though it was obvious. It was a refreshingly definitive statement.

Shizuku was a complete stranger to this man, yet he believed the preposterous story she'd shared with him and had spent time looking for answers.

Shizuku bit her lip, feeling pressure building around her eyes. She forced a smile to stop herself from crying.

"Thank you very much, Erik."

"There's no need to be so formal."

He took the paper bag from Shizuku. Doubtless, he'd noticed her getting emotional and was too kind to say anything.

Just as he was about to walk through the door, he added, "If you want to know more, come to the library. I'm almost always there."

"Oh! Can I come after work today, then? I'll be there before sunset!"

"Do whatever you like," Erik responded. And with that, he left.

Perhaps it was an unfriendly way to conclude their talk, but Shizuku still felt that he was kind.

Shizuku continued her work for the next two hours, trying her best to keep control of her excitement. When dusk arrived, she paid another visit to the library on the edge of town.

Night had not yet fallen, but the library was still fairly gloomy. Shizuku noticed there were a few other visitors scattered around the surprisingly spacious building. However, their numbers thinned the deeper she ventured. Silence permeated the place, the sort that possessed a weight of its own.

Erik was waiting for her in a dingy corner at the back of the library. There was a lantern positioned on his large desk emitting bluish-white light. Shizuku put

her bag down on a seat beside her and sat opposite Erik.

“You’ll strain your eyes like that,” she said. “You need more lights around you.”

“Bright lights damage the books.”

“I get that, but I think eyesight’s more important...”

Shizuku knew some people wore glasses in this world. Still, she preferred to avoid the possibility of losing her vision and relying on corrective eyewear. Shizuku searched for a knob on the lantern to adjust its brightness, but unfortunately, she couldn’t locate anything of the sort.

At that moment, Erik nonchalantly reached out toward the lantern. He chanted something under his breath, and in an instant, the light momentarily vanished before returning even brighter than before.

Shizuku’s eyes widened.

“...Th-that was amazing. How did you do that?”

“Magic, obviously. For a mage, this is as basic as it gets.”

“Can I study magic, too?!”

“No. You’re born with the power, or you’re not. The extent of one’s strength is fixed at birth, and you weren’t born with any. By the way, you need to be quiet in the library.”

“Sorry...”

Shizuku’s shoulders slumped. Her brief dream and curiosity were dashed in a few short sentences. She wanted to see a little more magic, but Erik didn’t seem to be in the mood to oblige.

He gazed at her intently with his deep-blue eyes.

“I should have asked you this before, but do you have any idea what might have caused you to switch worlds? Is there a sort of magic in your world that could have made that happen?”

“No. I mean, magic doesn’t even exist in my world.”

“What? Really? How does any of this make sense to you, then?”

“Some really old stories mention things like magic, but nowadays, most people doubt that was ever real.”

Shizuku tried to choose her words carefully to avoid confusing Erik, but it was generally accepted that magic didn't exist in her world. Shizuku might have been spirited away in some form, but people in modern Japan would've found it impossible to explain the event, whether they had an expression for it or not.

Shizuku drew a big oval in the air with her hands.

“A hole like this just appeared out of nowhere and swallowed me up. It almost looked like a full-length mirror. And then, before I knew it, I was in the middle of a desert.”

“Oh, and you collapsed afterward. I'm impressed that you survived, to be honest. Most people would've died.”

“There's no need to be so direct about it. It freaks me out.”

People congratulating her on a lucky escape from doom didn't make Shizuku feel any better. Whenever she thought about her journey through the desert, she shuddered with fear.

Having obtained all the information he desired, Erik thrust the thick book that had been lying in front of him toward Shizuku.

“Look, here's the story right here. Around two hundred and forty years ago, something strange occurred repeatedly in a country called Yarda. A specific area would abruptly transform and shift into an entirely different time. It wasn't an illusion, either. Real substances and living things appeared from nowhere. This phenomenon led to deaths, too. One hundred and forty-six of them, in fact.”

“I'm sorry to interrupt your explanation, but I can't actually read.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“That's kind of a pointless question, but I assume it's because I'm from another world...”

Shizuku had just about memorized the numbers, but remained clueless on everything else. She'd managed to pick up a few common words, but she was still likely at a prekindergarten level.

Erik gave her a look that suggested he was finding this hard to wrap his head around. He could glare at her like she was an underperforming child all he liked; it wouldn't change the reality of the matter.

The most crucial issue was not Shizuku's literacy, but the strange events that had occurred long ago.

"Could you clarify what exactly was so strange about that?" Shizuku asked. "Honestly, as someone from a world without magic, it's hard to gauge what's normal and what's not."

"Oh, I see. Isn't life hard without magic, though?"

"Is that how it seems to you?" Shizuku asked. "We manage. We have other sorts of technologies in my world, after all."

In this world, magic seemed rooted in people's everyday lives. Even in the town of Wanope, the doctor was a mage.

Erik looked intrigued by this answer but prioritized giving Shizuku the explanation she sought. He tapped the book with his finger.

"If you want to know about magic, you need to know that it has a number of fixed principles. No mage can violate these principles, regardless of how powerful they might be. This occurrence, however, did just that."

"What if someone just made use of a magic principle that hadn't been discovered yet?"

"It doesn't work like that. Magic can't create something out of nothing. You can move things that are in front of you and summon or rework natural substances...but you can't just make an apple appear out of nowhere, for example."

"Can't you? Does that mean you can't pull a rabbit from a top hat?"

"What are you talking about?"

"That was an unnecessary interjection on my part. Ignore it."

Staying silent made Shizuku uncomfortable, so she'd ended up interrupting, but their worlds were too different for the conversation to go anywhere.

Erik gave Shizuku a dismayed sort of look, but he quickly returned to the topic.

“Another important thing to note is that magic doesn’t let you travel through time. That also goes against the rules. There are plenty of other things that magic can’t do, but those are the two qualities that made the occurrences in Yarda so abnormal.”

“So you can’t go back to the past... Did people manage to do so during this incident?”

For some reason, the information wasn’t sinking in at all. Just as Shizuku considered asking for more concrete examples, Erik began reading aloud, tracing his finger along the lines as he went.

““One day, an unfamiliar horde of troops suddenly appeared near Cadoss Fortress, in Yarda. The huge army of around fifteen thousand soldiers split into two separate forces and began fighting each other, as if that was what they’d been doing all along. The fortress was pulled into the conflict and forced to defend itself. Many individuals, including some mages, testified that the attackers were real people. This unexpected battle in Yarda resulted in one hundred casualties. Curiously, about three hours after the men first appeared, the incident came to an abrupt end. Just as suddenly as the army arrived, it disappeared without a trace. All that remained were the bodies of the Yardan soldiers who’d died in battle, proving that the incident had not, in fact, been a dream. Later on, a veteran who’d been stationed at the fortress gave a witness account. According to him, the mysterious force and the battle were identical to those he’d seen ten years earlier during the fateful war between the nations of Tayiri and Medial.””

“Huh...? Soldiers from a war ten years earlier reappeared and reenacted the same battle? This is like a real-life mystery.”

“It’s certainly a conundrum, that’s for sure. At the time, things like this were a frequent occurrence. The mages of the era concluded some force must have been at work, one that brought memories of the past to life.”

“Sorry, could you simplify that one for me?”

“Basically, people’s memories became reality. If you were the key, for

example, then the sight of you working in the bakery could suddenly appear right where we're sitting. The building, the customers, and you yourself would all be real."

"That's so bizarre!"

Shizuku understood what Erik was saying, but accepting it proved challenging. There was no shortage of odd stories in her own world, but she hadn't expected this magic realm to have its own unexplained phenomena, too.

Shizuku finally understood why the incident was so abnormal, but it only left her more confused.

"So what does this have to do with me?" she questioned, cocking her head to one side.

"As a result of the phenomenon at Cadoss Fortress, people actually went missing. A total of fifty-six, to be specific. A general and fifty-two soldiers who'd left the fortress and cut their way into the enemy troops, plus three mages. They were found in the field where Tayiri and Medial *actually* fought—a battlefield far from the fortress—one week later. The mages who'd disappeared later claimed that no transportation spells had been invoked. They'd simply been moved to a distant location with no logical explanation."

"Oh... That's like what happened to me."

"It's not entirely the same, since they just transported elsewhere on the continent, but it is indeed another example of people going from one point to another for no discernable reason. If we dig into this particular incident, it might be able to offer us some clues."

Erik stopped there and stared at Shizuku intently.

She swallowed nervously, feeling as though she'd been entrusted with a conundrum too weighty for her hands to bear.

"You said these things happened frequently back then. What were the other incidents like?" she asked.

"About twenty similar incidents were recorded in the three months surrounding the trouble at the fortress. They all occurred within the borders of

Yarda. Each shared two common elements. Firstly, one individual acted as the key. Their memories played out in real life. The other was that those caught up in the replays of the past were whisked away to where that event actually happened once the phenomenon ended.”

Erik’s wording was complicated and difficult to comprehend, but essentially, the people who were present during the abnormal situation were transported to where the memory had been made. That’s how Shizuku understood it, anyhow. It was lucky that those people didn’t get sent back in time, but being dropped somewhere far away must have been a nuisance.

Shizuku thought back on the black hole that had swallowed her up. Was that a conjured memory, too? She couldn’t decide whether that felt plausible or not. However, in the moment, she wanted to cling to any possible clue she found.

“Okay, so if we’re going to research this...how would we go about it? I mean, this stuff happened over two centuries ago,” Shizuku said.

“I know. At this point, it’s basically just a legend. But you see, this story has a slightly peculiar sequel.”

“A sequel?”

Erik nodded and tapped the open book with his fingers. “This book contains witness statements about the incidents and the subsequent investigation that Farsas carried out. However, some revisions were made one month after the initial version was published. Most copies in existence are of the revised edition. I’ve heard that there were even people from Farsas who came and swapped out any remaining copies of the original edition for the new one.”

“Huh? But why would they do that? What was the difference?”

Had there been some misprints? Shizuku’s question had been a casual one, but it prompted a thoughtful frown from Erik. He closed the book for a moment, then opened it back up at the very last page.

“This volume here is one of the few remaining originals. It used to belong to a mage, and the library came to possess it a few decades ago. If you compare the two editions side by side, the only difference is in the witness statement right at the end of the book.”

“Just that one change?”

“Yes. In the original copy, the witness claims they saw a witch.” Erik’s words were solemn.

Shizuku gave him a skeptical look. The word *witch* brought to mind the sort from kids’ cartoons—the ones on broomsticks with pointy hats. She scanned her memories for something more, but *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* was still the best point of reference she could find. Even then, she was a child when she read the story, and barely remembered anything.

She tilted her head from one side to another in bewilderment. “So that sorceress’s involvement was the problem?”

“Not a sorceress, a *witch*. All witches are mages, but not all mages are witches. *Witch* is the old name for female mages who were extraordinarily powerful. Nowadays, you only ever hear about them in legends.”

“Are you saying that if I were to go and see one of those witches, I’d be able to get home?”

Shizuku was sure that was how it went in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

She had put as much thought as she could into her question, yet Erik didn’t look impressed. Shizuku fell silent, worried that she’d said something strange.

A few moments later, Erik gave her a nod.

“Maybe. But it’s been over three hundred years since there were witches on the continent. There may yet be some out there, but it’s just as likely they’re all gone. Even if you found one, she’d still be a mage. Who knows if she’d be able to wield power to overwrite the principles of magic?”

“Hmm. Then what are we supposed to do?”

“I’m not finished yet. My point is that Farsas went so far as to revise this book to cover up a witch’s involvement. During the period in question, there was a witch living in Farsas—the king’s older sister, Fystoria. We don’t know whether she was the witch who was spotted, but the fact that they went so far as to conceal that detail makes it seem likely. In other words, Farsas probably knows more about this incident than it’d like to admit.”

“Farsas...”

That was the land that people referred to as the kingdom of magic. For Shizuku, the idea of going to Farsas had become a vague objective of sorts. It was only during this conversation that the existence of this unknown, faraway land that was three months away by stagecoach began to sink in. She let out a sigh.

When she came back to her senses again, she took a notebook out of her bag.

“Wait a minute. I’m going to jot this down,” she said.

“Okay. Take your time,” Erik replied.

Shizuku started writing in her notebook, trying to recall everything she’d heard.

The first thing she’d learned in college was how to take notes. You couldn’t just copy everything on the board verbatim. Summarizing the most important points in a way that was easy to understand later on was of utmost importance.

Erik watched Shizuku intently as she began to jot things down next to her German notes with a mechanical pencil. To be more precise, he was enthralled by her writing, not her. After scribbling down a few key terms about Farsas, she looked up at him.

“What is it?” Shizuku asked.

“Nothing. I’m just fascinated. Did you make that language up yourself?”

“How weird do you think I am? It’s the language we speak in my country.”

“It’s completely different from ours.”

Erik pointed at one side of the open notebook, then the other. On the left page, Shizuku had written some basic sentences in German—whereas the right-hand page was where she was making notes in Japanese.

“Oh.” Shizuku sensed that she needed to explain. “The writing on that page is in a foreign language—one I’m studying at the moment.”

“A foreign language? You mean, people speak different languages just because they’re in different countries?”

“Well, there’s a whole ocean separating us. Isn’t it the same in your world? I assume there are other continents, right?”

“Apparently. Five in total. The one to the east is the only one that people have actually seen. Very few countries trade across the sea.”

“Okay...”

Shizuku found Erik’s use of the word *apparently* a little odd. It didn’t sound like it was very common to travel off the continent. Erik went on to clarify, perhaps having detected Shizuku’s uncertainty.

“A fair number of people moved from our continent to the one in the east during the Dark Age and settled there, so I think they speak the same language we do and do many things the same way.”

“Oh, so it’s like the UK and the US. That makes sense.”

Feeling pleased with herself for coming to that conclusion, Shizuku disregarded the confused look on Erik’s face and went back to taking notes. Right when she considered copying the map of the continent, Erik pointed at one of the words she’d written.

“What does this say?” he asked.

“*Farsas*... I hope.”

For the time being, she had to guess how to spell the proper nouns. When people from this world were speaking, it sounded like Japanese to her. The only bits that registered as foreign were the names of places and people. Although that made it easy to differentiate them from other words, Shizuku wasn’t confident in her ability to transliterate them.

“How about this word?”

“*Witch*,” Shizuku replied.

“It looks very different from *Farsas*.”

“That’s because one’s in katakana, and one’s in kanji. My language has a lot of different characters. Probably tens of thousands, if you counted them all up.”

Erik couldn’t hide his amazement. It was the first time she’d seen him look so

surprised. She laughed, finding it kind of amusing.

“Is that true?” Erik asked. “You didn’t just make those characters up yourself?”

“Seriously, how weird do you think I am? I’m not lying.”

Shizuku would’ve had to have been a very strange person to create a language with so many symbols all by herself. Maybe Erik’s reaction was justified, though. “Tens of thousands” undoubtedly sounded bewildering to someone unfamiliar with Chinese characters.

“Wow,” Erik breathed, but Shizuku couldn’t tell from his expression whether he actually understood.

Shizuku ran things by Erik as she wrote down the parts that she felt were important, then closed her notebook at last. The inscrutable mage tilted his head to one side and watched as she put her mechanical pencil away.

Once she’d stuffed all her things back in her bag, Shizuku stood and gave Erik a small bow.

“Thank you very much for your help today. I’ve learned a lot. To be honest, I didn’t even know where to begin when it came to this research, so I really appreciate it.”

“Think nothing of it,” Erik said with a nod.

He looked unfazed, but perhaps that was just his demeanor. Shizuku, who was slowly beginning to understand what he was like, smiled awkwardly, gave him another small bow, then turned to leave.

As she began to walk away, Erik called out to her.

“What will you do now?”

“I’m going to save up some money and go to Farsas.”

That was the only conclusion she’d gleaned from their conversation. Getting there would be difficult, but she wouldn’t accomplish anything unless she tried.

Her answer made Erik’s head list to one side.

“You seem to have a lot of guts, and I get the impression you have a

pragmatic side, too, but do you realize how much money and time it will take to reach Farsas? And what will you even do once you get there? Run to the castle and say, ‘Hello everyone, I’m from another world!’?”

“I know it’s not going to be cheap, but I’m prepared to hitchhike or work as a day laborer if I have to. As for what I’m going to do when I’m at the castle, well, I’ll come up with an appropriate plan when I get there.”

Shizuku couldn’t deny that she was scared, but no one else was going to step in and fix things for her. It was only natural that she should fend for herself, and she’d prepared herself to do just that.

Erik, who had an impenetrable look in his eyes, had a different idea, however.

“Why don’t I come with you?” he offered.

“...What?”

“You wouldn’t be alone in a world you know nothing about, at least. It’ll be easier to get around Farsas with me by your side.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku hadn’t seen this coming. From her perspective, this man had already gone above and beyond by doing this research for her. Why had he suggested accompanying her? Farsas was a distant place, and Erik himself had admitted that things wouldn’t be easy after reaching the kingdom of magic. Shizuku would never be able to repay such a tremendous favor.

Dumbfounded, Shizuku reacted with the only question she could think of.

“Is there something you need from Farsas?”

“No. In fact, there’s no other country I want to avoid more.”

“Really?! What makes you say that?!”

“It’s nothing you need to worry about. That’s just my personal view,” Erik replied. “Still, no other country can beat Farsas when it comes to magic. That’s undeniable.”

“It’s not going to be some kind of dystopia, right...?”

Shizuku was worried now, but Erik didn’t seem to grasp what she was saying.

“I don’t really understand what you mean, but I assure you that it’s a peaceful and prosperous place,” he said.

Even so, why would he volunteer to come with her to a country he didn’t even like? If Shizuku possessed the striking beauty her sisters were known for, she might have been able to understand why he’d do this of pure kindness. However, Shizuku knew she wasn’t that kind of girl. Erik didn’t seem like the kind of person to entertain such shallow motivations, either.

Noticing Shizuku’s perplexed expression, the young man gently waved his hand in front of his face in a reassuring manner.

“Don’t you realize how special you are? Throughout the continent’s nearly fifteen-hundred-year-long history, there has never been anyone like you. I’m intrigued not only by what Farsas is hiding but also by the mystery surrounding you.”

“Oh...”

Shizuku wanted some answers, too.

What had happened to her, and why? She’d been swallowed up by a black hole and found herself standing in the middle of a desert. Was there some sort of hidden truth to the ordeal that she needed to uncover? Was there a meaning to it all?

Shizuku felt like she was peering desperately into a deep crevice. She wished to know what was down there, but it felt like there was no end in sight. The thought made her throat tighten. She’d been trying to ignore the possibility that she’d never make it home, but it was rapidly becoming hard to avoid.

Erik noticed that Shizuku had turned pale with dread and furrowed his brow.

“Are you all right?”

“...Yeah,” she replied reflexively.

Shizuku sensed she was on the verge of trembling, so she clenched her fists hard. Recognizing the behavior, Erik seemed to deduce what was bothering her.

“Oh, do I make you feel uneasy? Don’t worry. I have no interest in other people.”

This dry comment instantly brought Shizuku back to reality. She frantically shook her head.

“No, it’s not that. This all feels a little overwhelming,” Shizuku clarified.

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that. You just have to be thankful for your few bits of good fortune.”

Shizuku stared at the young man, stunned.

Ultimately, he was right. She would probably be lying dead in the desert if not for some tremendous good luck.

She’d been given a place to stay, a job, and food to eat. She was more blessed than she ever could’ve hoped for. What use was there wasting time feeling anything but grateful?

A smile graced Shizuku’s face.

“That’s a good point... Thank you.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s perfectly understandable that you’re anxious. So what’s your next step?”

There was only one answer.

Shizuku didn’t know Erik very well, but she could sense that he was someone who took things seriously. Not only was he a mage, but he was also knowledgeable about this world. Shizuku couldn’t have asked for a better companion to assist her on this unexpected and bizarre journey.

Having made up her mind, Shizuku stood up straight. She placed her hands together in front of her chest and bowed deeply.

“Your assistance would be greatly appreciated. Please come with me.”

“Okay,” Erik replied. There was no warmth in his voice, yet he sounded sincere.

Shizuku clutched the handle of her bag as tightly as she could.

Her journey across this new, mysterious world was about to begin.

She couldn’t imagine what might happen or what was waiting for her.

However, moving forward was the only option if she was to have any chance of getting home.

“I have things I need to prepare, and I expect you do, too. How about we leave in a week’s time?” Erik suggested.

“Okay.”

Shizuku had finally gotten used to this town, and departing would be a sad and frightful thing. It would mean saying good-bye to Shisea, to the owner of the bakery, and all the other people she’d come to know.

Still, Shizuku had always known she’d have to take that crucial step forward at some point, much like that first step she’d taken across the desert.

When Erik saw the fervent determination in her eyes, he smiled. “Also, there’s one favor I want to ask of you. Think of it as my reason for coming with you.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to teach me the characters they use in your language.”

“What?”

Surprised, Shizuku met Erik’s gaze and saw the quiet passion burning behind it.

These two young people, standing in that library, had nothing in common.

They’d known very different lives.

Long afterward, Shizuku would think back on this particular moment.

Her whole life changed when she found herself in that desert, but her story didn’t truly begin until she met Erik.

His words marked the beginning of their journey.

Ultimately, fate was something individuals had the power to control. Thus, Shizuku began down the path she’d chosen.

It was a route that would lead from a gentle little town to a greater, unkind world.

At the time, neither she nor Erik knew this marked a pivotal juncture that would transform the foundation of the continent forever.

2. The Water Droplet



Erik originally suggested that they depart a week later, but ultimately, Shizuku made him postpone their departure by another two weeks. That gave her enough time to accrue a large amount of money and allowed the owner of the bakery to find a new shop assistant.

Shisea looked sad when she heard that Shizuku would be leaving, but she must have known such a day would come eventually. She kindly helped out by getting things ready for Shizuku's journey.

One day, while she was picking out some traveling attire, Shisea posed Shizuku a question.

"Do you want to take some money with you, too?" she asked. "You never know what might happen."

"Don't worry! My earnings from my new part-time job will handle the necessary costs!"

Erik had offered to cover some of Shizuku's travel expenses if she grew short on funds, but Shizuku had turned him down, insisting that it would be taking advantage of his kindness. However, Erik had countered by suggesting the money should be considered payment for lessons.

"If it makes you feel that uncomfortable, you can teach me those letters as well," he'd said, pointing at some German.

Fortunately, Shizuku had brought both an English-Japanese and a German-Japanese dictionary with her. Grammar would be difficult to teach, but Shizuku didn't feel like vocabulary would prove much of an issue.

Shizuku did, however, find it strange that he was so eager to learn the writing

systems that he was willing to pay. When she'd questioned him on it, Erik had a very simple answer.

"Magic lettering is what I specialize in," he'd declared. "Learning different alphabets interests me."

It was this side of him that reminded her that he was, in fact, a scholar. Convinced, Shizuku agreed to this new part-time job.



The day of their departure arrived in the blink of an eye.

Shizuku stood at the entrance of the town, examining her outfit. She was dressed in a short-sleeved cotton blouse and a long skirt, an everyday ensemble for women in Tarys. She also had a cloak around her shoulders, which was part of her traveling attire.

Shisea, who'd come to see her off, looked reluctant to let her go.

"I'm sure you'll be fine with Erik by your side...but be careful out there. If you run into any trouble, feel free to come straight back."

"Thank you. I'll do my best!"

There was a chance that this would be the last time Shizuku ever spoke with Shisea. Shizuku stared back into the woman's eyes, hoping to etch Shisea and her kindness into her memory. When she thought about the one and a half months they'd spent together, her eyes grew damp. Shizuku held back her tears and the things she wished to say, instead choosing to smile.

"I'd better get going!" she announced.

"Yes, of course," Shisea replied. "Take care."

Shizuku picked up her luggage and climbed into the stagecoach with Erik. As the wobbly carriage began to move, Shizuku poked her head out of the gap in the drapes at the very back of the carriage and waved good-bye. The town appeared to grow smaller and smaller as the stagecoach trundled along.

It was an idyllic start to their journey. Shizuku recalled the day she'd left home to move into her college dorm a few months earlier. It had been a much more casual departure. Mio had clearly had something more to say, but Shizuku had

told her she'd be back for Golden Week and left... In the end, Shizuku had been so busy with her new life that she hadn't returned for the holiday. Now that she took the time to consider it, that was the last day she'd seen her family.

"It's only when you realize you may never see them again that you truly appreciate the value of the people you encounter..." Shizuku muttered as she watched the town disappear into the distance. "I've been so oblivious for so long."

"Everyone's the same, to some extent. You feel like those close to you will be around forever. Even when you're far away from them, you assume you'll be able to see them whenever you like."

"I should have known different, really. I'd grown numb to this stuff."

"There's still a chance you could make it back, though."

Erik's wording seemed deliberately noncommittal, something that Shizuku presumed was typical of him. She giggled.

"I hope I can get home before I turn into Urashima Taro."

"What's that? A form of punishment?"

"Who said anything about getting punished? Well, I guess my enrollment will be scrapped if I'm away for too long. Anyway, 'Urashima Taro' is a fairy tale. The main character goes to spend time in another world for a short while, but when he gets back, he finds that years and years have gone by in his original world."

It would be a problem if, like in that story, time in this world and Shizuku's moved at different rates. She hoped to be gone for less than a year if something like that happened.

Shizuku's explanation brought a bemused look to Erik's face.

"Oh? So there is someone else who moved between worlds."

"It's just a fairy tale. And the place he visits isn't a different world, exactly. It's more like a foreign land. People have different opinions on what that foreign land represents, though. The woman he marries over there isn't a human, for one thing."

"Oh, I get it now. He visits a realm outside the human world. We have stories

about such places, too.”

“Like what? Do they have a similar storyline?”

Just as Shizuku was getting into their conversation, the stagecoach jolted violently as though a wheel had struck a big rock. Once Shizuku recovered from the shock of it, she looked around the carriage. She wondered if she’d made too much noise. This was a public transport, after all. Fortunately, nobody seemed to have noticed. The only other passengers were three merchants and a male traveler, so there were plenty of free seats.

Feeling embarrassed nonetheless, Shizuku politely sat herself back down.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “I got sidetracked there. I was just curious about what types of myths you have here.”

“Don’t worry. I understand why you’re interested. Still, you’re right. We need to focus on our route first.”

Erik spread a map on his lap, then showed it to Shizuku.

“We’re heading to Ilmas first, a neighboring town to the west. There, we’ll obtain permission to use a transit ring.”

“A transit ring?”

“It’s a piece of magical transportation equipment. It’d save us time if we could jump directly to Farsas, but commoners would never get permission. Instead, we’ll have to visit one of Farsas’s neighbors, Anneli or Nadolas, then head to our next transit ring from there.”

“Transportation equipment, huh? What’s magical transportation like? Do you get to run down a tube at high speed or something?”

“A tube? If it involved time spent running, what would be the difference from riding a stagecoach?”

“Do you mean it’s instantaneous transportation?”

“Exactly. You move to the corresponding transit ring the second you step inside. You weren’t expecting to spend three months going from stagecoach to stagecoach, were you?”

“Honestly, yes,” Shizuku replied. Her voice was calm, but she was overcome with shock. Teleportation was unthinkable in her world. Impressed, Shizuku probed Erik for a little more information.

“You don’t get destroyed as soon as you step into the transit ring, only to be put back together at your destination, right?”

“Why would you instantly come to that assumption?”

“I feel like everyone has to have considered that theory at least once!”

Shizuku thought it an obvious concern when faced with a teleportation device, but Erik looked taken aback.

“There are several categories of transportation magic. All of them operate on a similar principle. Some exclusively move the operator. Others create a gateway capable of transporting multiple individuals, and some are fixed installations. With transit gates, you essentially walk through a portal that sends you to another location, which means it’s possible to stand in the space between the two destinations. Experiments conducted in that state have proven that the individual has the same soul before and after the transition.”

“That’s reassuring to hear. It’s put my mind at rest anyway.”

“In principle, it operates by connecting two locations through specified coordinates. Some suggest that during this process, you transport through a separate dimension where the concept of distance doesn’t apply. That’s just a theory, though.”

“Travel by which the notion of distance is irrelevant...”

Shizuku was eager to learn more about this, but at present, she lacked the fundamental knowledge to fully engage. It seemed sensible to delay learning about magic until a later date.

An idea occurred to Shizuku, piquing her curiosity. “Can *you* use transportation magic?” she asked Erik.

“Unfortunately not,” he replied. “It’s high-level magic, even if it’s only for personal use. Around half of the mages who serve in the royal court can’t even manage it.”

Now that she saw them up close, Erik's deep-blue eyes exuded a greater sense of childlike innocence than usual. Shizuku figured the sour expression on his face was probably to blame for that.

Erik tapped his fingers against one temple a few times.

"There are even fewer people who can open a transit gate that others can pass through, or draw a transit ring by themselves, and I'm not one of them."

"R-right... I understand. Sorry for asking."

"There's no cause to apologize. I'm perfectly satisfied with my current abilities."

He forced a rare smile, one without aggression or bravado.

Erik had quit his job as a librarian to join Shizuku on this journey. Shizuku felt bad that he'd gone so far, yet he insisted their interests aligned. He wished to learn more about Farsas's secret and the writing systems of Shizuku's world.

Annoyed with herself for being the only one asking questions, Shizuku pulled her notes from her bag. On one piece of paper, Shizuku had drawn a fifty-square grid containing all the characters in the Japanese hiragana writing system. Erik received it from her with a serious expression.

"They're so round. Are these pictorial symbols?"

"No. I know they look quite circular, though. Maybe that's just my handwriting."

"There are tens of thousands of these, and you can still tell them all apart?"

"There are only fifty of these characters, so it's not a problem. There's katakana as well."

"Show me."

Shizuku did as he asked and tore a page out of her notebook. She used a book cover to keep the paper flat and drafted a fifty-square chart of all the katakana characters. As she wrote out each of the letters, Erik compared them with the hiragana chart he had in front of him.

"Those letters are more angular," he remarked.

“That’s right. You read them the same way, though.”

“If you read them the same way, then why are there two different types?”

“...Good question.”

Shizuku didn’t know the answer. She knew that hiragana and katakana had been derived from components of Chinese characters, but why *were* there two phonetic writing systems? Despite studying humanities, Shizuku was just as stumped as when Erik had asked her how a camera worked. It made her feel useless. Thankfully, Erik didn’t hound her for any more answers.

Once the katakana chart was complete, Erik took it off her and looked at the two pieces of paper side by side.

“They’re not totally dissimilar,” he said. “The pointy ones look more like symbols, generally speaking. Now tell me how to read them.”

“Okay.”

Shizuku moved her pen across the page, pointing to each character as she vocalized their sounds. Erik used the mechanical pencil he’d borrowed from her to make notes next to each letter. These were written in his world’s writing system, which employed a combination of smooth curves and straight lines. In some ways, it resembled the Roman alphabet.



“How many letters are there in your language?” Shizuku asked.

“There are thirty in our common alphabet. You can combine them to make words and sentences.”

“Oh, so it’s like the Roman alphabet. I’ve already managed to pick up a few simple words.”

“There are two hundred fifty-six characters in our magic script, though. Depending on the country and era a text is from, there may also be additional characters or variations in how the letters are written.”

“A magic writing system?”

“It’s what we use for spells and sigils. Those characters are hieroglyphs. Unlike our common alphabet, each of the symbols has its own meaning.”

“Oh, I see.”

This sounded interesting, but Shizuku stopped herself from inquiring further. The stagecoach was shakier than she’d expected it to be, so she suspected that staring at text and musing on complex ideas would give her motion sickness.

Once Shizuku had finished telling Erik how to read each character, she asked if she could take a break and get a bit of shut-eye.

The next thing she knew, they’d reached Ilmas—their first destination.



“You were fast asleep back there,” Erik said. “Rather bold of you, really.”

Shizuku rubbed her sore neck as she climbed out of the stagecoach. She’d had a good rest, but perhaps it had been her body’s way of dealing with the stress of her predicament. Although a little dazed, she mostly felt fine.

The discomfort of a sore neck was the price she had to pay. It was the inevitable result of nodding off with her head slouched in the rickety stagecoach.

Still massaging the muscles, Shizuku followed Erik into a large street. She looked around in wonder, captivated by the many sights.

“This must be a big town. It’s incredible.”

“Well, it does sit alongside a major road.”

Compared with Wanope, the town where Shizuku had stayed, this place was remarkably busy. The street was bustling with people, and the stalls that lined it buzzed with activity. The hubbub rang in Shizuku’s ears.

“Get your cheap chipis here! I’ll do you a discount!”

“Don’t miss the last of our cotton fabric! Once it’s gone, we’ll have no new stock for a long time!”

Shizuku understood what the hawkers said, with the exception of a few nouns. It was like she’d arrived in a foreign country where she already knew the language.

While Shizuku was busy goggling at all the sights that surrounded her, Erik yanked her arm, causing her to lose her balance.

“Ack!” she yelped in alarm as she was forced to steady herself. Not a moment later, she noticed a group of rough-looking men walking by where she’d been standing.

Erik, who’d basically pulled her against his chest, frowned at her.

“You need to pay attention. There are lots of dangerous people around.”

“S-sorry...”

Shizuku apologized and hurriedly broke away from him. The sudden closeness made her feel awkward, but Erik looked unfazed. Maybe he’d been telling the truth when he claimed he had no interest in other people.

Shizuku covered her red face with her hands.

“In order to get permission to use the transit ring, we need to submit to a screening process. I think it usually takes about three days. I’ll find us somewhere to stay for that period. Save your sightseeing until we take care of that first.”

“What do they screen for?”

“It’s nothing serious. They just conduct simple identity and background checks.”

“Our identities...? That sounds like it might be a problem!”

Shizuku had no way to prove who she was in this world. She had her college ID card with her, but that would only make her seem more suspicious.

Realizing she'd accidentally raised her voice, Shizuku looked around in a panic, but there was so much ambient noise that nobody paid it any mind. Even Erik, who stood beside her, seemed completely unperturbed.

“I don't see why it would be,” he replied. “I've already forged documents that claim you're my younger sister.”

“I-isn't the forgery of official documents a crime?”

“Sure, but it's not a serious one. Besides, it's not as though Tarys keeps a proper record of its citizens' births.”

“So it *is* a crime!”

“Quiet down. If you're going to be that pedantic, you're never going to make it out of Tarys.”

“Ugh. Sorry.”

Apparently, Erik was a pretty good person after all.

“This is the first time I've ever broken the law, and I'm doing it in a completely different world...”

“Sounds like you've lived a very respectable life. That's admirable.”

“I'll have to convince myself that this is an unavoidable emergency.”

“Hopefully, it'll be the last crime you have to commit,” Erik commented.

Shizuku ignored his ominous remark and tossed her black hair over her shoulder.

The gesture attracted the glances of a few passing men, but she didn't notice them. Erik, on the other hand, scowled. He pondered something for a moment, then walked up to one of the nearby market stalls offering bits of different-colored fabric.

The woman running it wasted no time. “Hello there. We've got plenty of choices. Considering the situation in Anneli, I'd recommend you stock up now.”

“Just one piece of material will be plenty. Is this one good enough, Shizuku?” Erik showed her some dull, dark-green fabric.

Shizuku tilted her head to one side.

“Is it to use as wrapping cloth or something? That color would hide the dirt, I guess.”

“No. It’s for your hair.”

“Wait! You can’t just take it without paying!” Shizuku screeched without thinking. Erik had taken the fabric off the stall without purchasing it first. Such an action would’ve raised eyebrows in her home country.

Flustered, Shizuku hurriedly collected herself.

“Sorry, I guess things are done differently here,” she said. “Um, is there some significance to the color you chose?”

“Not particularly. It was just the closest one to me.”

“Oh. Let me choose for myself, then.”

Her selection was a subdued shade of red. Shizuku gathered her hair and tied the fabric over the top of it like a scarf.

The young man examined her new hairdo, then nodded. “Yes, that looks good.”

“Why did you want me to do this?”

The pair resumed their walk. After they turned a corner, Erik gave his answer.

“Your hair stands out a little. That’s why it’s best we keep it hidden.”

“My hair? Is it because of the color?”

Shizuku slid her fingers through her bangs. Her hair was its natural color—black with a slight brownish tint. For a Japanese person, it was an extremely common shade. Nobody had commented on it when she was in Wanope, either.

Erik shook her head.

“It’s not the color that’s the problem. Possessing black hair and eyes is rare

here, but it's not entirely unheard of. It's the length that's more unusual. Women in this world tend to keep their hair long."

"Huh?"

Shizuku thought back on the people she'd met. Now that Erik had mentioned it, almost every woman she'd seen had kept her hair bound up. No other girls wore it loose or kept it trimmed shoulder-length like she did.

Erik continued walking, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "It's my fault for not noticing earlier," he said. "Your features are different, too, so you caught a few people's attention as they moved past. Everyone in Wanope knew that you were from some faraway land, so they probably never remarked on it."

"I—I had no idea... Thank you."

A few turns later, the pair arrived at an inn. Erik promptly paid for two rooms before entering one of them with Shizuku. Once inside, he set down the luggage.

"Stay here while I fetch the application forms. I don't want you getting lost outside on your own."

"I haven't gotten lost once in all my eighteen years, but since this is another world, I'll be good and wait," Shizuku replied. "See you later."

Shizuku had always been confident in her sense of direction. It may have been her first time in Ilmas, but she was certain she'd be fine with a map. A little walk would be enough for her to get her bearings. Still, Shizuku knew she lacked sensibility in other areas, so her wandering around might cause problems of another sort.

As Erik left the room carrying both of their personal documents, Shizuku took her notebook out of her bag. She drew a simple map depicting the route from where they'd disembarked from the stagecoach to the inn.

While Shizuku worked, she heard jeers from outside the window. She tiptoed over to it as quietly as she could and looked down at the back alley below. Her second-floor room gave her a good enough view.

Shizuku spotted a man in dirty clothes kicking things and cursing to himself. It

was daytime, yet he appeared drunk. Shizuku ducked her head to avoid being seen. The man was the sort of person she would've tried to avoid, even in her old world.

However, that's when she heard a small scream from down below.

"Huh?" Shizuku peered through the pane again in alarm.

It looked like one of the objects the man had kicked struck some children coming around the corner. The brother and sister, who seemed to be of elementary school age, cowered in fear as the drunken man hurled abuse at them. Hearing the man yell so irately at the scared children made Shizuku scowl.

It only took her a few seconds to decide what to do. The man's enraged shouting showing no signs of stopping.

"...Are you brats even listenin' to me? Annoyin' li'l freaks."

Half of the words that came out of his mouth were too slurred to understand.

Shizuku hurried down the stairs and outside. She peered into the alley, glowering with disgust. The two children were frozen with fear. They stood stock-still, huddled together.

Shizuku stooped over and gently slapped her hands against her knees.

Then she casually strode into the back alley as though she'd just happened to be passing by.

"Oh, excuse me! Have these kids done something wrong?" she asked, inserting herself between the man and the children.

Shizuku's sudden appearance seemed to have caught the drunken man off guard. He gawked at her for a moment, then favored her with a crooked grin.

"What's yer problem, missy? Think you can stick up for these brats when you're just a li'l kid yerself?"

"I just happened to be passing by, actually. I heard some voices, so I thought I'd check if someone was in trouble."

Shizuku forced herself to smile back at him, and that's when she realized the

man had a dagger hanging from his belt.

Cold sweat trickled down Shizuku's spine. She'd seen a few armed people walking by since arriving in the town, but standing before one of them was very different.

Trying her best to conceal her anxiety, Shizuku gently placed a hand on each child's shoulder. Despite their fear, they seemed to understand Shizuku's intent and hurried back around the corner where they'd come from.

"Darn kids! I ain't done with you yet!" the man screamed, but he didn't bother trying to chase them. Perhaps he realized he wasn't steady enough on his feet to pursue, drunk as he was.

All that Shizuku needed to do now was run away, too. Yet just as she thought to do so, the man reached out and took hold of her collar. He drew his red face closer to hers.

"You, missy, are a li'l piece of shit...", he spat.

Shizuku cursed herself for missing her chance to escape. Her opportunity had come and gone.

She caught a whiff of alcohol on his breath as he flung vitriol her way. The fury in his voice was palpable, too. Shizuku reflexively tensed. It was the first time someone had been so openly rough with her.

Although she was frightened, Shizuku still found the strength to speak. "Sorry, but...I think those kids heard more than enough from you."

"You little bitch!"

The man raised his fist. Aware of what would inevitably follow, Shizuku squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself for the pain.

To her surprise, no punch beat against her. Instead, she heard the voice of an unknown man.

"I get that you were annoyed about something, but that doesn't give you the right to take it out on little kids," he said. His words were so casual that he seemed liable to laugh.

When Shizuku dared to open her eyes, she saw a tall man holding back the

drunken one's arm.

The man—who'd apparently arrived from nowhere—looked older than Erik, but he was probably still in his late twenties.

Tanned and muscular, he wore a kind of light armor over his clothes. The thing that caught Shizuku's attention most of all, however, was the longsword hanging from his waist.

The man, who had short red hair, smiled upon noticing that Shizuku was looking at him.

"Give me a moment," he said.

"...Uh, sure," Shizuku answered, a bit dumbfounded.

This could have been her chance to escape, but she couldn't bring herself to move. Besides, she couldn't run away from the person who'd arrived to save her.

Fear entered the drunkard's eyes as he took in this new arrival.

"What's this got to do with you?" he grumbled at the man.

"What does that matter?" the man shot back. "I can't allow myself to turn a blind eye when a kid's in trouble. Work hasn't been going as I expected, so I found myself with a little time on my hands."

"A mercenary, huh? Bastard."

The drunkard's hostility couldn't hide that he was wary of the red-haired man. And when the red-haired man released his arm, he staggered away, disappearing down the alley.

Shizuku breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm sorry about that. And thank you," she said to her savior.

"Don't worry about it. I admit I really didn't have any work to do, but that's not why I'm here."

The mercenary let out a slight chuckle, then casually reached out for Shizuku. Before she had a chance to stop him, he pulled the fabric away from her hair. While Shizuku was momentarily stunned, he took a closer look at her face.

“Oh, so you *are* the girl from the stagecoach.”

“Huh...? How did you know that?”

Shizuku retreated a pace, wondering why this man recognized her. She didn’t have to wait long for an explanation.

“I rode with you. I was dozing off at the back, but I still caught a bit of your conversation.”

“O-oh!”

Thinking back, Shizuku did recall a traveler napping under his cloak. She hadn’t seen his face, but this had to be him. The man smirked and returned the piece of fabric.

“My name’s Tarkis. What’s yours?”

“...Shizuku. Thank you for helping me.”

“I’m guessing you’re about fourteen or fifteen, right? You shouldn’t be wandering around on your own.”

“I’m eighteen...,” Shizuku corrected.

Tarkis looked momentarily astonished, then burst out laughing. People had mistaken Shizuku for someone younger in Wanope, too. She’d hoped it was because of her different features.

“Sorry, sorry. Listen, you’re trying to get Farsas, right? You can come with me if you want.”

“Huh? No, I’m with someone else...”

“I take it you came here to use the transit ring. Well, I’ve got some bad news for you—it’s out of action. We’ve just received word that the castle city in Anneli, which is south of here, has been attacked. The transit ring’s been sealed off. And my job’s fallen through, too.”



“Wait, what?”

Shizuku had heard that trouble was brewing in the two countries south of Tarys, Anneli and Rozsark, back in Wanope. Apparently, those growing tensions had come to a head. She felt embarrassed for delaying her departure. Undoubtedly, this would cause trouble for Erik.

Shizuku’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. Then she realized what Tarkis meant by his earlier offer.

“If nobody can use the transit ring, then does that mean you’re traveling on the road?”

“No, I’m waiting for a friend who can open a transit gate for me. That’s why I suggested that you join me.”

“A transit gate...”

Erik had told Shizuku that only a handful of mages could use them. If Tarkis was telling the truth, then this was a very generous offer. However, it almost seemed a little too good to be true.

Shizuku scrutinized Tarkis’s expression, mindful not to stare too intently for fear of being rude.

“I don’t understand why you’d invite me. This is the first time we’ve met.”

“Huh? I’m just trying to show some kindness to a little kid.”

“I’m not *that* little,” Shizuku argued.

Tarkis’s reasoning made Shizuku feel defeated and reassured at the same time. After noticing her relax, the red-haired man laughed.

“Oh yeah, one other thing...” He took hold of Shizuku’s chin. His green eyes scanned her closely, with undisguised intent. “You’re no ordinary girl, are you?”

“...What?”

The comment caught Shizuku by surprise, something Tarkis recognized instantly. When Shizuku saw the grin on his face, she got a bad feeling in the pit of her stomach. As she began to turn pale, Tarkis let go of her.

“Just so you know, I didn’t hear all of your conversation,” he explained. “But

your hair and eyes are unusual, and the same goes for the stuff you carry around. My gut tells me that if someone like you is on the way to Farsas, then you've gotta have a special reason for it. I get the feeling if I come along, I could stumble on a pretty big case."

"A case?" Shizuku repeated. "I'm not a criminal, you know."

In reality, she was going to be involved in a criminal act. However, it likely wasn't the sort Tarkis imagined.

Tarkis had sensed that there was something different about Shizuku. She didn't know what that meant for her, but she understood it was best to be careful.

Shizuku took a step back and raised her hands in the air.

"I appreciate your kind offer, but I'm going to have to decline. I'm already traveling with someone else."

"Don't be like that. The road from here to Farsas won't be an easy one. What country are you from? You're definitely not from Tarys; I know that much."

"That's personal. I can't tell you."

"Come on. Eventually, you'll be glad to have a mercenary around who can make things happen for you. We can be real lifesavers."

Tarkis tapped the sheath of his longsword lightly. Shizuku frowned at the obvious implication.

For his part, the man was probably motivated by curiosity and goodwill, but the way he flaunted his weapon felt entirely too coercive.

Shizuku took yet another step back.

"...If I do find myself in a difficult situation, I'll just come up with my own solution."

"Even if it means sacrificing something?"

"That's not necessarily going to happen," Shizuku argued. "This conversation isn't going to lead anywhere, you know."

"Fine," Tarkis conceded, laughing.

Apparently, he found this amusing, but Shizuku didn't see the humor in it. She was grateful that he'd helped her out, but this was something else altogether.

Shizuku watched him closely, cautious of what he would do next. She couldn't allow herself to take her eyes off him. She readied herself to make a quick escape should he draw his sword.

Tarkis, having detected her distrust, threw his hands in the air.

"I understand. Until we meet again, then. Perhaps you'll have changed your mind the next time we see each other."

With that, he gently beat his fist against her left shoulder and turned to leave. Shizuku watched him calmly stroll away. Once she felt safe, she glanced at where he'd touched her. There was nothing there, yet the spot tingled.

"I—I didn't even move an inch..."

Shizuku had prepared herself to run if he'd tried to do anything, but she hadn't reacted at all when he'd knocked his hand against her shoulder. Was this what mercenaries were like? For Shizuku, who'd been the very opposite of sporty for her entire life, the whole experience had been frightening.

Finally able to relax, Shizuku put her hands on her knees.

"I managed it, at least... That's a relief...", she whispered.

Although it had come with more danger than expected, she'd still managed to help the kids escape.

Shizuku made her way back to the inn, paying close attention to her surroundings.

When she returned, Erik was already waiting for her inside.

"I was surprised when I realized you weren't in either of the rooms. I was just about to go out and look for you."

"I'm really sorry..."

It was only natural for Erik to react as he did. Shizuku bowed her head deeply. It felt like she'd never stopped bowing since coming to this world, but showing gratitude and remorse was key to staying on good terms with people.

Erik glanced at his unpacked luggage.

“You came back on your own, so that’s what matters. The truth is, I’ve run into a bit of a problem.”

“Is the transit ring sealed off?” Shizuku asked, remembering what Tarkis had mentioned.

Erik looked surprised. It was rare for him to display any sort of expression, so this wide-eyed look brought a faint, awkward smile to Shizuku’s face.

“I heard about it while I was out. I’m sorry for making us wait so long before leaving Wanope.”

“It’s not really your fault. I didn’t expect things to escalate so quickly.”

Erik seemed like he was telling the truth. Tarkis had mentioned that he’d suddenly found himself out of a job. This development must have come unexpected, even for those who’d been keeping an eye on the situation.

“How long will it be until they open the transit ring again?” Shizuku inquired.

“That depends on how things play out. Word has it that the prince of Anneli has fled his castle, which is not good news. Rozsark is trying to capture him, and other countries are also very concerned about the prince’s whereabouts. They know that this could trigger a huge conflict. Soldiers from Tarys’s army have blocked off the transit ring.”

“This sounds serious...”

Evidently, the transit ring was under tight guard.

Erik sighed and scratched his head. “Since this has to do with a neighboring nation, false rumors are rife. Some people claim that a princess imprisoned in Anneli has been taken away by Rozsark, while others claim that Rozsark wants to kill the prince who escaped. There’s even speculation that the prince has already taken refuge in another country and is looking for an opportunity to reestablish himself. It might take some time for this to settle down. A month, if we’re lucky, but it could well last for several.”

“That’s such a long time...”

“Still, if they keep the transit ring sealed off for too long, there will be

distributional delays. I can imagine them easing the rules for merchants who can verify their identities.”

“Could we sneak in with them?” Shizuku suggested.

“That’s a very daring suggestion.” Although taken aback, Erik still gave her a smile. Shizuku deduced from the look that he’d probably been thinking the same thing. “I wouldn’t rule out that possibility entirely. But if they do decide to lift the restrictions, the identity checks will be stricter than usual. No new merchants will be granted access right away, so we’ll need to win over some well-established ones and have them accompany us.”

“Right. We’ll need some money and acquaintances who can pull some strings for us, then...”

Suddenly, Shizuku’s conversation with Tarkis came flooding back, leaving her feeling a little uneasy. She’d declined his offer based on a feeling, nothing more.

Shizuku decided to ask Erik for his thoughts.

“If someone were to tell you that they knew a mage who could transport us directly to Farsas, what would you do?”

“I’d be suspicious, of course. You’d have to be quite the mage to open a gate leading from here to Farsas. Finding someone like that in a provincial city like this one would be bizarre. I’d sooner assume the person was lying to me.”

“You really think it’d be an outright lie?”

“It’s unlikely that such a claim would be true.”

To Shizuku, it sounded like there was still a chance. She crossed her arms, stupefied by Erik’s certainty.

“Why are you asking me this?” the pretty young man questioned. “Did somebody in the town invite you to go with them or something?”

“Well, sort of...”

Shizuku told Erik about Tarkis’s invitation. Erik listened intently, looking serious all the while. As soon as she finished telling the story, he rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“A mercenary, huh...? Those sorts tend to have many useful contacts, but we don’t want to risk exposing you. If it gets out that you came here from another world, you could be sold to royalty or the nobility.”

“D-don’t be silly. I wouldn’t let them violate my human rights.”

“Your human rights hold no weight against the whims of the aristocracy.”

His voice was so lacking in expression that it was hard to tell whether he was joking. Shizuku hung her head, crestfallen.

“I’m sorry for letting that weird person talk to me...”

“No, I’m partially to blame here, too. I wasn’t cautious enough.” Erik gave Shizuku a small nod and picked up his luggage. “Let’s hurry. I’m sorry to force this on you, but we need to move.”

“Are we going to a different inn?”

“No. We’re leaving town.”

“Huh?!”

“We can set out once we’ve bought the things we need. Even if that mercenary didn’t take that much of an interest, when his mage friend hears about you, he might feel differently.”

“...Okay.”

Tarkis had been easygoing, but that didn’t mean everyone would be. They needed to move quickly, before Tarkis’s mage friend arrived in town.

Shizuku picked up her bag. “Fine. Let’s leave before the witch hunt catches me.”

“If you know the phrase *witch hunt*, does that mean that people tried to hunt witches in your world, too? How many died?”

“I doubt our definition of *witch* is the same, but there were a lot of deaths,” Shizuku said as the pair strode out of their room in the inn.

By the time they were outside again, the sun had already begun to set.

It felt like a waste to have paid for two rooms they wouldn’t use, but there was nothing for it now. Erik confidently marched down the narrow alleyway

while Shizuku followed him from behind, drawing a map in her head as she went.

“Have you been to this town before, Erik?” she asked him. “You seem to know it pretty well.”

“I have, yes. I came through on the way to Farsas a long time ago now.”

“You’ve been to Farsas before?!”

“I wouldn’t be much guide otherwise, would I? It’s a huge country.”

Erik made it sound like he was stating the obvious, but his response left Shizuku wide-eyed, nonetheless. Previously, he’d insisted that there was no other country he’d rather avoid, yet he’d actually been to the kingdom of magic before.

“What was it like? Were there people flying in the sky and dragons roaming around?”

“...Is that your image of Farsas? It sounds dreadful.”

Erik didn’t even try to conceal his horror. Despite his reaction, Shizuku still couldn’t really envision what this kingdom of magic was like. She refused to back down, even as they walked.

“Come on, please tell me what it’s like,” she pleaded. “It’s only natural that I’d be curious.”

“Farsas or not, there aren’t very many mages who can fly, and none of them make a habit of it. And dragons don’t live among humans. I’ve never seen one in the flesh.”

“Really? I have.”

“You have?! Where?!”

The appalled look that had been on Erik’s face moments earlier melted away. He instantly stopped in his tracks and turned around. Now he looked as he had when Shizuku taught him writing systems from her world—almost boyish. Shizuku couldn’t help but smile.

“I spotted it in the desert when I first arrived in this world. It was flying

through the sky... I only saw it from a distance, but judging from its size, I can't think of what else it could have been."

"In the Souit Desert, huh...? That's amazing. I've heard that there are still dragons in the mountain range to the south, but it's rare to find them in the desert. I wish I'd seen it, too."

Erik's voice grew increasingly impassioned as he spoke, but when he noticed Shizuku's gaze, it brought him back to himself. Looking a little embarrassed, he returned to his usual way as he walked.

"Farsas is...a lively place, I guess. It's on a different level than other nations, culturally speaking. Its citizens are wealthy, and magic is well integrated into their society."

"Does that mean that people use magic in their everyday lives?"

"Yeah. For example, if you were working at a bakery there, magic would automatically regulate the oven's temperature for you. In the castle city, there are numerous fixed transit rings in place to help people get around, and people employ magic implements as day-to-day household essentials."

"Whoa. Sounds fascinating."

It was like something from a movie. Shizuku's face lit up, but the look on Erik's face was strikingly different. Sensing his bitterness, Shizuku felt herself growing anxious.

"Does Farsas have a bad side?" she questioned.

"Hmm... I'm not sure whether or not I should say this, but...I find Farsas to be a frightening nation."

"How so?" Shizuku struggled to understand what he meant. Why would a mage refer to a magical kingdom as scary? Shizuku believed her confusion was warranted, yet Erik turned his deep-blue eyes away and laughed.

"Out of the Four Great Nations of our continent, Farsas is by far the most powerful, and that's not because it's a powerhouse when it comes to magic. Farsas was originally known for its military force. It's only in the past century or so that it's established itself as the heart of magic."

“I see...”

For Shizuku, who was born after Japan’s period of rapid economic growth, that sounded like more than enough time for a country to change. She gave Erik a meek expression, to which he responded with a smile that looked a little too caustic to be genuine.

“These days, no other countries come close to matching Farsas in military strength or magical prowess. None have bested it for hundreds of years, not even in small skirmishes. However, that’s not the only thing that scares me. Despite the country’s size and might, it is the king—only the king—who wields complete authority. He’s no ordinary ruler, though. Generation after generation, the position has been passed to someone who specializes in killing mages. Were he to lose his mind, those around him would be powerless to do anything. That actually happened once, around sixty years ago. It led to the destruction of one country, and a battle broke out between members of the royal family. That’s why Farsas is dangerous... It all depends on the whims of one individual.”

“...”

Shizuku couldn’t find the words to reply immediately.

She wasn’t very familiar with a monarchy, but she understood what Erik was trying to say. In Farsas, the king decided on his own how to wield his tremendous power.

Ruler or not, he was still human, so he couldn’t be perfect. If the king made a wrong turn, the whole country would know the consequences. Erik’s smile turned a sliver apologetic while Shizuku swallowed nervously over the idea.

“Still, I don’t think there’s any reason for you to be scared. Farsas is famous for being a relatively open-minded nation nowadays. I’m just sharing my own personal opinion. I’m sorry for planting thoughts in your head.”

“No, it’s fine. Thank you.”

Shizuku wished she’d never asked.

There had to be some truth to what Erik had told her.

Countries, like people, were complex and multifaceted. They looked totally different depending on the angle or distance you viewed them from. Shizuku still had no idea how Farsas would appear to her.

Noticing that she'd been clenching her fists, she relaxed them.

"It's fine. Where I'm from, there's a saying that goes, 'If we could talk, you would understand,' so I'm more than happy to consider your view on things."

"You'd have to have a lot of faith in people to tell them that. Still, it's not a bad sentiment."

"It's actually the phrase that a famous politician said to his killer just before he was assassinated. His killer wouldn't listen to him, though, so he died anyway."

"I can't believe you'd bring up a phrase uttered before a murder at a time like this."

"Everything is subject to interpretation."

As the pair chatted away, Erik came to a stop outside a shop.

"This is a magic-implement shop. They don't sell anything particularly powerful, but try not to touch stuff."

"Magic implements... You mean they sell enchanted items?! That sounds exciting."

"Trust me, it's really not."

Shizuku was growing accustomed to Erik's sardonic comebacks by this point. He was never rude enough to ruin her fun completely, though.

Not discouraged in the slightest, Shizuku stepped inside and looked all around the dimly lit shop. There were so many different things scattered about that it almost reminded her of the stores back in Japan that sold snacks and souvenirs from across the country. Shizuku's eyes were drawn to the many accessories and weapons that filled the shelves.

Meanwhile, Erik, who seemed to have his own agenda, closely examined a pebble.

Once she'd taken a look at various artifacts, Shizuku's eyes settled on one of the rings displayed on the center table—an intricately wrought silver band with a small blue gemstone in the center. She drew closer so that she could study it more intently. A few moments later, she turned around to face Erik.

“Can I touch this one?” she asked.

“Which one?” he replied. “Oh, the protection ring. Sure, but I think you'll find this more useful.”

He offered something to her. When Shizuku saw what it was, she gasped.

It was a dagger in a scabbard attached to a leather belt.

Judging by the visible handle, she assumed the blade was about thirty centimeters long. It was too large to be used for any kind of handiwork. Shizuku suddenly realized she was holding her breath.

“What's that?”

“I'm going to buy it for you, so feel free to hold it. You'll need it.”

“...I will?”

The implication in Erik's words was obvious. They couldn't know what type of trouble they'd meet in the future.

Shizuku, on the other hand, couldn't help but think of the two men she'd found herself at odds with earlier in the day: the drunkard who'd bullied children and the mercenary who'd flaunted his strength as a means of negotiation. Shizuku had found both of them frightening. Her instincts had told her to avoid them.

That was why her anxiety surged when she was presented with the weapon. Carrying a weapon might bring about a similar change in her. The very idea was scary.

She couldn't imagine herself becoming quite like those men, but when push came to shove, would she be able to resist using force to manipulate people? Would she grow numb to the power she wielded?

Some people might have been able to dismiss the use of a weapon and write it off as a mere swing of a dagger. For Shizuku, however, it represented a line

that was difficult for her to cross. She couldn't justify carrying a weapon when trying her best to communicate was a perfectly feasible alternative. Accepting the dagger was more than she could bear.

Shizuku tried to explain herself, choosing her words carefully. "I'm sorry, but I don't feel comfortable carrying one of those..."

"You don't feel comfortable? Why not?"

"I don't have the confidence to carry a weapon," she said. "...I'm sorry."

Shizuku's apprehension must have stemmed from a lack of confidence. Unable to disregard this unease, she lowered her head.

Erik's eyebrows rose slightly. He looked at her like one would an ignorant child. Rather than yell at her, he spoke with a calm tone, though.

"Going by what I've seen from you so far, I take it that the land you come from is a peaceful one. If you really want to get back, carrying this is for the best. Not everyone in this world is so kind. You understand that, right?"

"I do. It's just...I don't understand myself."

Shizuku wasn't sure whether she could express her feelings properly.

She wasn't struggling to comprehend the dangers of this world but her own unsettled sense of self. Carrying a weapon felt like balancing a knife on a wobbly table—frightening.

Shizuku knew that, having come from a peaceful country, she was naive and unprepared. She had never considered herself a staunch pacifist. Yet after seeing armed individuals up close, she disliked the idea of crossing that line without careful consideration.

Erik watched Shizuku closely as she gazed at her feet.

Then he glanced at the dagger he held.

"I know what you're scared of...I think. A blade is a type of weapon, but a weapon is also a tool. We have the ability to control and use tools how we wish. That's what makes us human. Some people might misuse these tools, but I can't imagine you doing that."

“Erik.”

“Still, I’m not going to force you. I’ll carry it on your behalf. Let me know if you ever feel like peeling some fruit with it.”

The young man smiled. As Shizuku looked up at him with wide-eyed amazement, he gestured gently with his hands in a reassuring manner. After breaking off the conversation there, Erik went to pay for the dagger and a few other things.

Shizuku stood behind him and stared. The feelings welling up inside her felt like too much to handle.

After leaving the shop, the pair visited a few others to stock up on necessities.

The sun was slowly descending, and there seemed to be fewer citizens strolling about. In their place, soldiers were popping up everywhere, perhaps as a response to the fall of that castle in Anneli. The atmosphere was noticeably more somber than when Shizuku and Erik had arrived.

As Erik strode ahead, Shizuku hurried to keep up, determined not to stray too far. At one point, the young man turned around to ask, “Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“I’ve never even tried,” Shizuku answered.

“Okay. Well, you should be fine with short distances.”

“Are we going to travel on horseback?” Shizuku inquired, understandably curious.

She knew they couldn’t use the transit ring, but she’d assumed they’d take a stagecoach again.

Erik lowered his voice before replying:

“That *is* the usual method. The southern border is rocky, and the north is also mountainous. People tend to take the main road to the west to get out of the country without using the transit ring. However, if we do, it’ll be easy for *them* to guess where we are. That’s why we’re going to cross the northern mountains instead.”

“Oh...”

If they headed west, Tarkis and his mage friend would be able to follow easily if they so wished.

“I get it. We’re throwing them off our trail. Let’s flee to the north like real criminals.”

“Don’t make it sound so serious. Besides, we’ll be subject to vehicle checks if we head west. Moving north lets us dodge those.”

No sooner did Erik finish than a stable came into view. Erik got Shizuku to wait outside while he entered. A short time later, he came back out, leading a horse by its reins.

The animal was a little smaller than the racing horses Shizuku had seen in photos, but it looked sturdy enough.

“How did you get the horse? Did you rent it?” Shizuku asked as she stared into its shiny eyes, entranced.

“I bought it. What does ‘rent’ mean?” he replied plainly while fixing their luggage onto the horse’s back.

Once Erik mounted the horse, he offered his hand to Shizuku.

“Come on, let’s go,” he said.

“...What?”

“You said you’ve never ridden a horse before, right? I’ll teach you later. For now, you can ride up front.”

“Is it really okay for us to ride double?!”

“I picked a horse that would be able to handle it. You’re small, so I doubt you’re that heavy.”

The remark prompted Shizuku to look down at herself. He was right about her being small. She wasn’t even a hundred sixty centimeters. She’d always been an average weight, but she’d grown a little thinner since coming to this world. Her bag was heavy, but she doubted that was much to worry over.

She grabbed hold of Erik’s hand.

“Put your foot there and your luggage up here. Okay, I’ll help you up.”

Erik managed to pull Shizuku onto the horse with surprisingly little effort. He guided her down in front of him, then gathered the reins.

It was the first time Shizuku had sat on a horse saddle, and it felt higher up than she'd expected. She flinched in fear gently.

“Try not to fall off. And don't fall asleep, either.”

“I'm not bold enough to nap up here...”

The horse began at a trot, carrying its two passengers away from town. As Shizuku sat securely in the saddle, she stole a glance over her shoulder at the city they were leaving behind.

Twilight fell over Ilmas.

3. The Lost Princess



Having left Ilmas to move northwest, Shizuku and Erik decided to stay the night in a small farming village.

However, few travelers visited this town, so there was no proper inn. Instead, Erik and Shizuku—who'd arrived late at night—were shown to a large room in a village meeting place where each bed was partitioned by curtains.

"This is sort of like a bunkhouse," Shizuku remarked. "The kind where students stay when they go on trips abroad."

"You *are* a student on a trip—you're just in another world instead of abroad," Erik quipped. "Wait, what's a 'bunkhouse'?"

There was nobody else around, so the pair had moved the curtains to chat. Shizuku laughed as she admired the magic lantern.

"It's a type of lodge where you share a room with other people to keep the costs down. They tend to have bunk beds, though."

Erik hummed. "Really? In this world, you don't see bunk beds very often anymore. Only on boats."

"What do you mean, 'anymore'? Did people use them in the past?"

"I think the servants in noble estates slept in beds like that up until about two hundred years ago. But as the treatment of servants improved, that sort of sleeping arrangement was phased out. There are still plenty of shared chambers like this one where the beds are divided up by fabric, though."

Erik pointed to the curtain. It was black and heavy. The years had made it faded.

This was the first night Shizuku had spent outside Wanope. She rested her head on top of her knees.

“Is security not a big concern at inns in your world?” she asked.

“In these parts, it’s every man for himself. Nowhere is completely safe, but you get what you pay for. We didn’t have any choice, though. I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s fine! This is fun. I feel like I’m on a school trip. I have way more space than I did when I stayed in a mountain hut on Mount Fuji. When it gets busy there, two people have to sleep together on a single futon!”

“Is that right? If that’s what your world is like, I understand why you have such strong nerve.”

“Sorry, I think I gave you the wrong idea there. That example was quite an extreme one.”

Shizuku had hoped to convince Erik that she was all right and wound up going too far. Back home, not everyone was subjected to the cramped living conditions she’d known when climbing Mount Fuji. A very small percentage lived that way. That said, when she’d hiked up Mount Fuji with her family, Shizuku had been the only one of her sisters who hadn’t quit partway through. Her younger sister, Mio, seldom cried, yet on that particular occasion, she’d definitely come close. Reflecting on it now brought a bittersweet smile to Shizuku’s face.

“That story was a little much, but I assure you I can put up with almost anything! I’m strong like that!” Shizuku asserted.

“Okay, I get it now. You tend to take things a little too far.”

“What?!” exclaimed Shizuku. Erik smiled slightly.

With his face illuminated by the magic light, he looked strikingly beautiful. Shizuku couldn’t help but admire his appearance. It was like something out of a painting.

As she thought on it, she realized how crazy it was to be spending a night alone with a man. And they were lying so close to each other. A month ago, this

would have been unthinkable.

Now, though, it was a reality. If someone was to ask her whether spending the night with Erik felt embarrassing or relaxed, then...

“...I’m so sorry,” she muttered, covering her face.



“What for?”

The caring man who'd been leading her on her journey sat up in bed. Shizuku shook her head emphatically.

“I just feel like I'm being a burden. I mean, you're an unmarried man.”

“You're not causing any trouble. What's me being unmarried have to do with anything?”

“If it doesn't matter to you, then I'm glad...”

He'd declared to have no interest in other people, yet this was still comforting to hear. Shizuku felt immensely guilty nonetheless, but at least she wouldn't have to worry too much.

Shizuku sighed deeply and forced herself to snap out of it. However, Erik clearly noticed she'd been staring at him, entranced by his appearance.

“What's the matter?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. I'm totally fine...,” Shizuku replied, waving her hands in front of her face.

She had to look very suspicious. Still, she couldn't admit she'd been admiring his appearance. Were he to retort with a disgusted *What?* Shizuku would never recover.

Having lied, albeit rather blatantly, about her actions, Shizuku suddenly found herself feeling drowsy. She yawned, which made Erik laugh.

“Get some rest. You must be tired. We've got more traveling tomorrow.”

“Okay...”

Shizuku hadn't felt particularly drowsy or tired, but that was probably because she'd been so tense. She did as Erik suggested and lay down, while Erik pulled the curtain shut. The magic lantern went out.

“Thank you... Good night.”

“Good night.”

Erik's gentle voice resonated pleasantly in Shizuku's ears. She drifted to sleep

as though guided by the soothing sound.



Early the following morning, Shizuku and Erik stocked up on cooking ingredients. Shizuku examined the numerous nonperishable foods that Erik had picked.

“Is that *pasta*, by any chance?”

“What’s ‘pasta’?”

“You make it by kneading flour with water, then dry it. Before you eat it, you have to boil it.”

“Oh... I think this is more or less the same, then. We call this *setanne*. You call it *pasta*, huh?”

“I just realized that udon noodles are made the same way, but these ones look more like macaroni.”

The dried food inside the bag was divided into shorter pieces than macaroni, all of which had a small, flat oval shape. Shizuku peered at them, captivated.

“I heard that Italian soldiers used to cook pasta to eat, even when they were in the desert.”

“Is this the part where I’m supposed to laugh?” Erik said. “If a joke requires prerequisite knowledge to understand, then you need to add in an explanation.”

“If you have to explain a joke, it defeats the point.”

Once Erik and Shizuku were done with their shopping, they ended their stay in the village by purchasing another horse. On the way to the stable, they’d concluded that Shizuku would be able to ride alone, provided they went slowly.

Thus, their journey north began at a leisurely pace. As Shizuku gingerly coaxed her horse into a trot, Erik, who rode about a meter ahead, took the opportunity to explain that since the sun was still high, they’d be able to continue until they reached the border today.

“I’m an indoorsy person,” said Shizuku. “It’s been a long time since I went camping.”

“But you still look like a kid. You don’t seem eighteen anyway.”

“Really?” she replied. “That’s a little disheartening.”

While hearing she looked young might have sounded like a compliment, Shizuku didn’t appreciate being told she resembled a child. No matter how people phrased it, those two comments were the same to Shizuku.

Shizuku peered up at the mountains visible in the distance.

“Is the mountain path very rugged?” she asked.

“In places. Barely anyone uses it, after all.”

“Do they keep away because there are bandits there?”

“Bandits can’t pillage anything if there are no people around,” Erik reasoned. “These roads grew deserted after the transit rings were installed.”

“That’s like what happens to mountain paths when highways are built.” Shizuku took another look at the peaks.

Tall and covered in trees, they obstructed the path like an imposing green barrier.



“There are a total of twenty-six letters in the alphabet. English and German both use the same writing system, but in German, there are vowels with marks called umlauts. They’re the letters with those two dots on top.”

“I see. What difference do those dots make?”

“They change how you pronounce the letters,” Shizuku explained. “Pronunciation rules are much easier to understand in German than in English.”

Erik looked skeptical for a moment. “I get it. You adopt an accent when you say them.”

He quickly wrote down some notes.

Shizuku found this a strange way to explain things, but English and German were both Germanic languages. Around two thousand years ago, they were the same. From that perspective, it made sense that someone from another world would react as Erik did.

“There are a lot of countries in Europe that use this alphabet. I’m studying English and German... I’ve only just started German, though.”

Then Shizuku lifted her head and took a look around.

She and Erik were in a forest a short way up the mountains that served as the national border. The sun had set shortly after they began their ascent, so they’d elected to move off the path and make camp.

Erik had found a small clearing and spent a few minutes casting a kind of magic there. He used a tree branch to draw patterns on the ground in several places, then repeated a chant several times. He explained that he’d used magic to create a “relatively safe zone,” but naturally, that meant nothing to Shizuku. They built a fire and cooked a simple meal. After they ate, the books had come out, and they’d begun studying.

Japanese was Shizuku’s first language, but it was easier to teach English. Japanese was just something she’d picked up naturally, whereas English was the language she’d made a concerted effort to learn.

Shizuku had figured it’d be best to teach a language that somebody else had taught her, but as she spoke with Erik, she occasionally found herself overcome with a strange sense of unease. Not even Shizuku herself could pinpoint what caused it. Erik apparently detected the same thing, because he stopped from time to time to brood.

Shizuku used her mechanical pencil to write three sentences in her notebook.

The first was in Japanese: “私の名前は雫です。”

The second was in English: “My name is Shizuku.”

And the third was in German: “Mein Name ist Shizuku.”

Shizuku drew lines to link the corresponding words in each sentence together, then showed Erik.

“These sentences all mean the same thing: *My name is Shizuku.*”

“It makes sense that the bottom two sentences have the same meaning, but the first one couldn’t be more different.”

“That’s to be expected. I mean, my country’s a whole ocean away!”

Erik could question it as much as he liked, but that was just the way things were. Japanese was an established language, so there was no changing it now. Every student who ever struggled to learn a foreign language probably felt the urge to question a lot of things, too.

Erik compared the three sentences with one another. “In Japanese, there are no spaces between the words. Do you use hiragana and dots in certain places to make it easier to determine where one word ends and another one begins?”

“U-uhhh, maybe. I guess so.”

“Got it.”

Erik, who seemed to have come to a realization, wrote something on his paper.

Shizuku had been vaguely aware for a while that Erik appeared to catch on to things quicker than she could. When Shizuku doubted that he’d understand her descriptions, he still managed to piece things together. Sometimes, Erik came back with thoughtful questions to her unclear explanations. As Shizuku watched him quietly taking notes in his own notebook-like thing, she couldn’t help but audaciously wonder if he might assist her with her school report.

She didn’t know how many days had gone by in her world. If time moved at the same rate, then less than two weeks of summer break remained. There was no way she could finish a whole report in that time. Shizuku paled at the idea.

Erik looked up, perhaps having noticed the strained look on her face. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Shizuku frantically waved her hands dismissively in front of her face.

Erik seemed to assume she was fretting over something else. He looked around the gloomy forest. “Don’t worry. I’ve set up a protective barrier. No low-level demons will be able to get near us.”

“Oh, right... Wait, what do you mean by ‘demons’?!”

“A demon’s a demon, obviously,” he replied. “They’re beings with different tendencies from humans and animals. They desire to destroy and contaminate

things.”

“Huh? I didn’t know we were in *that* kind of word!” Shizuku exclaimed, inadvertently raising her voice.

Erik gave her a cold look.

“Why are you making a big deal about it *now*?” he said. “Let me guess—they don’t have demons in your world.”

“...Nope.”

This world was even more different than Shizuku had assumed. However, since dragons and magic existed, perhaps she ought to have expected demons, too.

Shizuku gazed at her feet dejectedly. Erik cocked one eyebrow.

“You’ve been living in this world for over a month, yet you never heard about demons?”

“I know I’m causing you nothing but trouble, but please try not to give up on me.”

“How heartless do you think I am?” Erik replied.

His wry grin, awash in the glow of red fire, momentarily seized Shizuku’s attention, sending a shiver down her spine. In that moment, she stole a glimpse of the depth of his character. To her, it seemed a wealth of knowledge and hardships had been condensed into one individual.

He was only four years older than her. What kind of life had he led to end up as he was? Shizuku’s limited understanding of this world made it difficult to fathom.

For the first time, Shizuku felt like she’d begun to develop a genuine interest in who Erik was as a person, and that came with a tinge of sadness, too.

Once they’d finished studying, the two of them lay down on either side of the burning fire and wrapped themselves in their heavy blankets.

Erik assured her they wouldn’t have to sleep outside the following night if all went as planned. Shizuku didn’t mind either way, though.

They'd set out on this journey for her sake. That Erik was involved at all made Shizuku feel guilty.

Even when Shizuku apologized for the trouble she'd caused, the guileless mage would reply, "It's nothing I hadn't accounted for."

On reflection, Shizuku had never really been able to tell what he was thinking. She'd never seen him get properly angry, and she couldn't picture him beaming with joy.

Shizuku let out a small yawn, then extended her hands toward the sky. The stars nearly looked close enough to touch. There was a moon, too. Did that mean that this world was on Earth?

"Can't sleep?"

Erik's voice startled Shizuku, who'd assumed he was already asleep.

She put her arms back down and looked over at him. His face was lit by the flames, revealing that his eyes were firmly shut.

Perhaps sensing the young woman's hesitation, Erik continued, his eyes still closed.

"If you can't sleep, then how about we talk? We could tell folktales or something."

"...That sounds interesting. How about we swap legends?"

Matters of language aside, Shizuku hadn't told Erik much about her world. She'd only gone as far as showing him things people carried around with them, like her smartphone, her notebooks, and her writing utensils. Erik hadn't come to her with any questions, so she'd just left it at that. Unlike the inner workings of a machine, however, legends were something that Shizuku felt adequately equipped to talk about. The idea excited her, and she grew intrigued to hear the stories of Erik's world.

She began with a story she knew.

"Once upon a time, there was an old man and an old lady. One day, the old man went to the mountain to cut the grass..."

"What for?"

“Let’s say he went to fetch some firewood, then... And the old lady went to the river to wash some clothes. That was when a big peach came bobbing down the stream. *Bob-bob, bloop-bloop...*”

“What’s that weird chant? A spell?”

“They’re onomatopoeia!”

Shizuku retold the famous Japanese folktale of “Momotaro.” Once she’d finished, she was bombarded with a tirade of dry comments from Erik. How naive she’d been to hope he would overlook the fable’s peculiarities. He asked question after question, showing all the self-restraint of a little kid coming to terms with how the world worked. Shizuku wasn’t quite sure whether this was because he was from another world or if that was just his personality.

After listening to the story’s conclusion, Erik remarked, “Oh, so it’s a story about using your powers to obtain material wealth.” Shizuku felt the will to live physically drain from her body.

Erik nodded to himself, eyes still shut. “So that’s what ogres are like in your world,” he said. “How interesting.”

“Now it’s your turn. Tell me one of your legends!”

“Sure. How about a demon one? It’s the story of the water god in Lake Nevys.”

Erik’s voice took on a soothing tone as he launched into the tale.

The ancient legend came from Candela, the country on the other side of the mountains.

At the base of the peaks that separated Candela from Tarys lay a blue lake called Nevys.

Over a thousand years ago, this lake, which rested gently in a mountain valley, was home to a water deity.

The people of the three villages in Candela near the lake worshipped this water god. And it was thanks to his divine protection that they enjoyed peaceful lives. However, this water god did not meddle in the lives of these individuals. Instead, he observed from his home, and the humans benefitted indirectly from

his presence.

Eventually, the peace and tranquility that prevailed for so long ended as the continent entered the Dark Age. Two of the three villages came under the control of a neighboring country, whose soldiers had crossed the mountains. They set up military camps in those previous peaceful villages.

Before too long, the army, whose origin had long since been forgotten, callously desecrated the lakeside in pursuit of drinking water and fish. They unknowingly crossed an unspoken boundary that the water god and the villagers had respected for many years—and by doing so, they incurred the deity's wrath. In a single night, countless soldiers were hauled into the depths of the lake. Half of the army drowned, compelling the prince who was the commander to order a retreat.

"That was when the water god demanded something from them," Erik said.

"An apology?" Shizuku guessed.

"Of a sort," responded Erik, a slightly awkward smile on his face. His voice was gentle, however. It sounded pleasant as it seeped into the night air. "The water god asked the prince to offer his younger sister, whom he'd brought with him, as an apology. If he refused, then the water god would kill all the remaining soldiers."

"Whoa. A human sacrifice, huh?"

It reminded Shizuku of Oto Tachibana Hime, a character from Japanese mythology. In her story, she'd been the prince's wife rather than his younger sister, but it was still a similar tale. Oto Tachibana Hime drowned herself after her husband had incurred the wrath of the god of the sea.

This development in the story upset Shizuku a little, but Erik carried on unaware.

"At first, the prince wasn't sure what to do, but he decided that giving up the princess for his country was part of his duty. He went to meet the water god, and in the end, the deity didn't kill her. He took her as his wife instead."

"A cross-species marriage?"

“Yes,” said Erik. “But the story doesn’t end there. After sending the remainder of his army home, the prince visited the water god with a few of his servants. Following a terrible struggle, they killed the water god and brought back his sister, who’d been living a perfectly happy life. Without the water god around, the lake became inhospitable for fish... And that’s how the story ends. They all lived happily ever after.”

“Hold on a minute! What’s happy about that?!”

Shizuku was sure Erik had claimed the princess was fine before her brother came and snatched her back. Hadn’t the prince done the opposite of what the princess wanted?

Erik nodded, still not opening his eyes.

“You’re right. It is a little sad. The whole reason that the water god had asked for the princess in the first place was because he was in love with her. Once she found out, she grew to love him, too. That’s why the tale became known far and wide as a tragic love story.”

“...You left out the bit about them being in love!” Shizuku exclaimed. “That makes it totally different!”

And then there was the part about all the fish disappearing from the lake; that wasn’t happy in the slightest. This story was no more than a tragedy of misunderstandings.

Erik received Shizuku’s incredulity calmly.

“Still, it’s a decent story, don’t you think? I’m not sure which part you took issue with, but that water god claimed the lives of half of the prince’s army. Marrying the woman he adored and enjoying a blissful life with her afterward with no trouble would’ve been strange. Consider that she was a member of the royal family that ruled those soldiers who died.”

“I—I guess so.”

The story didn’t quite sit right with Shizuku. After all, none of characters really ended up happy. Frowning, she thought back on how Erik had introduced the fable.

“What does that story have to do with demons?” she questioned.

“That water god was a demon, a high-ranking one. We have gods and religions that revere them, but no one’s proven that any deity genuinely exists. However, during the Dark Age, there were actual gods out in the countryside that people worshipped. People claim they were actually high-ranking demons.

“Oh... I see.”

This surprised Shizuku, but as she thought it over, it did make sense. In her world, some beings considered devils were ancient gods whose divinity had been denied by other monotheistic faiths. Here, too, there seemed to be a paper-thin line between powerful beings considered good and those deemed wicked.

“Those high-level demons are, by nature, disinterested in humans. There aren’t very many stories like the one you just heard. The only high-level demon that lives on the same plane of existence as us is...the Spirit of Farsas.”

“Farsas?! There are demons there?”

This revelation almost caused Shizuku to jump to her feet. Dragons didn’t exactly roam the skies here, but Erik just confirmed there were demons so powerful that people called them gods. She was simultaneously frightened and intrigued at the same time, which was a weird feeling.

“There are,” Erik replied, his voice calm. “The witches brought them there a long time ago. Nowadays, it’s the royal mages who put them to work.”

“Witches...”

This wasn’t the first time Erik had brought witches up.

Shizuku thought back on that incident Erik had told her about, the one that might hold clues to how Shizuku would return home. He’d mentioned that a witch might have been connected.

It was just a “*might*,” though, one of many mysteries that encircled that particular story.

Shizuku found herself sighing.

Would all the mysteries surrounding her be unraveled as they were in the

mystery novels she used to read? Would she ever make it back to her world? Where would this journey of hers, which none of her family and friends knew of, reach its conclusion?

“There’s a legend about the king of Farsas and a witch, too. If you’re interested, I’ll tell you that one another time. Now, though, you need to get some sleep,” Erik said.

Shizuku nodded.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

With the stars in the sky so close that they looked liable to fall, Shizuku gave in to her exhaustion and drifted into sleep.



That night, Shizuku had a strange dream.

She was standing in a huge, empty space. It had no walls, just a white floor that stretched on and on.

Before her stood a single desk, also entirely white.

Three large books rested atop it. She gently touched the navy-blue cover of one.

It wasn’t made of paper. It felt more like leather. The slippery surface was curiously cool to the touch.

Shizuku ran her fingers along the cover’s decorative, silver border, then opened the book.

The text adorning the strange volume’s yellowed pages was that of this other world.

It wasn’t Japanese or the Roman alphabet, and the letters looked slightly distorted, yet she was able to read it fluently. Her eyes scanned each of the horizontally written lines.

“...When Laylia arrived at the castle at the bottom of the lake, she sensed she was about to meet her death. However, the pride she took in her role as a princess and her determination trumped the fear. She simply assured herself that she would forfeit her life for her nation’s soldiers. She reluctantly entered a

long corridor, and a door at the end of it opened. The man known as the water god waited ahead, welcoming the bride he'd longed for."

The story was vaguely familiar to Shizuku.

She felt like she'd learned of it recently yet had also known about it forever.

Why was the story giving her déjà vu? She couldn't remember.

Rather than consider this, she carried on reading the book.

No matter how many times she turned the pages of the mysterious navy-blue book, she still felt stuck on the same one.



Shizuku awoke just as the sun began to color the horizon.

As she lifted herself up, still in a daze, a young man called to her.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

"Yeah..."

Shizuku looked over at Erik. Like her, he'd only just emerged from sleep. Perhaps her movement had roused him.

Shizuku patted down her messy hair with her hands.

"G-give me a minute, okay?" she said.

"Take your time."

Erik stood, brushed the dirt from his heavy blanket, then folded it up. After seeing him making such quick work of tidying, Shizuku frantically rose to her feet. She'd spent the previous night with him, too, but they'd been partitioned from each other, and she'd been able to dress herself before meeting with him. This was the first Erik would see her right after waking.

Flustered, Shizuku combed her fingers through her hair to make it look presentable. Shortly after she stood, she got to work helping Erik break camp.

Once dawn broke and the two finished their preparations, they set off again.

Luckily, the mountain path followed gentle curves. Erik and Shizuku had their horses trot at a leisurely pace as they made their way up, only dismounting and guiding them with their reins when the roads narrowed and turned steep.

“I haven’t been up a mountain since I was a kid...,” Shizuku remarked at one point during their ascent.

“You still look like a kid,” Erik retorted.

“Stop with that already,” Shizuku snapped. “I’m eighteen! *Eighteen!* Actually, there might be six hundred days in a year in this world, for all I know—still, though!”

“There aren’t that many. There are only three hundred and eighty-four.”

“That’s a lot... Anyway, that’d only make me about a year younger.”

Shizuku realized she didn’t know if a day in this world was the same length as one on Earth.

As the day’s trek with Erik continued, she recalled the time she’d gone up a mountain for an elementary school field trip. Back then, a bus had taken them halfway up, and she’d still been totally exhausted by the time she’d gotten over the mountain pass. Perhaps she’d lacked the stamina for it at that age.

Even now, she was short of breath, but no more so than if she’d gone jogging. Whenever it seemed like she was pushing too hard, Erik took quick notice and gave her a break, so she didn’t have any worries for now.

“We’ve climbed pretty far...”

Shizuku looked behind her and suddenly recognized they were higher than she’d expected. The foot of the mountains looked so far down, and the path they’d taken the previous day stretched out of sight. The view was so breathtaking that Shizuku felt tempted to yell at the top of her voice. However, she knew her companion would object and offer some dry quip.

Unaware of what was running through Shizuku’s mind, Erik pointed at the route ahead.

“If we keep this up, it should take us about three hours to descend. Even if we account for breaks, we should make it to a town within Candela’s borders tonight.”

“I’ll try my best.”

Shizuku concentrated on the path ahead, taking it step by step. Before long,

the idea of a rocky downhill path sounded ideal.

Her legs were growing tired, but she still managed to force them into action. Two hours later, she and Erik arrived at the peak.

“What an amazing view. Can I take a photo?”

“A photo?” Erik thought for a moment. “...Oh yeah, that thing.”

Shizuku grabbed her phone out of her bag, which had been piled onto her horse’s back.

A series of verdant mountains and a deep lake nestled comfortably below greeted her.

“That lake’s incredible... It almost looks turquoise.”

The water was astonishingly clear. Shizuku understood why people claimed a god had lived in its beautiful waters.

Shizuku turned on her phone—she’d kept it off since her earliest days here. A few moments later, a logo appeared on the screen. The sight of it stirred a despairing kind of nostalgia in Shizuku.

She turned her phone on its side to fit the surroundings into the frame, then kept her finger on the shutter button as she panned across the vast expanse. Keen to capture the lake in its full glory, she tried out different angles.

Yet no matter how she attempted to photograph it, something felt wrong.

Unable determine the reason, she scrutinized the landscape reflected on her phone screen.

In her old world, she regularly took pictures of anything that slightly caught her attention.

That allowed her to share what she’d seen with her friends or look back on things at a later date, not unlike a diary. It was really useful. Shizuku felt like her phone gave her the opportunity to preserve memories, no matter how insignificant.

Now, however, she felt weirdly unsettled—so much so that she couldn’t even bring herself to lift her finger off the shutter button.

It wasn't because of the view. She knew that it was rare to see such beautiful scenery. That was precisely why she'd wanted to photograph it. There was no doubt about that. So why couldn't she bring herself to do so?

She shifted her focus away from the screen and onto the device itself.

It had a white, oblong outer shell. For Shizuku, who'd found herself lost in another world, it was a shard of her old life, proof of who she'd been. It should have felt familiar to hold, and yet in this moment, it felt bizarrely alien to her.

She put it down and looked up at the young man beside her. He returned her gaze, his deep-blue eyes even clearer than the lake below. She found herself noting their beautiful color.

"Finished with your photo?" he asked.

"Uhhh... How should I put this?" she replied. "Do you think I might be...good at adapting to things?"

"I think you have a lot of nerve, at least. What prompted this?"

"You need to learn how to express things in a more considerate way."

Shizuku stowed her phone in her bag. She stroked the back of her horse, pulled its reins, and smiled.

"All right! Let's go!"

"Okay."

Once the two of them were mounted again, they slowly made their way down the peaks.

Since the border ran along the mountaintops, they had already crossed into Candela, the country that neighbored Tarys, yet no one was around. Shizuku questioned whether it was okay to charge into another nation so recklessly, but considering that some countries didn't even keep proper registers of their citizens, it appeared that people were rather lax about such things here. As the lake bobbed ever nearer, Shizuku felt her heart begin to race with juvenile delight.

"I wonder if I can swim in it. The idea's kind of exciting."

“You can swim?”

“I’m pretty good at it, actually. When I was a kid, my grandpa used to call me a kappa,” Shizuku said, referring to the river-inhabiting creature from Japanese folklore.

“What’s a ‘kappa’?” Erik questioned.

He’d known about ogres, but he hadn’t heard of kappas. Shizuku had been focusing on steering her horse, but she looked up to answer.

“It’s a monster from folklore that lives in the water. They have a hundred hands—that’s what makes them so charming.”

This last part was a flat-out lie.

The turquoise-blue lake glimmered in the sunlight. Shizuku found herself entranced by its natural color.

She didn’t need to take a photo.

Even if she didn’t have a physical record of it, she was confident she’d never forget this sight.



The tragic love story of Lake Nevys had spread across the continent, but all its iterations were slightly different.

Sometimes, it was only the princess’s hair and eye color that varied, whereas in others, the result of the battle between the water god and the prince and the way the princess felt differed. These variations, which had all branched from the same story, became well-known among the populaces.

The iteration Erik told Shizuku was the most widely accepted version.

After the water god’s death, the princess had returned to her country, still harboring feelings for the husband she’d been briefly wed to. From then on, the lake became uninhabitable for wildlife. Ultimately, all one saw on its surface was a reflection of the sky. Legends that evoked a sense of sadness must have tugged at people’s heartstrings. There were many books based on the legend. It was quite popular.

And now Shizuku stood before the very site of that tale from over a thousand

years ago. Her cry of admiration resonated through the crisp air.

“This is amazing! It’s so clear! Can I swim in it?!”

“I wouldn’t recommend that,” Erik said. “You don’t know what’s in there.”

“Kappas?”

“Didn’t you say those things have ten hands? I doubt you can find one of those anywhere.”

“Multiply that by ten.”

Shizuku hoped to draw a comedic parallel with the Thousand-Armed Avalokiteshvara, a figure in Buddhism with a thousand hands. She bit her tongue, however, knowing that would only draw the conversation down a needless tangent.

After peering into the water, Shizuku looked back at Erik, who stood behind her.

The gently curving shore of the lake was covered with small, round stones. Its water was clear to the very bottom and reflected the sky when viewed from an angle, shining so brightly that it nearly brought tears to the eyes. Shizuku couldn’t find the words to describe the mystical scene. No cliché comment would do it justice.

It was clear from Shizuku’s face that she didn’t want to leave. Erik tapped her on the back anyway, though.

“It’s time we leave,” he said. “We need to find somewhere to stay in the town nearby.”

Shizuku nodded. “Okay.”

The two of them climbed onto their horses and rode along the edge of the lake. The path that came down from the mountains continued by the water. Now that the ground was flat, Shizuku’s horse seemed to find the terrain much easier to traverse. Although she was only the rider, she felt grateful for that.

A breeze suddenly brushed against her ears from behind. Shizuku felt compelled to look back at the mirrorlike lake. No ripples ran over its surface.

“Is something the matter?” Erik asked.

“...I thought I felt something. Never mind, it’s nothing.”

Shizuku gently shook her head and faced forward again.

It had felt like someone was speaking to her, but she had surely imagined it. She and Erik were the only people around, so it must have been the wind.

Shizuku tamed her windswept locks and tied them back.

Eventually, the path beside the lake led to the unmistakable shapes of buildings.

The town of Colwa, which lay on the shore of Lake Nevys, had changed its name and even its national allegiance in the past thousand years. Yet despite all odds, it was still standing.

Its origins could be traced back to the era of the legend Erik had told Shizuku. Once, it was one of the three villages whose people revered the water god, the only one not seized by the neighboring country. This last village, which had relocated shortly after the other two disappeared, gradually expanded to become the present-day tranquil country town.

Shizuku and Erik entrusted their horses to a stable near the town’s entrance before making their way inside.

The town stood at the foot of the mountains, but that didn’t keep travelers from visiting to see Lake Nevys. Erik chose one of the many local inns and decided that they ought to rest.

He spread his map of the continent on the table.

“From here, we’re going to head farther northwest, toward Candela’s castle city. Once we arrive, we can either use its transit ring or take the highway west.”

“Got it. Is the castle city far?”

“Fairly so, I think. I’ve never been there myself. Provided things go well, it should take about two weeks.”

Shizuku ran her finger across the map. They’d moved a little way west, but

Farsas remained a distant thing. That was to be expected, considering their trip had only just started. She was reminded of *Journey to the West*, the old Chinese novel, although she didn't plan on fighting any monsters. If Shizuku was Sun Wukong the Monkey King and Erik was Tang Sanzang the monk, they were short a few characters. As Shizuku idly mulled this over, the young man sitting across from her cast her a suspicious glance.

"What are you smiling about?" he said. "Are you plotting something?"

"Of course not! I wasn't thinking about anything, really. I was just wondering what you'd look like if you shaved off your hair."

"I think I'll be heading back to Wanope now. I trust you have no objections?"

"I'm sorry. I sincerely apologize."

Erik gave her a somber nod. He didn't seem interested in asking why she'd been imagining such a thing.

Given Erik's handsome appearance, Shizuku felt he'd make a good Tang Sanzang, if one could overlook the fact that he wasn't Chinese.

Once the two of them had decided on how they were going to proceed, they retired to their separate rooms until dinner. It allowed Shizuku just enough time to take a hot water bath. The inn's washrooms weren't big, but guests could use them in privacy, which meant that she could relax and stretch out her arms and legs.

"I'm so tired..."

She hadn't felt weary, yet the fatigue struck soon as she relaxed in the warm water. She must have been holding it in while climbing the mountain.

Shizuku took a deep breath, inhaling steam and letting it spread through her.

She rubbed both her shoulders in turn, then massaged her tense calves. She combed up her wet hair with her fingers and peered into the water, where she could nearly make out her reflection.

"...I want to go home."

She looked like a Japanese person. Thus far, she hadn't met anyone who shared her appearance in this world. In the past, she'd always thought she

didn't resemble anyone in her family. Now, though, she felt like she was gazing at their faces in addition to her own.

It had been so long since she'd seen her sisters. The last day she'd spent with her family had been at the start of April. Almost six months had already come and gone since, if the time Shizuku had spent in this other world counted. Her family was likely searching for her by now. The very idea made her want to cry.

Shizuku pressed her wet fingers against her eyes.

She knew she was lucky to have received so much help. Without it, she would've died alone and forgotten in this confusing new world, or perhaps met an even worse fate.

That was a poor consolation, though. Shizuku didn't feel more fortunate than any of her classmates who'd enjoyed a perfectly ordinary summer break. Why was she the only one dropped into an unknown land?

"...I can't think like that."

Once Shizuku had grounded herself again, she slapped her cheeks. She couldn't allow herself to fall into the trap of negative thinking. It was an insult to Erik, who'd been kind enough to accompany her on her journey.

On one occasion when Shizuku worried whether she'd ever get home after they reached Farsas, Erik had replied, *"If the land of Farsas knows what caused those mysterious incidents two hundred and forty years ago, we might be able to use that to send you home. To be more specific...we need to make your past memories materialize. Memories of your old world, I mean. When you're in the center of the memory that's remanifested, you get sent to the place where it really happened once the phenomenon concludes. You'd be able to return to your world."*

After hearing that, Shizuku had clapped her hands together enthusiastically.

"*Oh, I get it now!*" she'd exclaimed. Being armed with a concrete idea of what they might be able to do brought a genuine sense of relief.

It was too early to feel hopeless. There was no need to fall to her knees in despair. She could continue forward.

“It’s fine... I think we can make this happen.”

Had Shizuku’s older sister been put in this world, she would’ve attracted more support and made it to Farsas without any trouble. On the other hand, her younger sister would’ve taken the initiative to turn things around and found the solution on her own.

So what would Shizuku Minase do? What was her method of overcoming this challenge?

She looked up at the ceiling as steam drifted through the air. She could feel the blood flowing through her outstretched limbs.

She lacked focus and awkwardly flailed about a lot, but as long as she refused to give in and pushed ahead, Shizuku was sure that this journey would be a positive one for her. Someday, she may be able to think of it as a precious memory. There was no choice but to trust that.

Shizuku exhaled, letting her breath dissolve into the steam.

For a moment, Shizuku felt like she could make out a hazy outline of what was to come in the white steam.

The town of Colwa wasn’t particularly large, rivaling Wanope in size.

After a night at the inn, Shizuku got Erik’s permission to take a walk around by herself. Unlike Ilmas, which had been a key location on their journey, nobody in Colwa was armed. What Shizuku *really* wanted, though, was to see that blue lake one more time.

Since the town stood on the lakeshore, the edge of the settlement looked straight out onto it. A stone path sloped gradually downward as it approached the water’s edge, where pebbles covered the sand. Water lapped against them, wetting the white stones.

Shizuku crouched down beside the lake, then spotted two brothers playing not long after.

“Good morning,” she called out to them. “What are you up to?”

The pair looked surprised. Their home was a tourist spot, so they were probably used to travelers. They returned her greeting, seeming friendly.

Shizuku glanced down at their feet. They'd cleared away some pebbles and were using rocks to draw on the exposed sand.

"Are you making pictures? Can I join?" Shizuku asked them.

"If you want to. Where are you from?"

"The other side of that mountain," Shizuku replied, picking up a rock and starting on her own picture. "After I've seen this lake, I'm going to the castle city."

The two boys watched, captivated, as she drew into the sand. Just as she was about to finish, the younger boy yelled, "It's a cat!"

"That's right," said Shizuku. "Now...what about this one?"

"A fox!"

"You got it. And this?"

"A deer!"

"It's a goat."

Shizuku continued to draw animal after animal. She'd always been fairly good at drawing, so she had a habit of doodling cartoon animal characters in her notebooks.

In every picture she drew in the sand, she captured the characteristics that made that animal unique. The brothers enthusiastically offered rapid-fire guesses.

After playing this game for over half an hour, Shizuku had learned plenty of interesting stuff.

For one, the boys didn't seem to recognize a zebra or a giraffe. This made Shizuku wonder if they'd recognize an elephant or a lion. To her surprise, they did. There was a possibility that they simply hadn't come across zebras or giraffes, since they were so young. However, it did lead Shizuku to consider that the ecosystem of this world might differ from what she was accustomed to.

Shizuku made a mental note to ask Erik about that next time it came to mind. That was when the young brothers stood up.

“We need to get going. We promised everyone we’d be back soon,” one of them announced.

“Okay. Thanks for spending time with me,” Shizuku replied.

The pair waved good-bye and hurried back to town. Now that she was alone again, Shizuku inhaled the crisp air and looked around. Lake Nevys was a stunning sight to behold, the deep azure of the sky reflecting off its surface. Had Shizuku wished to see something so lovely in her old world, she would’ve had to travel quite far, perhaps even to a foreign country. She definitely understood why travelers came to this secluded place among the mountains just to see the lake.

Shizuku walked right to the edge of the water, pebbles crunching beneath her feet.

According to the story, the lake had become inhospitable for wildlife. The blue water was crystal clear, so much so that it felt entirely plausible a water god once lived deep below. The surface remained utterly still, as if refusing to change in any way, and exuded a sense of desolation.

Squatting down, Shizuku tried to put her finger in the water, but before she could, she suddenly had the sensation someone was calling to her. She looked up and surveyed the area, but there was no one nearby. The only other person was a distant boy on a leisurely stroll.

“...What was that?”

Shizuku thought someone had whispered in her ear. It had felt so close, yet the voice was so quiet that she’d barely heard it. Could it have truly been the wind?

Shizuku stood and glanced around nervously. A stone monument stood on the shore, not far from her. Shizuku began to walk over to it, watching her steps as she went.

As she got closer, she realized that the statue was surprisingly small, only coming as high as her waist. The monument, which had been carved from white rock, had long known the caress of lapping waves. However, the absence of moss suggested someone was looking after it.

Shizuku let her hand touch the letters etched into the monument's surface, but she couldn't read them. It wasn't a particularly long string of symbols, either, which made it more frustrating.

"I should have studied harder...", she said to herself. To her surprise, someone answered:

"...That's the princess's monument. The princess who married the water god."

"Ahh?!"

The unexpected voice coming from behind made Shizuku jump. This time, she hadn't imagined the sound. She turned around to find a boy of roughly middle school age standing there.

"You're a traveler, aren't you?" he said. "Did you come to see the lake?"

"Well, not exactly... I'm actually heading to Farsas," she told him.

"Huh? Farsas? Why would you come through here, then?"

"I have my reasons." Shizuku let out a dry chuckle, but the boy looked at her skeptically. Hoping to avoid an awkward situation, Shizuku decided to change the subject.

"Hey. What does this say?" she asked.

"What do you mean? Can't you read?"

"No. Can you read it for me?"

The boy's expression changed from skepticism to something crueler. He regarded her as though she weren't human.

If Shizuku allowed herself to panic, she'd be admitting defeat. Instead, she calmly shrugged. Evidently giving in, the boy pointed at the monument and began to read the inscription aloud.

"It says, 'From this very spot, Princess Federica is invited to the castle at the bottom of the lake.'"

"A princess? Is that the one from the legend?"

"Yes. This is a town landmark."

“I see... Thank you.”

The boy then walked away, still watching Shizuku with obvious doubt. Once Shizuku was alone, she turned to face the monument again. She mulled over the name she'd heard.

“Princess Federica...”

Erik hadn't mentioned the princess's name in his version of the legend.

The boy she'd just met hadn't had any reason to lie. Shizuku was certain he'd read the inscription verbatim.

Yet for some reason, upon hearing the name, her first thought was *That's wrong*.

What was wrong? What did she know? Shizuku felt a prickly sense of unease burning inside her.

She closed her eyes. An unfamiliar scene came flooding back.

White

Book

A thick book

The letters

and the stories

are connected

My memory

whispers to me

It says...

The wind asked Shizuku a question.

“What is your name?”

The voice was so quiet—barely audible.

Yet with an unyielding fixation that refused to fade, the wind persisted in its questioning.

Finally, Shizuku spoke. She uttered the name almost instinctively.

“...Laylia.”

Instantly, Shizuku’s world changed.

A sudden rush of air raced past. The previously mirrorlike surface of the water rippled vigorously, its surging waves engulfing the monument. In the blink of an eye, the lake rose to her calves, and water droplets splashed against her cheeks.

“Wait, what?!”

Shizuku shielded her head with her arms. She took a few steps back, but it wasn’t enough. She still couldn’t get away. Something had stirred and sought to ensnare her.

Using both hands, Shizuku clawed at the rising water. The memory of being sucked into that black void flashed in her mind. Desperately, she stretched out her arms toward the clear sky. A breathy scream caught in her throat.

“Save me... Eri—”

Her world turned black.

She was dragged into the water.

Unable to call Erik’s name, Shizuku disappeared from the lakeshore.



Erik, still at the inn, had been sorting his research and reviewing the letters Shizuku had taught him. However, he grew suspicious when noon came and went, and Shizuku still hadn’t returned.

The town wasn't big enough for her to get lost, and the past few days had demonstrated to him that Shizuku's sense of direction was exceptional. He didn't think she'd struggle to find her way back, even if it was her first time here. What's more, she was weirdly conscientious. There had to be a reason why Shizuku, who'd confidently announced she'd been back by midday, was yet to return.

"Should I be worried?"

Erik got to his feet, stone-faced.

He doubted the mercenary she'd met in Ilmas had tracked her down. He hadn't felt like they were being watched or pursued. The only scenario Erik thought plausible was that Shizuku had been dragged into some trouble while out.

After leaving a message with the innkeeper in case Shizuku returned while he was away, Erik left to have a look. He hurried through the little town, eventually making his way to the lake.

Had he been too careless?

This was a countryside village, its lake being the only point of interest. Shizuku had been quite taken with it, too.

Only an hour or two had passed. She wasn't a kid and had demonstrated reasonable levelheadedness. Erik didn't think her walking around for a change of scenery would lead to any issues. What's more, he'd assumed that spending all day with a man she didn't know well would get boring.

Shizuku was a normal girl. There was nothing special about her. If she'd heard him say that, she might have scowled and argued that she was too old to be called a girl. However, to Erik, she was very much like a protégée, just on the brink of adulthood.

Erik also knew that for someone like her to remain "a normal girl" required tremendous willpower, though. After all, she had been suddenly transported to a different world. There was no guaranteed way of returning. The mental burden of being alone in an unfamiliar land was no ordinary thing to cope with.

Despite this, Shizuku still laughed like an average girl.

She tried hard to stay positive and not fall prey to anxiety. Her seemingly natural demeanor was the result of a conscious effort. She'd been a total mess during their first meeting. It wasn't a stretch to conclude that her bravery was a facade.

As a result, Erik had chosen to respect her wishes and let her act independently.

Should he have been more attentive?

"Our luck was bound to run out eventually..." Erik muttered, quickening his pace.

The blue lake was right around the corner.



Someone had once told Shizuku that she needed to stick up for herself more.

At the time, she hadn't understood why they told her as much. She didn't feel like she had any difficulty speaking her mind. If there was something she needed to convey, she would. If she remained quiet, it was because that felt like the best choice.

Later, Shizuku came to understand what that person meant.

Her older sister had learned to smile sweetly and use it to get her way, and her younger sister made firm decisions about her desires and expressed them. Compared with them, it probably did seem like Shizuku didn't stand up for herself.

Whenever the three of them were together, her sisters did much of the talking. Most of the time, Shizuku merely nodded along. If she agreed with one of them more than the other, she'd remark, "Yes, I guess I feel the same way," to the one she shared the opinion with.

That said, the claim that Shizuku never stood up for herself simply wasn't true.

When she disagreed with both of her sisters, she would quietly express her opinion. Although low-key, Shizuku never felt like she was suppressing who she was. Besides, she barely knew what kind of person she was in the first place.

Her character was still undetermined, so she could shift it in any way she liked. She could still become anybody she wanted to be.

Once she'd separated herself from her sisters, she would be free to create a new personality for herself. That had been her plan, at least.

Perhaps it was her desire to be alone and see herself for who she truly was that had led her to enter this new world—a magical continent where she was as foreign as possible.

Here, Shizuku had to be the one to take the first step.

Shizuku had heard plenty of stories about people regaining their consciousness only to discover they were dead, but she found the notion very contradictory.

With her eyes only slightly open, Shizuku saw a white ceiling.

“Am I in heaven...? Is that a ceiling?”

Her head ached. She didn't know where she was. She clenched and released her fists, confirming she could still move. With that done, she sat up and looked around.

She was in a room that she didn't recognize. The floor, the walls, and the ceiling were all made of white stone. It looked like a temple of some sort, but there was nobody else in the disproportionately expansive space. She had been sleeping on the cold floor in her dripping wet clothes.

“...I bet I'm going to catch a cold,” she muttered.

Shuddering, she rose to her feet. She squeezed the water—lukewarm from her body heat—out of her long skirt and watched it drip onto the floor.

She wanted to change her clothes, but she didn't have any of her belongings on her. The water definitely would have ruined her books and broken her phone and music player. She took small comfort in knowing she'd avoided that disaster.

Shizuku shook her head like a wet dog, sending water flying.

A single door existed in the windowless room. Shizuku made her way to it cautiously.

“I feel like I’m in a horror movie,” she remarked to herself as she nervously reached for the stone door.

Before she reached it, however, the door opened itself.

“Gahhh!”

Shizuku instinctively pulled her hand away and recoiled in shock.

A young girl stood on the other side of the door.

At a glance, Shizuku judged her to be twelve or thirteen. She had green hair, green eyes, and the kind of pretty face typically only seen in movies. It was expressionless, though—like that of a doll.

Shizuku gazed in awe at the young girl’s hair. It was bright green, the shade of young leaves.

“...What a beautiful color,” Shizuku found herself whispering.

When she realized what she’d said, she clapped her hands against her mouth in a panic. The idea of there being green-haired people in this new world had initially excited her, but she worried it was rude to comment on it.

She knew Erik would laugh at her assumption that this girl was human. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he’d say. “No human being would have hair like that.”

Shizuku stooped down slightly to meet the girl’s eyes. Although unsure how to explain her situation, she had to try.

“Ummm, I was in front of Lake Nevys, but I suddenly found myself here, soaking wet. I think the person I’m traveling with is waiting for me at the inn, so, well, to put it simply...where am I?”

Shizuku tried to gauge what the girl was thinking. She had a restrained air to her that made her seem a little unapproachable.

The girl fixed her gaze on Shizuku, her eyes as green as emeralds.

Shizuku waited a little while for an answer, but the girl remained perfectly still. Stumped, Shizuku decided to explain herself again, but just as she was about to speak, the girl lowered her head and gave Shizuku a deep bow.

“Welcome home, Consort,” she greeted.

“Huh?”

Shizuku struggled to process what she’d just heard.

She didn’t look anything like a consort. She was just a suspicious-looking girl in soaked clothes. What could have led to this misunderstanding?

Shizuku grew flustered, but she eventually regained enough of her composure to respond.

“A-are you sure you’re not mistaking me for somebody else?” she asked. She knew she sounded a bit uneasy. However, it was the best she could manage.

The girl, however, didn’t appear to be listening. Instead, she just looked Shizuku up and down.

“I think you should get changed,” she announced. “I’ll show you the way.”

“Huh? Ummm, okay...”

Shizuku’s attempt to converse with the girl hadn’t led anywhere, but she did want to put on something dry. Shizuku hesitated, but in the end, she decided to follow the girl out of the room. They walked down a corridor that also lacked windows, though that wasn’t as much of a surprise now.

The girl led Shizuku to a chamber larger than the one she’d arrived in. Far bigger, in fact. There was a huge canopy bed, an oval-shaped full-length mirror, and various other extravagantly decorated pieces of furniture. It was a picture-perfect bedroom fit for a princess.

“Wh-whoa... This is like something from a fantasy world...”

Shizuku gawked at the interior, entranced. Upon closer look, she realized that much of the furniture—including the frame of the mirror and the cabinet drawers—was decorated with the same flower-shaped emblem. When Shizuku came to a stop in front of the mirror, the girl called to her.

“This way.”

The girl ushered her into the bathroom next door. Steam hovered over the wide, shallow bathtub. Evidently, the girl had run the water for Shizuku. The sight made Shizuku’s eyes widen with surprise. This tub was about five times the size of an ordinary one.

The completely white bathroom only captivated her for a moment, however, and she swiftly returned to her senses. The young girl reached out to help Shizuku remove her wet clothes, but she hastily pulled away and waved her hands in front of her chest.

“I—I can do this myself!”

“But won’t it be hard for you to wash your hair and your back?”

“It’s fine! I always wash myself!”

The young girl seemed baffled by this adamant refusal, yet her expression remained blank.

“I’ll leave your change of clothes outside, then,” she said before exiting the room.

Once Shizuku was alone, she heaved a sigh of relief. She took off her wet clothes and entered the water. As the blood started flowing through her body again and she began to warm up, her mind finally began to work properly.

“Now then...where am I?”

She remembered standing in front of the monument and being engulfed by the lake.

The water had surged up as though to ensnare her. Looking back, it was like a scene from a horror movie. There hadn’t been an earthquake, yet the water had flowed toward her like a tsunami. The whole thing had been bizarre. Shizuku was lucky not to have drowned.

“I don’t...seem injured, at least.”

She looked all over her body. There were no prominent cuts or bruises. Other than getting wet, she’d emerged from the ordeal totally unscathed. It was almost anticlimactic.

Just as she began to relax, however, a sudden shadow of doubt passed over her.

“I sort of remember...somebody asking me a question...”

She crossed her arms and frowned, continuing to scour through her

fragmented memories.

It had only happened a short while ago, and yet she couldn't quite recall what she'd been asked or what her reply had been. Her memories felt just out of reach, hovering on the edges of her mind and refusing to take clear form.

"Hmph. I didn't think my memory was that bad..."

Shizuku tilted her head to one side and then the other as she pondered. Still, nothing materialized. Eventually, she grew guilty as she worried that Erik was fretting over her, and she left the room.

The clothes that had been laid out for her were not the kind she could put on by herself. At least, that was the case for Shizuku.

That being the case, she wasn't in a position to decline the young girl's offer to help. Once Shizuku had donned the old-fashioned full-body undergarments, she was dressed in loose-fitting loungewear and seated in front of the dressing table.

The green-haired girl let Shizuku's hair loose and ran her hands through its wet strands to dry it.

Shizuku had no idea how, but steam drifted into the air as the girl combed through her locks. It was like her fingers were hot. Shizuku touched her vaguely warm head.

"How are you doing that?" she asked, amazed.

"I'm using magic."

"Magic! I didn't know you could do stuff like that..."

Shizuku had gone without a hair dryer since arriving in this world, so she'd been wringing her hair with a towel and letting it dry naturally.

As naive as it was, Shizuku found herself questioning if machines were even necessary when you could do things like that without them.

The girl finished quickly and proceeded to carefully pin flowers into Shizuku's shoulder-length hair. Next, she skillfully applied a light layer of makeup to Shizuku's face. Shizuku sat back and let the girl go about her tasks, captivated by the assured manner in which she moved.

The girl moved like clockwork, brisk and efficient. Shizuku observed her in the mirror. Her pretty face remained expressionless, yet there was an air of contentment to it, too. As Shizuku watched the girl enthusiastically doll her up, she couldn't help but feel a sense of restlessness wash over her.

The makeover soon came to an end. Finally, Shizuku was dressed in a white gown to complete the look. The corners of the girl's mouth curled up in a slight smile.

"You look beautiful," she said.

"Th-thank you...," Shizuku replied.

She'd been made up like a princess attending a party, but her face remained that of an ordinary Japanese person. What she saw in the mirror didn't match.

The hem of her skirt dragged along the floor, and she wasn't used to the shoes she wore. It was quite puzzling.

"I don't think I'd be comfortable wearing this for very long...," she muttered.

"We should hurry and meet the king soon, then."

"Who?!"

This was the first Shizuku had heard about a king. If the lake had swallowed her up and taken her through an underwater passage to Farsas, that would've been fine. However, maps of the continent suggested that no one could survive a trip like that. This girl had to be talking about another king.

Shizuku had a bad feeling about what was to come. She stared at the green-haired girl. Why had she been called a consort? Wasn't that what you called the spouse of a reigning monarch? In which case...

"The king is the head of this castle and the man you are married to, milady."

"Argh, I knew it! You definitely have the wrong person!"

Shizuku was only eighteen. She'd never had a boyfriend. Why was this girl acting like she was married to a stranger?

After being transported to another world, remaining silent in the face of yet another bizarre turn of events wasn't an option.

She pointed at her own face.

“Look at me! I’m Japanese! I have a Japanese face! I’m not the consort who lives in this castle!”

The young girl’s expression refused to budge. She did appear puzzled for an instant, though. Following a short pause, the girl averted her gaze and bowed dejectedly.

“I’m sorry. I’m not able to distinguish people’s faces. Still, I’m certain that you’re the consort. I’ve been alone, waiting in this castle for you for a very long time—waiting for you to prove your identity by revealing your secret name so you could return to the castle and wake the king...”

When the girl looked up, there was an imploring glow in her eyes. “Have your memories of the king already faded, Laylia?” she asked.

“...Laylia?”

That wasn’t Shizuku’s name. However, it felt familiar. Shizuku pressed her fingers against her temples.

Sinking into thought, Shizuku was seized by a feeling that she had wandered into the corridors of her dreams. Eventually, she recalled that the name Laylia belonged to the princess who, after a long and tumultuous journey, wedded the water god from the legend.

Shizuku knew her name, but she couldn’t place why.



When Erik reached the edge of town where the lake was visible, he noticed a few people near the water were causing a small commotion. He took a quick glance at each of their faces, but none of them were Shizuku.

A sense of dread gnawed at him, urging him to approach the group.

“I’m telling the truth!” the boy in the middle shouted.

The others, a gaggle of men, sounded flabbergasted.

“That’s not possible. It’s a lake, not an ocean. There couldn’t have been any high waves.”

“There were! They surrounded that one girl for a second and swallowed her

up! It was crazy! You need to look for her.”

“She drowned, then? We could attempt a search, but it sounds like it’s already too late.”

Erik was left speechless. The bad feeling in his gut solidified into a heavy weight.

He casually raised his hand in an effort to wedge himself into the men’s conversation.

“Sorry, but I’m looking for my traveling companion. She’s eighteen, although she looks younger, and has black hair and eyes. She looks foreign. Have any of you seen her?”

The boy in the middle’s expression shifted.

“I bet that’s her! She couldn’t read the letters on the monument, so she asked me to read them for her!”

“...”

Erik’s heavy feeling now felt like a rock. It strangled him and left him wanting to groan from the agony. Several regrets flashed through his mind, but he knew voicing them wouldn’t change anything. He fought them off almost as quickly as they’d arrived, then focused his attention on the boy.

“Some waves swallowed her up, you say?”

“Yeah! She was right by the monument, all spaced-out. I watched her from a distance when the water suddenly rushed toward her...”

“How long ago was this?”

“Uhhh, about ninety minutes? I’ve been calling for help, but nobody would listen!”

If this was an ordinary drowning tragedy, then the chance to save Shizuku was long gone. More than an hour had passed since the time Shizuku said she would return. That was the entire reason Erik had ventured out to search for her.

A stern expression formed on his face as Erik posed a question to the men standing before him.

“Are there water spirits in this lake? Does this kind of thing happen often?”

“Uh, no. Nothing like that has ever occurred. No such incidents have been recorded for hundreds of years,” one man explained, frantically trying to assure him that the lake was safe.

It seemed like the seriousness of the incident had finally dawned on the group. At the end of the day, this was a tourist spot. If incidents like this were regular, they would have taken steps to prevent them long ago.

The men paled. Erik grimaced, unable to shake the suffocating sensation.

It wasn't every day that somebody got engulfed by sudden waves. There had to be magic or a nonhuman entity involved. In most cases, that meant there was nothing to be done.

Undoubtedly, there were a handful of mages in town, but Erik doubted he'd have much luck finding anyone capable of assisting in such a remote location. He could petition for help at the castle in Candela, but that would take days. Besides, there was no guarantee that they would be willing to allocate any of their personnel to aid an outsider.

“...Am I out of options, then?”

Erik silenced the restless thoughts swirling within him and mulled over the situation.

The idea that he may have already lost her had naturally crossed his mind, but he deliberately set that aside. Shizuku had come from a different world. He didn't want to believe that she, who had embarked on this expedition with nothing, had reached an early end. They were only just getting started.

Erik knew it was wishful thinking. He knew more than anybody how cruel reality could be. Other people didn't appreciate her effort or perseverance.

Rather than lament the absurdity and cruelty of the situation, Erik elected to search for possibilities. That's what Shizuku did. She'd left the kind, welcoming town of Wanope behind her and set off on a new journey. She'd relinquished that comfortable sanctuary to achieve her goal of returning to her old world.

Perhaps that had been the essence of their journey from the outset. It was all

about relentlessly pursuing possibilities until the very end.

Erik looked out over the lake, which stood perfectly still. His gaze suddenly came to rest on a small white stone monument at the water's edge.

"Is that the statue? The one she was standing in front of?"

"Y-yeah."

"What's it for?"

"It's to commemorate the legend of the lake. It says, 'From this very spot, Princess Federica is invited to the castle at the bottom of the lake.'"

"Princess Federica? Was that her name?"

She was the woman the water god had fallen in love with and later married.

After spending a brief period of marital bliss with the demon, her husband was killed, and she was taken away by her brother. It was a tragic story.

Shizuku had stood before the monument before disappearing. Where could she have gone?

Erik thought quietly.

The expansive blue lake shimmered vividly in the sunlight, as though to repel everything that tried to disturb it.



She had clearly been mistaken for somebody else.

Shizuku hesitated for a moment, then asked, "Didn't Laylia live a really long time ago?"

She was sure Erik had told her that the story was over a thousand years old. How could a character from that legend still be alive?

This question made the girl tilt her head to one side, confused.

"I have no concept of time, so I can't really help. But...yes, I've been waiting for your return for quite a while."

"Wouldn't she have passed away, then? She's human, right?"

The girl's green, jewellike eyes widened. They looked empty, which startled

Shizuku.

Briefly, Shizuku considered that she had said something wrong, but the legend was known across the entire continent. There was no way the girl hadn't heard of it.

Shizuku watched her, waiting for a reaction, but the girl said nothing. When Shizuku looked into her emerald eyes, she sensed that the girl knew nothing and everything simultaneously. The emptiness was so unsettling that it made her flinch.

The next moment, however, the green-haired girl calmly turned around and strode ahead like nothing had happened. Shizuku chased after her.

"E-excuse me. Where is this castle, exactly? I'm not Laylia, and I have someone waiting for me in Colwa. I need to get back as soon as possible..."

It seemed like the girl understood what she was saying, yet at the same time not.

Shizuku tried desperately to clear up the misunderstanding. She needed to hurry back and apologize to Erik. She didn't want to cause him even more trouble. No matter how much he tried to reassure her that he was a nice person deep down, she didn't want to take advantage of his generosity and burden him further.

"Ummm, I really need to get back."

Shizuku placed her hand on the girl's shoulder.

This bought her to a precise halt. She slowly turned and gave Shizuku a slightly self-deprecating smile.

"This is the castle at the bottom of the water. There's nowhere else you need to go."

"...Huh?"

Shizuku froze, horrified.

The castle had no windows. If it stood on the lake bed, then they were surrounded by a vast expanse of water.

The thought of it was so bizarre that Shizuku felt dizzy. She covered her mouth with her trembling hands.

“If Mio were here...she’d lose her mind,” Shizuku muttered.

That thought grounded her somewhat.

Since she was a little girl, Shizuku’s younger sister, Mio, had been a true all-rounder. Whether it was schoolwork or exercise, she was above average at everything. Well, almost everything. Her one and only shortcoming was her inability to swim. She was a pragmatic person, and despite being the youngest of the three sisters, she tended to act like the eldest. When faced with water, however, she’d always hidden behind Shizuku, shaking her head.

Shizuku, on the other hand, was a strong swimmer and loved playing in the water. She could even handle long distances of up to three kilometers, provided she didn’t need to go very fast.

Shizuku remembered how big the lake had looked from the mountain’s summit.

“How far is it to the water’s surface?” Shizuku asked.

The green-haired girl shook her head. She didn’t appear to understand the inquiry. She turned back around and continued down the corridor, leaving Shizuku with no choice but to follow.

Given that this was a lake rather than an ocean, Shizuku figured it would be shallow enough for her to swim back up, but she didn’t know how she was supposed to get out. The castle lacked windows. Even if she did manage to escape, there was the risk of dying if the water was particularly deep. She knew that the deepest lake in Japan was over three hundred sixty meters below ground level.

As Shizuku chased after the girl, she kept finding herself kicking and treading on the hem of her dress. No matter how slow she went, however, the girl never seemed to drift any farther ahead. Shizuku figured she was adjusting her speed to stop Shizuku from falling too far behind.

The corridor, shrouded in an oppressive silence, looked to stretch on indefinitely. Thankfully, its end did come into view after a while.

Shizuku nervously swallowed as she beheld the white double doors.



Erik stood before the stone monument where Shizuku had been seen an hour and a half earlier.

He inspected the statue intently. There was nothing unusual about it. It was a stone monument like any other. He recalled the legend he'd told her a few days before.

If there were no water spirits in the lake and no other mysterious disappearances had occurred, then that legend was the only thing he had to go on. After all, this was the exact spot where the princess had vanished into the lake, and Shizuku had been deeply moved by the scenery here.

“But why would something happen now...? That story is over a thousand years old.”

There had been no other developments since the Dark Age. Why had she disappeared? Was some other trouble to blame rather than the lake itself?

If that was true, dwelling on the lake was a waste of time.

Erik rested a hand on the monument, agonizing over what to do.

There were no clues as to where or how he should search for her. If he and Shizuku were powerful mages, he could've contacted her. Unfortunately, she had no magical power, and Erik wasn't strong enough to compensate for that. He wished he'd sought out a magic implement that would've enabled him to track her down or check if she was safe. Such regrets were pointless now, though.

In his head, Erik lined up a number of possibilities and ways to deal with them. He then recalled Shizuku's behavior when they'd come upon the lake. One particular moment temporarily brought his breath to a halt.

“It was right after we reached the lake...”

Before heading to town, Shizuku had stood by the water and claimed to hear someone call her name when she'd turned and left.

The moment had stuck in Erik's mind because Shizuku had been trying hard

not to show any signs of fatigue from their travels. As a result, he'd paid close attention to her behavior, giving her breaks when she seemed tired and watching for any other unusualness.

Why had she looked back toward the lake?

Erik hadn't heard or felt anything. Yet if there had been something there, a presence that elicited a response from her, then it was possible the lake had captured her.

"Does that mean she's in the castle at the bottom of the water?" Erik asked himself.

According to the legend, the water god's castle lay at the bottom of Lake Nevys, and the princess had been invited there.

It sounded ridiculous, but a high-ranking demon could certainly build a castle at the bottom of a lake. Perhaps it had survived after more than a thousand years.

But how could Shizuku have reached it?

High-ranking demons could only appear in the human realm if they took on bodies similar to human ones. In other words, there had to be a barrier around the castle to keep out any water and preserve the atmosphere. Erik wasn't sure if anyone could break through such a barrier or whether they'd even be able to reach it. Ideally, he'd begin his search with some research, but considering the situation, that seemed like it'd be a challenge.

"...Did she get snatched away and taken to the castle, just like the princess?" posited someone behind Erik.

He turned around. The boy who'd claimed to have met Shizuku stared up at him with anxiety in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I was the one who saw her get swallowed up, but I was too frightened to move a muscle."

"It's understandable. If you had done something, you might have gone missing, too."

Erik's blunt statement made the boy hang his head dejectedly.

“But it’ll be hard to get her back now, won’t it? This is just like the legend.”

The remark caught Erik off guard. His deep-blue eyes went wide.

Evidently, the boy was surprised by Erik’s response because his expression came to match Erik’s. “What? Did I say something weird?” he asked.

“Not really. But you remarked that this resembles the legend.”

“Well, it does, doesn’t it?” replied the boy. “The bit when the prince goes to get his younger sister back...”

“You think so?”

Erik regarded the boy with small wonder. Yes, a girl had vanished from the lake, but the parallels with the legend didn’t end there. In the next part of the story, the prince went to retrieve his sister. The trouble was how he’d done so. All Erik knew was that the prince had reached the castle at the bottom of the lake and then fought off the water god.

He decided to ask the boy for more information.

“Do you know how the prince got to the castle in that story?”

“Uhhh... I’m not sure. Didn’t he just swim?”

“Don’t be stupid. I know they had simpler armor in those days, but he wouldn’t have been reckless enough to dive into the water wearing it. There must have been another way.”

Intimidated by Erik’s decisive proclamation, the boy looked around nervously. Then still feeling a little overwhelmed, he looked back toward the town and pointed at one of the buildings.

“They keep lots of old documents over there,” he said. “Maybe you can find the answer...”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Erik wasted no time leaving the lakeshore and hurrying for the building. The boy chased after him.

The midday sun hovered in the sky, giving it a vibrant color. Migratory birds glided over the lake, so eager to soar beyond the mountains that they didn’t

descend to rest in the clear water.

The archive was located in a corner of the town hall.

Erik started by charging straight into the town hall and asking to view its documents. The civil servant who was on duty looked disgruntled. It wasn't every day that an unfamiliar mage walked in and demanded that he be granted access to their valuable records.

"What for? You're not from around here."

"My traveling companion has gone missing at Lake Nevys. It's suspected that some sort of magical anomaly is at play," Erik stated. "If you don't wish to cooperate, I'd be more than happy to tell some other towns what happened and request their help instead. I'm sure the castle city will be very intrigued."

"What...? But..."

The civil servant stumbled over his words. He didn't want the town's reputation as a tourist spot to be tarnished. As reluctant as he looked, he gave in and allowed Erik to see the documents.

Erik and the boy stepped inside the musty storeroom. The documents stored there were just piled and tied. No measures had been taken to preserve their condition. The boy glanced around the room with a bewildered look in his eyes.

Erik quickly scanned the shelves, roughly estimating what era each bundle of the documents was from. He then pulled a large number of them out and piled them on the nearest desk. Unsurprisingly, it seemed like most older documents had a preservation spell placed on them to stop deterioration. Erik silently picked out one of the papers and began to skim its contents. The boy hurriedly took a seat opposite him.

"I-I'll lend you a hand," he said.

"That'd be a great help."

The two of them scoured through the pages without saying a word.

As Erik piled up the documents he'd finished reading, he started to wonder what may have happened if he'd been the one in Shizuku's position. He probably wouldn't have stood much of a chance. This thought brought a wry

smile to his face. She couldn't read the language of this world. She would've had to rely on someone else to look for a solution.

On the other hand, Shizuku had claimed to be a strong swimmer. What if she'd jumped into the lake on her own to rescue Erik? That seemed like something she'd be gutsy enough to do. She certainly wouldn't have given up on him easily.

Erik scanned each page quickly, never absorbing much. He was too engrossed in his thoughts. The boy looked at him skeptically.

"Did you find something?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Then what? It looked like you were smiling, so I assumed you'd found us a clue."

"...I didn't realize. Sorry."

Erik re-collected himself and focused on the page before him.

Ten minutes later, the boy looked up from a text that had held his attention for a little while.

"Hey, isn't this the prince?"

Erik inspected the passage the boy pointed to. He was correct—it was an account of the legend. The boy traced his finger along the yellowed paper, his voice faltering as he attempted to read the old-fashioned, ornate lettering.

"The prince...at the altar...an offering...summoning...the village's...water god."

"The prince places the offerings on the water god's altar. The altar of the village that is under his rule is located to the southwest, by the lakeside. From there, the villagers summon the water god."

The boy gave Erik a look of admiration, impressed at how fluently he'd read the section aloud—then cocked his head to one side.

"But what does that mean?" he asked.

"I would assume...that the three villages that existed at the time had their

own altars where they worshipped the water god. They used to give offerings. But the prince took advantage of that and forced the villagers he ruled over to leave things for the water god. When the water god came to collect them, the prince captured him.”

“Oh, I get it!”

Now that he understood what was being implied, the boy’s face lit up.

Armed with a lead at last, Erik took the document off the boy and inspected the account with intense detail. He picked out information he thought important, such as the locations of the altars and what the offerings actually were.

While Erik was in the midst of his research, the boy remarked, “This trick must have really angered the water god...”

“Probably.”

Two villages that historically worshipped the demon had suddenly been taken over, and the lake was desecrated by an army of invaders.

The water god exacted his revenge for this audacity by killing some of the soldiers and taking the princess. But then as if the water god hadn’t suffered enough, a staged ceremony was orchestrated to provide the prince with an opportunity to kill him.

It was hard to imagine just how furious the water god must have been. That said, things probably looked different from the prince’s and the princess’s perspectives. To Erik, it wasn’t so much a story of star-crossed lovers from different species, but a tale of loss in which every character had their hopes destroyed.

“The original story had rights and wrongs on both sides,” Erik said. “But I don’t think we’re in the wrong this time. I’m ready to do whatever it takes.”

After sparing a moment to gather his notes, he stood to leave.

Even if his wishes clashed with someone else’s and he ended up having to fight for what he wanted, he had no intention of backing down. Even if it led people to criticize him for being sly, he was willing to cross a few lines. That was

human nature.

Erik knew that better than anyone.



The green-haired girl stopped before the large, white double doors, which opened inward soundlessly.

Recognizing her own anxiousness, Shizuku clenched her trembling hands. Then she picked up the hem of her dress and followed the girl inside.

Beyond the door, Shizuku was confronted with a striking, alabaster expanse. The hall was so large that it could fit two side-by-side gymnasiums. Shizuku looked straight ahead. At the far end of the hall was an elevated platform.

Nobody stood upon it. All Shizuku could make out was a stone structure reminiscent of an altar.

“Ummm, where’s the king...?” Shizuku fretfully asked the girl, who continued walking unbothered.

“Straight ahead of us,” she responded.

Shizuku took another glance at the back of the hall, but she still saw no one.

“He’s not one of those kings who’s invisible to idiots, is he?”

Shizuku knew she was getting her fairy tales mixed up, but she couldn’t think of anything else to say.

They were already halfway down the hall. Shizuku glanced down at the girl’s green hair. She was shorter than Shizuku. Finally, Shizuku asked something that had been on her mind for some time.

“Could I ask what your name is?” she said.

The girl stopped abruptly, forcing Shizuku to do the same for fear of bumping into her.

The girl turned her head around. Her expression was like that of a doll—it didn’t look real. She looked up at Shizuku with her emerald eyes.

“My name...is Mea, Laylia.”

Her stern voice left Shizuku with an odd sense of loneliness—it was

impossible to discern any kind of emotion from Mea. Still, Shizuku sensed Mea was hiding how she really felt. Shizuku felt a sharp pang in her chest, but she still couldn't bring herself to respond.



The closest site where an altar once stood was about three minutes south of Colwa. Villagers had worshipped the water god there long ago.

Erik pushed his way through the short trees and into the lakeside forest. Two other men, along with the boy, followed close behind. All shared a nervous look, particularly the two men, who were mages the town hall had dispatched. They looked both skeptical and worried at the same time.

Soon after entering the forest, Erik, who was leading the little search party, whispered, "There it is."

Half buried in the grass lay a circle of weathered, white rocks.

The boy reached over and touched one of them, his fingers brushing against its rough surface.

"You're telling us this is an altar?" he said. "It's broken."

"It's only the stone that has come apart. The spell formation is still in place. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised, considering it's supposed to connect people with a high-ranking demon."

The mention of a high-ranking demon made the two town mages pale slightly. They weren't the sort who were primed for combat. One was a doctor, while the other made a living repairing and adjusting magic implements. They'd only come along because Erik had insisted on taking some other mages with him.

One of the men looked over the pieces of rock, then shook his head.

"This is a very old spell pattern... I won't be able to analyze it."

"I'll put it back the way it once was. All I want you to do is use your magical abilities," Erik said calmly, beckoning the two mages closer.

One of them grimaced.

"Don't be so stupid! We can't fight a high-ranking demon!"

"Isn't he supposed to be dead? That's what the story says."

“What exactly are we trying to accomplish here?!”

The boy glanced around nervously, unsure how to cope with the tense atmosphere. Erik, the only one keeping a level head, glanced at the water through the trees. After a bit of consideration, he answered the other two mages.

“We’re rescuing a young woman,” he said, his voice flat and well projected. “All we need to do to achieve that is open up the way.”

The pair of mages stared at him in disbelief. The prince in the legend had also wanted nothing more than to reclaim someone. However, he’d been awarded a perilous battle for his trouble. Faced with a scenario that sounded all too familiar, the men went rigid with fear.

None of them knew what lay ahead.



Every time she was referred to as Laylia, Shizuku felt extremely weird. That much was natural for a victim of mistaken identity, though.

Shizuku’s footsteps were heavy as she trudged behind Mea, struggling with the weight of her cumbersome dress. The altar wasn’t far now. Her gaze strayed downward.

Previously, Shizuku had questioned why she’d been the one sent to this world. Now, however, she felt like she was coming to understand. Shizuku seemed to know things that she shouldn’t have been able to know. Plus, Mea was calling her Laylia. It was all too bizarre to be a simple coincidence.

She parted her crimson lips to speak.

“Was I...Laylia in a past life? Is that what this is about?”

Mea halted again. Shizuku gulped, worried that she’d said something inappropriate. As it turned out, they’d simply reached the altar.

Mea took a step to the left and narrowed her eyes at Shizuku. “People aren’t reincarnated,” she said.

“What?”

“When they die, their bodies rot, and their spirits vanish. Their souls turn to

pure energy and disperse. Nothing remains after death.”

“Huh...”

Shizuku stood motionless and dumbfounded. This revelation sent her head spinning.

According to Mea, death was an absolute end.

Many people in Shizuku’s old world insisted that was the case, too. It was by no means an unreasonable suggestion. In a way, it made perfect sense.

Shizuku didn’t necessarily believe in reincarnation or life after death, either.

Even so...to hear Mea assert her position with such decisiveness proved to be a shock.

“Is that what people in this world are told?” Shizuku questioned. “Or is it fact?”

“Fact. For demons and mages, it’s common knowledge. The soul is a manifestation of energy. When someone’s physical form expires, others can see it dissolve into the air.”

Afterward, nothing else remained.

Shizuku could imagine Mea adding, “When someone dies, it’s all over.”

The idea stopped her breath for a moment.

After a death, people prayed for the deceased to find happiness in heaven.

They begged for them to come and visit, even if only as a ghost.

People held on to the hope that they may one day be reincarnated.

Some surely claimed these were absurd ways of seeking solace.

However, there was a reason why such ideas were known all over the world for generations. People wanted to believe. They wanted to believe that redemption after death was possible, that there was more to it than loss.

Humans took the idea of death very seriously. Their attempts to make peace with the reality of it were a testament to that. Life had an inevitable conclusion that everyone was aware of.

However, those of this world evidently insisted there was nothing beyond this life. They rejected wishful thinking that could salve their pain.

This world was different from Shizuku's—magic existed here, after all. Despite those differences, she was overcome by a profound sadness that all but brought her to tears. How did everyone accept the knowledge of an inevitable end and overcome the despair it brought?

Shizuku didn't know. It was still too difficult for her to comprehend.

That was just how foreign this world and the concept of death were to her.



Shizuku's eyes were shut. Mea examined her with evident bemusement.

Mea wasn't human. She couldn't grasp why Shizuku was in pain.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

Shizuku's body trembled slightly. Her black eyes peeked from beneath her eyelashes, and she peered down at Mea.

"I'm...not Laylia. I'm from a different world."

Her tone was more assertive than it had been previously. There was a sorrowful gleam in her jet-black eyes.

Mea stood in front of her and stared.

Only one human had been permitted to enter the king's castle—his beloved princess. She was a fragile woman. Even when she smiled gladly, her gaze always had a pinch of sadness.

Mea, who was a being like the king, struggled to tell humans apart. To her, any woman within the castle was Laylia. After all, only Laylia was allowed inside. Discerning one human face from another seemed needless in the face of that fact.

That being the case, the black-haired girl was obviously Laylia, too. It didn't matter that she didn't know anything about the king and had forgotten Mea's name, which she had once spoken so affectionately. This woman was undeniably Laylia.

There was no one else she could be. Were that not true, Mea wouldn't know

how to handle it.

Mea wouldn't be able to bear knowing Laylia was already dead.

Mea's master had a rather unusual temperament for a high-ranking demon.

For starters, he lived in the human realm at the bottom of a lake. That was weird enough. Usually, high-ranking demons didn't take any interest in humans. They didn't show themselves in the human realm unless summoned.

However, the king had chosen to go to the human realm of his own accord, and he even erected his castle in one of their lakes. After selecting it as his personal territory and cleansing its waters, he released living creatures into the lake as though it were his private garden. The people were grateful, and he ended up becoming the object of their worship.

Mea had never asked him why he'd done all this. She lacked the free will to question her master's actions. Instead, she knew a comfortable, peaceful existence inside his castle. Perhaps she even enjoyed it.

Then one day, after what seemed like forever, a woman arrived.

She exuded a delicate, almost ethereal beauty. When the king had introduced her to Mea, she'd beamed and said, *"Nice to meet you. Your assistance will mean a lot to me."*

Her smile had been as clear as the crystalline lake.

For the first time, Mea had realized just how beautiful humans could be.



"You're Laylia," Mea declared authoritatively, leaving Shizuku puzzled about what to do.

Whatever Mea insisted, the girl was still wrong. Shizuku wasn't even from this world. She needed to rectify this misunderstanding and return to the surface, no matter what it took.

Shizuku kept her eyes fixed on Mea as she spoke.

"I've only been alive for eighteen years. This Laylia person lived over a thousand years ago, didn't she? You must have the wrong person. My name isn't Laylia. I am Shizuku Minase."

“Then how do you know her name?” Mea shot back in an abrasive tone of voice.

Shizuku didn’t know what to say to that. She couldn’t explain that. She simply knew it.

Still, if she gave in now, it’d cement the fact that she was Laylia in Mea’s head. It took Shizuku a moment to decide how to respond, but she eventually came up with a roundabout way of deflecting Mea’s proposition.

“The story of the water god and the princess has become a widely known legend. It’s only natural that I’d know the princess’s name.”

“That’s not true!” the girl shouted unexpectedly, startling Shizuku. Mea looked up at her, revealing her true emotions for the first time.

Shizuku couldn’t tell whether she was angry, sad, confused, or all of them at the same time.

A frenzied haze had come over Mea. Shizuku felt overwhelmed by the intensity of emotion in her expression.

The girl’s green eyes shone brightly, making it clear they weren’t the sort humans possessed. A bizarre, tense atmosphere filled the space around them.

Then the girl spoke again.

“There’s no reason that any other person should know Laylia’s name. It was concealed.”

“...Concealed?”

Shizuku suddenly felt like she ought to make an escape. However, she was trapped in a castle at the bottom of the water. Her options were severely limited.

And that wasn’t her only obstacle. For some reason, Mea looked terribly worried.

She reminded Shizuku of a missing child who’d been left in the rain—soaking wet, alone, and fearful.

Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to abandon Mea yet. Shaking off her hesitation,

she decided to ask something else.

“Why was her name concealed?”

“She...loved the king. Humans accused her of being a traitor for it. And then...”

“And then what?”

Mea fell silent. She stood frozen, motionless as a statue.

It felt as if time and space had come to a standstill. Shizuku exhaled, but it did nothing to ease her tension.

Perhaps this was it. She’d finally learn the truth. Shizuku waited expectantly for the girl to respond.

A moment later, however, Mea lowered her head. Her movements became so fluid, it was as though their conversation hadn’t happened at all.

“I have been awaiting your return, princess. The king is expecting you. Come with me.”

“...Mea.”

This was like something plucked from a bad dream—a looping nightmare in which every time Shizuku made progress, she was sent back to square one. No matter how much she wanted to wake up, she just couldn’t.

But it wasn’t a dream.

Where was the king whom Mea kept talking about? Shizuku was confident he’d know she wasn’t his consort.

There was only a large stone altar at the end of the hall. Mea kept her head bowed. Shizuku, who felt like she was about to panic, reined in her emotions and looked around.

As she observed the altar again, one of Mea’s earlier comments returned to her.

“Mea... Didn’t you say that the king’s consort needed to wake him up?”

What had she meant by that?

Struck by a niggling suspicion, Shizuku approached the altar.

There was a line carved into it that ran the object's circumference. A familiar emblem was engraved in the center as well. Upon closer inspection, the line just below that insignia appeared to be an opening.

That's when Shizuku realized her guess was correct. Her pulse quickened.

This wasn't an altar, but a stone box.

"That's...not a casket, is it?"

Was it Sleeping Beauty or Snow White who slept in a casket? Shizuku couldn't remember.

Her anxiety was scrambling her thoughts. She placed both of her hands on the lid. The moment she tried to lift it up, an arm reached out from behind to stop her.

"You can't do that!"

Mea, who'd been bowing demurely just a moment earlier, ripped Shizuku away from the casket. She was far stronger than her diminutive build suggested.

The young girl used great force as she dug her fingers into Shizuku's arm, yet her expression was vacant. She seemed devoid of any driving emotion.

Shizuku felt like she was going to scream.

"B-but isn't the king inside?"

"No. He's..."

"Where is he, then?"

"Back then...the king..."

Mea's grip slackened. When Shizuku frantically pulled her arm away, Mea gazed down at her own hands.

Horror showed in her expression. Her abrupt emotions seemed too much to bear.

Noticing that Mea looked about ready to cry, Shizuku was rendered

speechless. Without thinking, she reached out to touch her, but Mea covered her face with her trembling hands before she could. Shizuku gently retracted her arm and placed a hand on her pounding chest.

She got the distinct feeling that she was standing next to something forbidden. However, if she was going to act, now was the time.

Shizuku made a lunge at the stone lid. There had to be something inside. She pushed it as hard as she could.

The hefty piece of stone shifted away slightly. Shizuku planted her feet on the ground and gave it another forceful shove.

The next thing she knew, her body was gently floating. The lid moved farther and farther away.

It felt as if time was moving in slow motion.

That was when Shizuku realized that an invisible force was propelling her into the air.

“Stop...!”

Mea, who was standing next to the altar, looked stunned. Her green hair billowed like a pit of serpents.

Sensing the floor swiftly approaching, Shizuku tensed up.

In the back of her mind, she started to suspect that she was about to die. Still, Shizuku prepared for the impact, her body moving instinctively to protect her head.

However, to her astonishment and relief, she collided not with the firm stone floor but with something softer. And damp.

“Perfect timing,” somebody uttered, their voice calm. “Are you okay?”

Shizuku opened her eyes. She stared up at the person in disbelief.

Her traveling companion was soaked for some reason. He’d caught her before she landed on the ground.

“E-Erik...”

Erik looked down at the young woman in his arms, water dripping from his

hair. Surprise colored his expression, but there was a hint of gladness, too.

The look on his face made Shizuku feel like all her strength was draining from her body.

“Th-thank you,” she said.

“It was nothing. I’m just glad you’re not hurt. You’d been gone for some time, so part of me thought it might have been too late.”

“You can keep that last part to yourself, okay? Not that it bothers me.”

“What’s with that outfit?” Erik asked.

“I was forced to wear it,” Shizuku replied.

Just as Shizuku was about to explain, Erik placed her behind him. Her eyes widened in surprise. From over his shoulder, she saw Mea glowering at the two of them. Her emerald-like eyes emitted a subtle, fluorescent light.

Shizuku found herself gripping Erik’s clothes tightly.

She couldn’t see his face from behind, but his voice didn’t sound much different from usual.

“A mid-ranking demon, huh?” he remarked. “Not ideal.”

“A-are you going to fight her?” Shizuku asked.

“Of course not,” he replied. “I’m not that sort of mage. I wouldn’t stand a chance. I’ve activated a transit ring, so let’s get out of here.”

Erik was alone. Not only that, but he was also soaked to the skin. Surely, he hadn’t swum to the castle, had he?

Shizuku looked behind her. They were about ten meters away from the door. She looked up at the man shielding her once more, then to Mea, who had inserted herself in front of the altar. Shizuku knew nothing about magic, but she could tell that there was a peculiar atmosphere swirling around the girl.

His eyes fixed on the demon girl, Erik urged Shizuku to take a step back.

“I’ll buy us some time. Run when I give you the signal. Turn right at the end of the corridor.”

“Wait a minute! Aren’t you putting yourself in danger?!”

“I’ve brought a defensive magic implement with me just in case. I’ll be fine. Probably.”

Before Shizuku could object to Erik’s attempt to get her to leave, Mea’s voice thundered through the room.

“Stay away from Laylia, human,” she declared.

A gust of wind began to blow through the hall.

The strength of the command didn’t alarm Erik. Rather, it was the name Mea had used.

He turned to face Shizuku.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

“Mistaken identity, I think,” Shizuku explained. “She thinks I’m the princess from the legend...”

“But why?”

Shizuku didn’t know, making it challenging to answer. However, she had devised a theory. Tugging on Erik’s clothes, she said, “I have an idea. Hear me out.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

Shizuku kept an eye on Mea as she quickly outlined her thoughts to Erik. He listened silently, frowning when she was done.

“Are you sure that’s okay? Won’t you just be adding fuel to the fire?”

“I can’t say for certain that it’ll work, but I think there’s a chance. I’m sure she knows the truth deep down,” Shizuku replied. “After all...she does seem very upset.”

Some people found happiness in never-ending dreams. Mea didn’t seem like one of them, though.

She was locked in a static dream, trembling from loneliness. She’d been waiting for someone who would never return.

Erik looked like he wanted to say something, but he ultimately nodded in acceptance.

“Fine. I’ll leave this to you, then.”

He pulled a pair of crystal balls from the bag hanging at his waist and held one in each hand.

A protective barrier formed in front of him and Shizuku. It blocked the gusts of magic that were emanating from Mea, sending them around it instead.

“Give me your hands,” Erik said.

Shizuku nodded. “Okay.”

She obediently held out her palms, only for Erik to casually slip a ring onto the middle finger of her left hand. Shizuku, who’d never experienced anything like this before, automatically lifted her hands into the air.

“Hey, what are you doing? That came out of nowhere!”

“You’re the one who’s suddenly acting weird,” Erik insisted. “Calm down—it’s not a dangerous magic implement.”

“This is a magic implement?”

Shizuku examined the ring now that it was on her finger. She remembered it from the shop in Ilmas, and her eyes widened with surprise.

“It seemed like you wanted it, and since it’s for protection, I thought it was just right for you. It won’t shield you from especially powerful forces, though, so be careful.”

“Th-thank you so much!”

Shizuku turned the ring around her finger, then gave her left hand a light squeeze.

“...I’m going to be fine,” she told herself.

She was certain this would go her way. Things tended to move in a positive direction when she kept an optimistic mindset.

Shizuku smiled, then braced herself for what she was about to do. She looked up at Mea, who returned her gaze with sad eyes. That intensity coming from

the girl helped steel Shizuku's resolve.

Mea pleaded with her, her voice no more than a whisper.

"Laylia, please. Humans will slander and hurt you. They only accept what fits their worldview. They reject what doesn't align with it and feign righteousness with their words."

"I admit you have a point," Erik said, pulling a dagger from his waist. It was the one he'd bought for Shizuku.

He took a step forward with the weapon in hand. Mea's face contorted with fear.

"You monster... You're doing it again..."

"I want to start by righting the confusion. She and I have never met you before. The princess you know lived over a thousand years ago. None of the surrounding countries that existed in her day remain."

"Silence!"

The wind suddenly became more powerful. Even the protective barrier Erik had created pushed against him now. He tried his best to remain standing.

Then Shizuku rushed out from behind him, just as planned.

Worried that Shizuku would be caught in the brewing fight, Mea hurriedly directed her conjured wind out of the way.

Shizuku didn't run toward the exit or the altar. Instead, she rushed to the right side of the room. Mea looked between her and Erik in turn as the young man strode up to the altar.

It only took a few seconds for Mea to decide what to do. In an attempt to do away with Erik, she created a ball of light in her hand. Without a moment's hesitation, she launched it at him.

The very next moment, Shizuku, who was only a few paces from the wall, changed direction and dashed for the altar. Unsure of her aim, Mea was left flustered.

"What are you...?!"

Erik raised the dagger, meeting the ball of light with its blade. The sphere fell to the floor, making a small popping sound as it struck the ground.

Then Erik leveled the point of his dagger at Mea.

“...Shoot,” he said.

Upon receiving this command, the magic implement sprang into action.

A number of small invisible arrows launched from the tip of his dagger. Mea jumped to the left in an effort to evade. The projectiles rose into the air and plunged down toward her, but they ended up dissipating before they connected. Mea must have been out of range.

Erik redirected his dagger and launched another volley of arrows at her, but the girl leaped farther back. The constant bombardment gradually forced Mea away from the altar.

Gathering up her dress in handfuls, Shizuku ran over to the altar.

Her hands collided hard with the odd lid, and she pushed it aside with all her strength.

When Mea noticed what Shizuku was doing, the color drained from her face.

Mea and Erik both screamed at her at the same time.

“Don’t you dare open that!”

“Do it!”

Mea raised her hand and launched another luminous sphere, this time at Shizuku.

The light was dazzling. Shizuku closed her eyes in expectation of what was to happen.

However, just as the light was about to hit her, Erik leaped in front of Shizuku and repelled the attack.

“Quickly,” he urged.

“Sorry!”

Grateful that she’d been saved, Shizuku gathered all her might and gave the

lid, which was adorned with a floral emblem, a final shove.

“Don’t look!”

The girl’s scream shattered the stillness that had filled the room.

Shizuku peered through the small gap she had made.

Inside the casket lay a tattered dress, its color faded to an ochre brown, and a skeleton that had mostly crumbled away, barely holding its form.

They were human remains.

Shizuku could tell as much, but only barely. The bones had likely had some preservation magic cast on them, but even with that in place, a thousand years must have been too long to stave off decomposition. Shizuku beheld the deteriorated body with a sad look in her eyes. As she stared—unable to drag her eyes away—she heard Mea speak with a feeble voice.

“Laylia... Laylia...”

Shizuku could tell that Mea wasn’t calling out to her anymore.

She looked at the emblem carved into the lid. It was the same sort that had adorned the furniture in the room she’d been shown to upon arriving here. It must have been Laylia’s personal symbol. When Shizuku realized that this altar was a stone casket and contemplated the significance of that emblem, it occurred to her that the real Laylia might be resting within.

Erik sighed beside Shizuku, appearing to have realized that Mea—who’d collapsed onto the ground—no longer had any intention of attacking him. He stowed the dagger and fixed his deep-blue eyes on Shizuku.

“This is what really happened, then.”

His tone was straightforward yet was not without pity.

Shizuku wanted to nod, but she couldn’t bring herself to lift her face.

“The princess, who’d been rescued by her older brother, returned to her country and lived a peaceful life.”

That was how the legend ended, yet in reality, she had died in the castle at the bottom of the lake.

The circumstances surrounding her death and why her body was kept here remained unclear. However, as Shizuku reflected on Mea's words, she began to piece together a possible scenario.

When the prince came to retrieve his sister, he or his men had likely accused the princess of being a traitor upon learning that she loved the water god. They must have killed her, although whether it was intentional or accidental was a mystery.

Both the death and the name of the princess who'd loved the water god were covered up, and a woman named Federica was sent back in her place.

It was unlikely that the water god, who'd lost his wife, was still in the castle.

Mea had remained here alone, waiting for the deceased consort to return. The knowledge that nothing remained of a person once they had passed was too much for the demon girl to bear, so she'd continued to live in denial.

How long had she waited?

Shizuku couldn't begin to fathom it. It would've been presumptuous for her to feign understanding. She had been rescued thanks to the kindness of others on the day she arrived in this new world. Mea, meanwhile, had spent centuries in isolation, waiting for the one who was so precious to her.

Now, though, that was finally coming to an end.



Mea sat on the floor, crying.

No tears flowed down her face. No sobs could be heard. And yet there was no doubt about it. The girl who stared at the ceiling vacantly was crying.

She knew that Laylia had perished and would never return.

She'd watched the king place her body in the casket and brush his hand against her cold cheek, weeping.

No one else knew the truth of the story. The princess had died, not the king. The people who turned up at the castle killed Laylia and fled back to the surface. The stories that circulated afterward had nothing to do with the truth of the castle at the bottom of the lake. As for the master of the palace, he'd

long ago returned to his previous realm, heartbroken.

With the arrival of the princess, the castle had transformed into a warm and tranquil place. However, that happiness was fleeting, and the castle became frozen in time. Laylia's demise made certain that it would never be the same again. With both the king and his wife gone, only one girl remained. She longed to see their smiles once more. She clung to the hope that if Laylia were to return, she might have brought joy back with her.

However, the illusion that had stood for so long was unraveling.

Mea would never retrieve what she'd lost. The reality unfolding before her was solemn, but it was the only reality that truly existed.

Mea watched in a daze as the two people moved the lid of the casket back in place.

She knew it wasn't their fault. She didn't blame that human girl. Mea was the one who'd wanted her here. When Mea's call, which no one ever heard, caught Shizuku's attention and she uttered the princess's secret name, Mea was so overjoyed that she thought she'd lose her mind. At last, the solitude had come to an end, and she would finally have someone to share things with.

What would she have shared with her, though?

Mea was very tired.

Her consciousness, the thread that held her together, threatened to slip away.

And would that have been so bad?

Mea had completed her duties a long time ago. She just hadn't been willing to accept that.

What did it matter if she broke? Nobody was ever coming back. There was no point in waiting.

Mea closed her eyes and lay on the stone floor.

In response to her resignation, the depths of the castle trembled slightly. The girl surrendered everything to the vibrations coursing through her body.

But then she heard a woman beside her speak.

“Mea.”

She was calling out to her. She sounded warm.

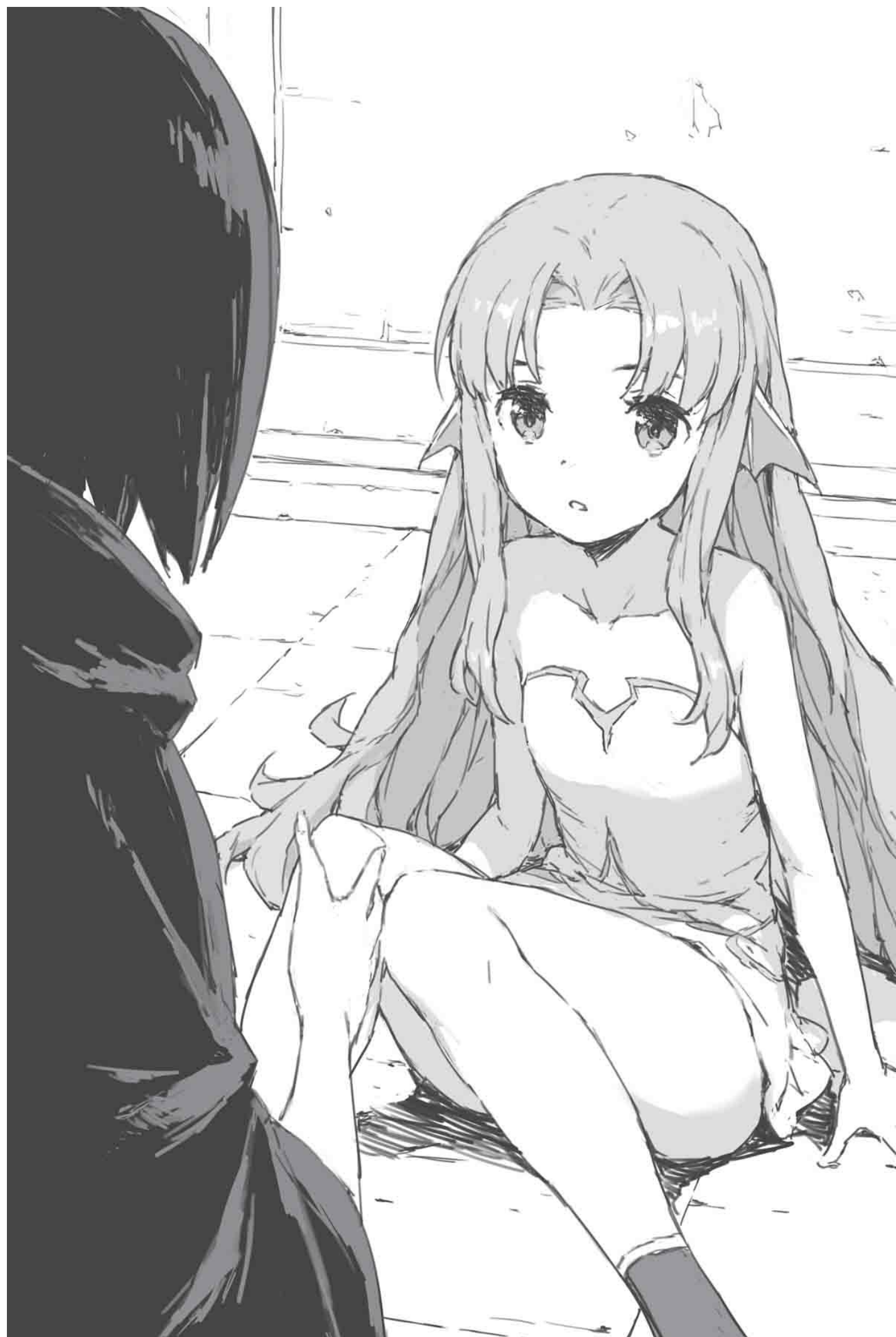
Mea opened her eyes.

Shizuku had crouched next to the girl, peering at her with worry in her eyes. Wearing a smile that carried a hint of sadness, she offered her hand.

Mea looked up at it like she’d never seen such a thing before.

What was going on?

What more was left for her? Everything had ended a long time ago, leaving no trace behind.



Mea stared at Shizuku's outstretched hand, then at her face.

Shizuku was puzzled by her lack of response, but she didn't retract her hand. Instead, she made a suggestion.

"If you don't like being alone, then why not come with us?" Her dark-brown eyes were brimming with a gentle emotion.

Shizuku gave Mea another determined smile.

"In a sense, I'm on my own, too. I'm from a different world, you see. But he's accompanying me on my journey to Farsas. I'm going there to search for a way home. Why don't you come outside with us?"

Mea couldn't help but find this woman kind of strange.

She wasn't like Laylia or the humans who had come to fetch her. Mea was far from ordinary, and yet Shizuku treated her entirely as though she were.

How did she manage it? Mea couldn't tell if she was ignorant, kind, or strong.

The girl, who'd only just remembered that she was by herself, stared at Shizuku. Perhaps Shizuku was even more of an anomaly than she was. There was hesitation in her expression, yet she would not turn away from Mea. A smile spread across her red lips.

Mea felt a surge of feelings she didn't understand. After a long silence, she reached out with trembling fingers.

Shizuku nervously took Mea's hand in hers with a firm grip. She smiled at her, but for a brief moment, she looked ready to cry.

Mea couldn't help but find the display extremely beautiful.



Shizuku knew it was reckless of her to offer to take Mea along. It would be akin to a child accompanying a child. She didn't know much about this unfamiliar world yet. There was no way she could look after a demon girl and herself.

She hadn't been very confident when she'd proposed the idea to Erik.

"Could we invite Mea to come with us?" she'd asked.

The young man looked alarmed for a moment. Then he frowned.

“Aren’t you scared of demons? She might hurt you.”

“I’m scared, yes,” Shizuku replied. “But I’m sure she thinks of me in the same way. Plus...she always looks miserable.”

A thousand years of solitude had surely exhausted Mea. She was lonely, mourning something she’d never have. That was why Shizuku had felt the urge to reach out and help her.

“I understand, but you’re a human. It’s different,” Erik said with a stern look. “I don’t support this idea.”

“Ugh, I knew you’d say that.”

Shizuku forced a lifeless smile in the face of mounting disheartenment.

Mea was of another species. Sympathy wouldn’t take precedent the way it did for Shizuku. Her reaction to losing the princess was proof enough of that. Despite this knowledge, Shizuku fought to keep resolute. The truth of the legend and Mea’s isolation were heartbreaking. There was no changing the past, but it wasn’t too late to help Mea.

That was when Erik looked at Shizuku, who wore a bittersweet expression, and nodded.

“Your compassion might be one of your virtues, but it could also lead to your downfall. I intend to help you as much as I can; however, your decisions will determine your fate.”

“I know.”

“Then you should do whatever you feel like.”

“Huh?”

His words weren’t terse or disdainful. It was as though he was suggesting that she pick what she wanted for dinner.

At the same time, however, it didn’t sound like a throwaway comment. He’d expressed his true belief.

Shizuku’s eyes widened as she tried to process the remark.

She was weak, ignorant, and could barely protect herself.

She felt too naive to the risks that surrounded her. She was reckless.

Even so...

Shizuku looked at her hands. She was free to do whatever she liked. That freedom was the only asset she had.

There was little she could accomplish in this world. Things didn't go the way she wanted. That said, Shizuku could still take another's hand. She could still communicate with them.

Although her potential was limited, that inspired her to cherish what she could manage even more.

At some point, one of her choices might endanger her.

Still, rather than letting the uncertain future deter her, Shizuku wanted to take the chances that came her way. That was the one thing she was most eager to do. It would help her grow as a person.

Shizuku squeezed her hands a few times. Then she looked up at Erik and smiled.

"I want to go and speak to her, then," she announced.

"Okay. Feel free."

"I'm sorry for being a nuisance. Your patience means a lot to me."

She bowed her head deeply, then lifted it. The girl still lay on the ground, hoping to disappear like her dream.

Shizuku had taken a step toward her, seized by a feeling that Mea, too, had some yet untapped potential.

Once Shizuku had pulled Mea to her feet, Erik looked the demon up and down. It was as if he'd never seen anything like her before. Placing his fingers on his chin, he nodded.

"It'd be safer if we took her on as an assistant demon and had her sign a contract, but you don't have any magical powers. We need a mage who can act as an intermediary. Oh well, we can decide on that later. First of all, I feel like

her appearance is going to be an issue... Are you able to transform?"

Mea gave him a firm nod. In the blink of an eye, she became a small, emerald-colored bird and perched on Shizuku's shoulder.

"Th-that was incredible," Shizuku remarked.

"High-ranking demons are such complex beings that this sort of transformation is impossible for them. Mid-ranking ones strike that happy medium," Erik explained. "She would have stuck out like a sore thumb with that hair color."

"Oh. There are no green-haired humans here?"

Considering the fact that magic existed in this world, the idea that some people might be born with emerald locks didn't seem too far-fetched. This question, however, earned Shizuku a dumbfounded look from Erik. He shrugged as he began walking toward the doorway.

"You're not about to tell me there are green-haired people in your world, are you? That's crazy."

"Uhhh... Wait a minute. I think we've got our wires crossed."

"Or perhaps there are some folks in your world that have hair that stands on end?"

"You might see that every now and then, but it's not like it defies the laws of nature or anything..."

Shizuku chatted idly with Erik as she followed him out of the hall.

The small bird on her shoulder looked back toward the casket they were leaving behind. For a brief moment, her green eyes brimmed with a vivid emotion, culminating in a solitary tear that dropped down onto the paved stone floor.



The transit ring was located in a room in one corner of the castle that was almost submerged in water. Now Shizuku understood why Erik was soaked. She placed her head in her hands. The floor sloped down into the water, with the central part reaching a depth of around two meters. The water was so clear that

Shizuku could make out the circular patterns etched onto the floor.

“Won’t you drown with that outfit on?” Erik asked. “Will you be okay?”

“Ha-ha... I’ll probably be fine, as long as we’re not submerged for too long. We won’t be stationary for a while, will we?”

“The ring will launch into action as soon as we enter it.” Erik waded in with no hesitation.

“Is it okay for you to stay in bird form?” Shizuku asked the tiny creature on her shoulder, to which Mea responded with two nods.

Shizuku braced herself, then dipped her leg into the water, still wearing her dress.

At first, her skirt filled with air and floated on top, so she pressed it down, causing it to billow beneath the surface. Once she was completely submerged and opened her eyes, she saw Erik before the transit ring, reaching out his hand.

She reached for him, and a firm tug brought her close.

The shock that followed made Shizuku feel like everything had gone blank.

The world seemed to warp. It was a peculiar feeling.

When Shizuku opened her eyes again, she found herself standing in the middle of a lakeside forest, completely drenched.

“Whoa, they’re back!”

“Are they all right?!”

Shizuku, dazed from her first experience in a transit ring, heard a pair of unfamiliar voices. She realized two men and a boy were staring at her and Erik, utterly astonished.

Shizuku cocked her head to one side. She felt like she’d seen the boy before.

“Oh... I met you in front of that stone monument...”

It was the boy who’d read the inscription for her. Judging by his expression, he’d been quite worried. Shizuku started to bow her head, meaning to thank these people for their help. However, a rumble from the lake gave her pause.

“What was that?!”

Everyone but Erik turned to look. Terrible waves ran across the water in the distance. The once-placid water shuddered, sending thinning ripples to the shore. The lake water surged a few times, kicking up white foam. This continued for a short while, but ultimately, it subsided. Then the lake was its still self again.

Noticing how stupefied Shizuku looked, Erik whispered to her in a voice so low that only she would hear.

“She was the very thing that was holding that castle together,” he said. “Now that we’ve brought her out, it’s collapsed.”

“What? That can’t be true. That...doesn’t sound good.”

“What does it matter? It’s not like anyone would have been able to get inside,” the young man replied nonchalantly.

A gentle smile spread across Erik’s face. It was a comforting, honest thing. Shizuku looked down at his hand, which was still gripping hers. She was so grateful he’d freed her that it was difficult to contain the feeling.

“...Thank you,” she muttered.

The words were meant for Erik, not herself, yet they gave her a warm, reassuring sensation.

The lost princess’s memories rested at the bottom of the lake, along with the castle.

No trace of her soul remained. No comforting tales of the afterlife could provide solace for what befell her. Those who remained simply had to accept it and move on.

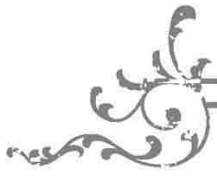
On that day, someone undoubtedly recounted the fictional version of the story. For generations, it would be passed down from parent to child and from child to grandchild as a sad tale to help kids drift off to sleep. Perhaps that was cruel, or maybe it was a form of relief. Either way, it made no difference to the dead.

Similarly, Shizuku had no choice but to live with the feelings she found so hard

to shake off. Lamenting the mercilessness of death wasn't an option.

Equipped with this knowledge, she began to desire a better understanding of this unusual new world.

4. Towering in the Sky



Shizuku looked at the ground beneath her feet.

Some sort of chalk had been used to draw a circle about two meters in diameter. And that wasn't all. Letters and symbols had been written within the circle in a very specific format.

Shizuku glanced at Mea, then at Erik, who nodded at the mage standing outside the magic ring.

"Go ahead. You may begin."

At the young man's command, the mage recited some kind of chant. Shizuku glanced around nervously, although she tried her best not to come across as rude.

About twenty minutes after this prescribed magical contract procedure began, Mea officially became Shizuku's assistant demon.



Erik and Shizuku stuck to the main road as they traveled from the town of Colwa to Candela's castle city, a trek that would end up taking more than a week.

During this leg of their journey, they were fortunate enough to encounter a mage who could facilitate their contract, and thus, Shizuku and Mea's contract was successfully formalized.

Shizuku would've preferred to be a friend for Mea than an owner, but Erik strongly recommended they forge a contract for safety. Mea seemed to desire it, too. She was able to tell Erik apart from other people because he was a mage, but since Shizuku possessed no magical powers, it was impossible for

Mea to differentiate her from any other stranger. Once Shizuku heard this, she realized there was no option but to make the pact.

Shizuku became Mea's master, and Erik was also given the right to issue her orders, second only to Shizuku. Although the mage readily agreed to assist them in this matter, he was quite surprised.

"It's rare for humans to employ the help of mid-ranking demons nowadays." Still, he went about the task with no objections.

Once Shizuku and Erik were finished with the contract process, they had dinner in the town where they were staying for the night, then retired to an inn. While drinking his tea, Erik remarked, "Once she gets used to you being her master, she'll naturally develop the ability to recognize different people. Demons are really adaptable in that respect. They adjust to their environment."

"Is that right...?"

Shizuku glanced at Mea, who was still in bird form. She was pecking at a bowl of water set on the corner of the table. She seemed to notice Shizuku's gaze, because she looked up with her emerald eyes. Shizuku felt like she might forget Mea ever had a human form at all. She reached out her hand and gently stroked Mea from her head to her back.

"Once we're in Candela's castle city, we should gather some information. I'm concerned about what may have happened in Anneli and Rozsark."

Shizuku examined the map spread before her. She'd filled in the names of the countries in katakana.

Anneli was located to the south of Candela, their present location. It had been captured by the neighboring Rozsark, causing the transit rings to be blockaded off. How the situation unfolded would determine which countries they could pass through to reach Farsas. Keeping updated on current developments was a necessity.

Shizuku tapped the name of the country that bordered Candela to the west with her pen.

"If we go west from here, uhhh... How do I read this?"

“Bebuls. Beyond that is Gandona.”

“Thank you. We just need to cross two more nations, and then we’ll be in Farsas.”

“Yeah. But the Great Nations have pretty rigorous immigration controls in place. I’m a little torn about what to do.”

Erik drew four circles on the map with a red pen from Shizuku’s pencil case.

The first was around Farsas, and the second was around Gandona. Then he drew one to the south of Gandona and one on the east side of the continent.

“These are called the Four Great Nations. If we want to use a transit ring in any of those countries, we’ll need a little bit of preparation.”

“Do you mean things like forged documents?” Shizuku asked.

“Yes, but that’s just one part of it.”

Erik contemplated to himself for a moment, then poked the Great Nation to the south of Gandona with his pen.

“And then there’s this place...,” he began. “It’s called Kisk. It’s rather dangerous. Honestly, I’d like to avoid it if we can.”

“Is there a lot of crime there or something?” Shizuku inquired.

“The crime isn’t too bad, but the royal family is a little weird at the moment. It harbors a love for chaos and causing trouble. There are a lot of ominous rumors about Princess Ortea, the king’s younger sister. Some claim she went as far as gouging out the eyes of a mage who voiced his discontent with her.”

“Ugh... I’d like to stay as far away from her as possible.”

“Yeah. Things could turn ugly if she learns the truth about you. She might end up experimenting on you or something.”

“Noooooooooooo!”

Considering the princess’s gruesome reputation, Shizuku wanted to avoid her at all costs. She shuddered, then picked up her cup of tea. It possessed a rich aroma and a color similar to the black tea she was familiar with, yet it tasted different. Shizuku took a sip of the slightly salty liquid inside the cup.

“You know, sometimes, I get this insatiable craving for fast food. I’m a modern person, after all,” she said.

“What’s ‘fast food’?”

“Salty food that’s high in calories, but lacking in nutrition. That’s how I think of it, at least.”

“Why don’t you make some?”

“If I made it myself, it wouldn’t be fast food anymore!”

“Sorry, I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

Shizuku abandoned the fruitless conversation. Most of the vegetables and grains she’d come across in this world were the same as those back home. In that sense, this journey really felt like going to a foreign country. When it came to meat, however, there were times when she immediately recognized she was eating beef, and others when she couldn’t possibly guess what she’d put in her mouth. Once or twice, she’d been too scared to ask.

At one point, she’d asked Erik whether there were pigs in his world. “*They have them to the west,*” he’d assured her. That made her a little excited to reach Farsas.

By contrast, there was no seafood served anywhere. Shizuku figured that was because she and Erik were traveling through a landlocked country. She’d grown up on an island nation, and so she found that disappointing.

“Ahh, I wish I could eat some seafood... Squid... Grilled squid...”

Shizuku used her mechanical pencil to draw a fun picture of a giant squid on the sea part of the map. When Erik saw it, he looked flabbergasted.

“Do you want to see a kraken?”

“Huh, those exist here...?” Shizuku replied. “I’d really rather not...”

She had no desire to encounter whatever giant squids existed in this magical world. For the time being, she’d have to abandon her hope of enjoying some seafood.

Once Erik and Shizuku finished their tea, they opened their books and

notepads on the table. With her thin German textbook in hand, Shizuku began copying a verb chart into her notebook.

“English verbs change, too, but German verb conjugations are especially tricky. Do you know what I mean when I say ‘first person’ and ‘second person’?”

Erik nodded. “Yes.”

“There are six ways to conjugate a verb in the present tense, depending on who the subject is and whether the subject is singular or plural. Meanwhile, in English, the verb ending only changes when you’re using the third person singular.”

“I see. That’s logical,” Erik remarked as he took down some notes.

“Is it?” Shizuku asked, puzzled. “I find it pretty hard to remember.”

“It makes it easier to tell who the subject is, even in complex sentences. The more information a single piece of vocabulary conveys, the easier it is to make sense of what you’re reading.”

“The hard part is having to memorize *what* information that single piece of vocabulary conveys! We haven’t even looked at all the different tenses yet!”

“Maybe you have a point. I feel like there’s a lot more you have to memorize in Japanese, though.”

“That’s why I’m glad it’s my first language!”

Shizuku got the impression that Erik wasn’t merely interested in learning to read and write in languages from another world. He also desired to know how the languages operated and their rules.

Unfortunately, Shizuku found Japanese grammar more difficult to explain than anything else. Not only were there far too many different words in Japanese, but she could also barely even recall being taught about its grammar. As a result, she ended up answering most of Erik’s questions with “That’s just the way it is.”

He never looked surprised by this, though. He actually seemed to be taking notes on the vague vibes she got when she couldn’t articulate something properly.

Shizuku continued her explanation by giving another example of basic verb changes.

“To some degree, verb conjugations tend to follow specific rules, but when they digress from those patterns, they *really* digress from them. Especially when it comes to the verb *to be*, for example... The verb that connects the subject and the predicate, the one that expresses what the subject is, changes quite significantly in both German and English.”

Shizuku casually reached beneath the table as she spoke and took her German-Japanese dictionary out from her bag. She’d only grabbed it because she couldn’t recall the irregular verb conjugations off the top of her head, but the very sight of the book made Erik’s eyes widen in astonishment.

“What kind of book is that? Is it a murder weapon?”

“I guess you could use it for that purpose, but no—it’s a dictionary. A dictionary that tells you what German words mean in Japanese. I’m sure you have dictionaries in your world, too.”

“We do. Still, let me see it.”

Shizuku placed the book in his hand. Erik took it from her and started flicking through it.

His long fingers looked different from any other adult’s that Shizuku had seen before. While she absentmindedly appreciated their beauty, he suddenly looked up, causing her to jerk her head in another direction.

Inquisitiveness shone in his deep-blue eyes. He angled the open dictionary toward her, pointing to a word printed in a slightly larger typeface.

“This bit at the start is in German, isn’t it? *L, E, R, N, E, N.*”

“Yeah. I guess it’s like *learn* in English. It means ‘to acquire knowledge or a skill.’”

“What about this one? The bit with the strangely shaped letters.”

“Those are phonetic symbols. They tell you how a word is pronounced.”

Erik frowned. He tilted his head back and forth, seemingly trying to make sense of what he’d heard, then pointed at one of the example sentences in the

dictionary.

“Could you read this out to me?”

“I’m not very good at the pronunciation... *Icki rerne Japanishu!*”

“...”

There was silence.

Had her pronunciation been that terrible? Shizuku hung her head in shame.

She knew she spoke German with a thick Japanese accent, but there wasn’t much she could do about that. She was aware that pronunciation wasn’t her strong suit. It’s why she’d only read out translations when teaching Erik grammar and had avoided pronouncing example sentences almost entirely.

“Never mind. Pretend you didn’t hear that...”

Shizuku looked up and flashed Erik a weary smile. The expression on his face, however, was the epitome of sincerity. He looked hesitant, yet upon recognizing that Shizuku was confused, he sought to clarify himself.

“I’ve been thinking how strange this is for a little while. English and German words are pronounced completely differently, aren’t they? It’s more than just a different accent.”

“W-well, yeah. I mean, they’re different languages.”

“And sometimes, it kind of sounds like you’re reciting an odd spell.”

“My poor pronunciation is probably the main issue, but I know what you mean. I struggle picking up on what’s being said as well.”

Erik leaned forward. “May I ask you a quick question?”

“Of course,” Shizuku replied.

She wondered why he needed to be so formal about it. However, she knew inquiring about it needlessly would just earn her a sharp quip.

Erik pointed at the dictionary with the end of the pen.

“Do people who use German or English converse in those languages?”

“Of course they do. German people speak to one another in German.”

“What percentage of the German language is pronounced like some sort of weird incantation?”

That was a pretty harsh thing to say. Shizuku knew her reading had been poor, but it was still upsetting to hear. Her shoulders sagged.

“All of it. People in Germany just pronounce the words a lot more smoothly than I do.”

“You’d be able to understand what they were saying, then?”

“I doubt it. As I mentioned earlier, I struggle to pick up on what’s being said. It all sounds like a strange spell to me, too.”

Erik’s eyes widened in amazement. Shizuku frowned, unsure what the problem was.

A weighty silence fell between them. Erik was the one to break it.

“There are languages spoken in your world that some people can’t comprehend?” he questioned, his tone stiff.

It sounded as though he’d happened upon some previously unknown truth.

Shizuku replayed his astonished reaction in her mind a few times before she finally realized that they were considering very different things.

“Huh? Does that mean that people understand every language spoken here?”

“Yes. Well, it’s more that we all share a common one. Some people speak in different accents, but you can still tell what they’re saying.”

“Whoa...”

Shizuku had always sensed that Erik was missing something. At last, she finally grasped why. She gasped with amazement.

Now that she thought about it, Erik had never asked her any questions about pronunciation. Sometimes, when she’d read out a piece of vocabulary, he’d made a funny face, but that was it. Perhaps he’d assumed that all the letters were read individually—an *a* would be pronounced *ay*, and a *b* would be pronounced *bee*, for example. Or perhaps he’d assumed that each letter represented something else.

Thanks to Shizuku's inferiority complex, which had led her to avoid reading anything out loud, they'd gone all that time without having the chance to correct each other's preconceptions.

Erik heaved a great sigh, then wrote a few letters in his language into the margin of his notebook.

"In this world, we use the word *foreign language* to refer to different writing systems. The pronunciation is always the same, but there are some discrepancies in the letters and the syntax. That's why I assumed it'd be the same in your world..."

Shizuku shook her head. "In different countries, people write and pronounce things in a totally different way. If you don't know the language, you won't be able to understand."

Shizuku thought back to when she'd first arrived in this world.

She'd been surprised to discover that she could communicate with others, but nobody else found it strange, regardless of her foreign appearance. Even when she'd revealed to Erik that she was from another world, he didn't question why she could converse with him.

Simply put, in this world, there was no such thing as a language that you could hear but not comprehend. The very notion didn't exist.

People assumed that as long as you were human, you could communicate with everyone you came across.

"Have things always been like this in your world?" Shizuku asked Erik. "Have people never pronounced things in different ways? Not even a thousand years ago?"

"It's always been this way," he replied. "The letters we use might have evolved, but our spoken language has always been the same. The only time you'd come across a word you didn't understand would be when it's a proper noun."

"That sounds useful... I'm jealous."

Had that been the case in Shizuku's world, she wouldn't have had to worry

over pronunciation. She couldn't be more envious.

Erik scowled.

"It's *your* world that strikes me as odd," he said. "Written languages are one thing, but what's the point in having different spoken languages, too? Do people inherit the languages they speak?"

"The countries are just so far away from one another, physically speaking... It has nothing to do with genetics. If a Japanese person grew up in Germany, they'd be fluent in German," Shizuku responded somewhat absentmindedly. She couldn't stop thinking about how everyone on the continent spoke one, unified language.

Wrapping her head around it proved difficult. However, it seemed amazing. She really was in a whole new world. She found it kind of exciting. Before she knew it, a smile had spread across her face.

"You couldn't have had the Tower of Babel in your world, then."

"'Babel'?"

"It's a story from my world—a myth," she explained. "Long, long ago, everyone spoke the same language. One day, people got together and started to build a really tall tower. They wanted it to be so tall that it reached the heavens. But when God saw what they'd done, he attributed their success to the fact that they all spoke the same language, and so he put a stop to that. From then on, they spoke different languages. Then people were scattered all across the globe...and here we are."

The story might have been about bringing humanity's ego down a notch, or maybe it aimed to demonstrate the limits of human ability.

Either way, such a thing couldn't have come to pass in this land. Shizuku didn't know how big the continent was or whether the same was true of the other continent to the east, but people here spoke one language. The concept of language barriers didn't exist for them.

Shizuku found herself overcome with profound emotion, much like when she'd discovered that souls ceased to exist after a person died. However, it was an entirely different feeling this time. She was simply fascinated by the

differences between the two worlds.

Erik still didn't understand what Shizuku, now practically beaming, was thinking, but he wound up forcing a smile.

The small, green bird sitting between them let out a clear little chirp. It sounded like she was enjoying herself, even if she didn't understand the discussion.



About three days after Mea signed a contract to become an assistant demon, Shizuku and Erik bought what they needed for the next step of their journey and left town.

The weather was quite pleasant as they set out on horseback down the main road, and they proceeded at a leisurely pace. Initially, the route was bustling, but after about two hours, Shizuku and Erik were the only ones in sight. They had either passed the others or been overtaken.

Evidently, Erik had been waiting until they were alone, because he began lobbing questions at Shizuku. He was still on the subject of languages.

"You say you're not very good at pronunciation and understanding foreign languages. Isn't that an inherited quality?"

"My pronunciation's so bad that you think it's a genetic defect, huh? I'm sorry to have to say this, but it's not hereditary."

Shizuku pushed her windswept hair back behind her ear, then stuffed it inside a scarf.

"Japanese has relatively few consonants and vowels compared with Western languages...I mean, languages like German and English. They have way too many vowel sounds. When learning your native tongue as a child, you become ignorant of the sounds you don't actively use. Most Japanese people can't differentiate the sounds used in foreign languages. Some people pick that skill up later on, when they make the effort to learn it...but in my case, I've got a long way to go."

"I wouldn't be able to tell the difference myself, but I acknowledge that I feel your pronunciation is a problem."

“Thank you for your understanding.” Shizuku stuck her tongue out at Erik, then made eye contact with the bird on her shoulder and smiled.

Erik glanced at Shizuku. Her expression kept changing. One minute, she looked annoyed, and then the next, happy. All throughout, he appeared in deep contemplation.

“You...shouldn’t tell anybody else anything about the languages of your world. And that includes the conversation we just had.”

He left it at that, not bothering to go into any detail or provide any reason.

The pair’s next stop was in a small village not far from the main road they’d been following.

It was almost dusk by the time they neared the settlement, which sat in the middle of the forest. Fortunately, it was home to a large tower, which made the place easy to locate.

“I wonder if Rapunzel’s up there,” Shizuku mused quietly, gazing at the distant spire. It almost looked like a big chimney.

“What’s a ‘Rapunzel’?”

“She’s a princess. Uh, will you respond with a barrage of dry questions if I start telling the story?”

“Not if the story makes sense.”

“Forget it, then. The princess lived happily ever after! The end!”

Erik looked stunned, but Shizuku had elicited that expression from him so many times that it didn’t faze her anymore.

“You have a pretty outgoing personality,” he remarked.

“I’m just clear-cut and straightforward.”

“Clear-cut? I hope you don’t cut any peaches. You’ll hurt the little boy inside.”

The fact that Erik thought that all peaches had boys inside them—like in the folktale “Momotaro”—was so amusing that Shizuku decided to let it slide.

Before long, the entrance to the village came into view. This particular settlement appeared to go out of its way to make its visitors feel welcome.

There was a signboard advertising the inn positioned at the entrance, alongside a stable where people could leave their horses.

It was unusual for such a small village to have a designated inn, but Shizuku figured this was due to its proximity to the main road.

The two of them left their horses safely at the stable and secured a room for the night. Then they ate an early dinner in the inn's dining room.

"Oh, this soup is so delicious! I wonder what gives it its flavor."

"I get the impression it's a local dish. If you go to the kitchen, they might tell you."

There were no other guests in the dining room. Shizuku scooped up some of the pink-colored soup with her spoon and looked out at the evening sky.

"I keep thinking about that tower in town," she said. "It's really fascinating."

"If you're that interested, go and see it tomorrow when the sun comes up. Perhaps it's a sightseeing spot," Erik said. "...Oh, but I should come with you. I don't think I should leave you by yourself."

"I can't argue with that."

Whenever Shizuku did stuff by herself, she tended to get tangled in some manner of trouble.

She lowered her head to find the small bird perched on the table looking up at her. She smiled.

Shizuku knew that the phrase *All's well that ends well* wasn't always true, but luckily, things seemed to have worked out that way for her so far. Being forced to take a detour occasionally had advantages.

Still, that didn't mean she could dive into situations that might trouble Erik just because she felt like it.

Shizuku gazed at the spire from the window. She likened it to a stake, driven straight into the earth.

"It must be a watchtower or something. But it doesn't have any windows."

"...It's a lying-in tower. For the Noy family," someone spat from behind

Shizuku, catching her off guard.

Startled, Shizuku looked around.

The speaker was a woman about the age of Shizuku's mother. It looked like she'd just brought some vegetables to the kitchen. When she noticed Erik's attire, her expression changed.

"You're not a mage, are you?" she asked him.

"For all intents and purposes, yes."

"Perfect! Could you check my magic implements for me? Our village mage passed away six months ago. We don't get many of your kind visiting us, so I've been in a real predicament."

"I'd be happy to, but I don't know whether I'll be able to fix anything."

"Don't worry about that. It won't do any harm to have a look. I'll come and fetch you when you've finished eating."

When the woman made her way out of the dining room, Shizuku asked Erik a question.

"She said that tower was a lying-in tower, didn't she? Do people here believe that the delivery will go more smoothly if you give birth in a high place or something?"

"There's no such tradition. That sounds a little strange, actually."

Shizuku peered at the narrow tower through the window again.

Now that she had a proper look at it, she noticed a single, small window set into the structure.

When Erik went to repair the lady's magic implement, with Shizuku tagging along, they were shown into a room that was about eight square meters in size. Devoid of any furniture, the small space featured a wooden floor with a silver plate roughly a meter in diameter embedded into it. Orphic markings were engraved in the argent surface in a ring.

Erik peered closely at the etchings.

"Is this a communication ring?" he asked the woman. "That's quite an old-

fashioned magic implement.”

“It is indeed,” the woman replied. “One craftsman who came to the village to peddle his wares told me I’d have to ask a royal mage to restore it for me. I know that’d be costly and troublesome, so I wasn’t very fond of that idea. So what do you think? Can you fix it?”

“As long as you give me enough time, yes.”

“That’d be wonderful. I’ll pay you, of course.”

Erik looked back at Shizuku and summoned the small bird who was sitting on her shoulder.

“Mea. I need you to lend me some of your magical power.”

The bird let out a small chirp, then perched on Erik’s shoulder instead.

Shizuku wasn’t sure what to do in the meantime, but the woman soon beckoned her over.

“Come here and wait. I’ll get you some snacks,” she said.

Shizuku felt a little disconcerted. How old did this woman think she was, exactly?

Erik, however, encouraged her to go along, so she obediently followed after the woman.

Once Shizuku had been served some cookies and tea, she took the opportunity to ask the woman a question.

“Is that tower only used as a lying-in tower? It’s just a place where people give birth?”

“That’s right. The tower itself belongs to the Noy family. Nobody else can go anywhere near it. After all, it’s owned by a cursed lineage. It’s home to something that nobody is supposed to see.”

“C-cursed?” repeated Shizuku.

The woman nodded as she poured some tea into her own cup. However, before she could continue her story, a male voice came out of nowhere and began to reprimand her.

“Cut it out, Mom. It’s embarrassing to hear you bad-mouthing other families.”

A young man appeared in the doorway. He looked about the same age as Erik.

The woman faced her son and snorted. “What’s wrong with saying it how it is? Everyone in the village knows the truth.”

“But...”

That was when the man noticed that Shizuku was a stranger. She bowed her head in a perfunctory manner. “I’m just visiting,” she told him.

“I’ve asked a traveling mage to repair my communication ring. I just thought the girl who was accompanying him might need some help whiling away the time.”

“Oh, I see. Sorry. I shouldn’t have disturbed you,” the young man said to Shizuku.

He spoke to her like he would a child, almost leading her to worry about how old he really perceived her to be. Nevertheless, she dispelled the awkward tension lingering between the mother and son, breaking the silence with “You didn’t disturb us at all.”

Once the man had gone, the mother muttered something to no one in particular, her words cutting and condemnatory.

“How hopeless can you get...?” she said. “Imagine being deceived by a woman from the Noy family...”

Surprised, Shizuku looked up.

A slender tower loomed tall through the window on the other side of the hallway.

“What is a communication ring?” Shizuku asked Erik, who seemed quite tired, once they’d returned to the inn.

He’d failed to finish the repairs in a single day. After spending three hours trying to fix the magic implement, he’d called it quits for now.

“My head hurts,” he’d said. *“I’ll come back tomorrow.”*

Even if they had left the village after Erik’s work, they wouldn’t have arrived

at their next stop until late into the night, so delaying the next step of their journey a bit wasn't much of an issue. The woman who'd asked him to complete the repairs, Olya, offered to reimburse them for the extra lodging fees, so the pair elected to stay for longer.

"A communication ring is essentially a magic implement used for two-way messaging. You position them in two distant locations, and then when you step inside, your voice is relayed to your ring's twin. They're mainly employed by mages incapable of telepathy magic... You mostly find them in places like castles, government offices, or public spaces where there are a lot of people. It's rare to find one in a regular person's home."

"So it's like a telephone. In my world, everyone has a telephone of their own. Even that thing I use to take photos is a phone."

"Really? That's amazing. It's so small. Can you use it here?"

"Not a chance. There's no coverage."

Not only that, but Shizuku also didn't have anybody she could call. The thought of her smartphone in her bag and the faces of the people in her phone book briefly came to mind. It felt as though she hadn't seen any of them in years. This thought evoked a pang of nostalgia.

Gently pushing these feelings to the back of her mind, Shizuku distracted herself by considering how communication worked in this world.

It was simply enchanting to think that some were able to telepathically communicate with others using nothing but their own body, provided they were a sufficiently adept mage and acquainted with the target. The method couldn't send photos like a smartphone, but it also required no electricity.

There were a couple of other downsides, too. You had to be a mage to communicate telepathically, and according to Erik, the communication rings, which served as an alternative, weren't common household installations. It seemed like it would be a very long time until people carried around remote communication tools in their hands. Landline telephones were once the norm in Shizuku's world, too.

She shared her thoughts with Erik, who was leaning against the back of his

chair with his eyes closed. The corners of his mouth turned up, forming an awkward smile.

“Magic implements tailored for everyday life have been around for about two hundred years. It’s just that the majority of these implements have only become widespread among the wealthy, and very few are affordable for the common person. Although there have been gradual advancements in magical technology, its benefits simply haven’t reached the average citizen. Hence, civilization as a whole has seen little significant change since the Dark Age.”

“Is that because magic implements are difficult to make and impossible to mass-produce?”

“That’s one factor. You see, ordinarily, magic requires the spellcaster to be present at the location. Magic implements and rings, however, have markings etched onto them so that they remain functional, even without the caster. Some powerful mages create such engravings using just their magical powers, but they’re very rare. That’s why, in the past, magic implements were so precious that they were all hoarded in castles.”

“Whoa. They were like valuable treasures, then.”

Shizuku glanced at the ring she was wearing. The intricate pattern on it must have carried some sort of magical significance.

Neither that band nor any of the magic implements that Erik carried with him were particularly effective, though. According to Erik, they’d lose their strength entirely if they were used too much. Still, it sounded like there were tons of powerful magic implements on the continent. Perhaps they were just tricky to find.

Erik continued his explanation, sounding calm and composed.

“Around three hundred years ago, a small spell was created in the Great Nation of Gandona. It connected markings and shapes that were made without the use of magic together to form magic spells. This innovation allowed artisans to take care of the markings, while the actual composition of the spells remained the responsibility of the mages. In the blink of an eye, there were many magic implements in circulation.”

“Was that when it became possible for ordinary people to purchase them?”

“No. The first implements created were weapons. Each nation outfitted its royal mages, using magic implements to reinforce its military strength. Several fairly significant wars ensued. During those decade-long conflicts, the majority of the nations that existed at that time underwent substantial changes. At one point, the era was even referred to as the second Dark Age.”

Erik’s tone turned bitter before he cut himself off. He picked up his teacup and took a sip.

“It wasn’t until after that period that magical tools for everyday use were created in earnest. They’re still expensive for common folk—perhaps because they haven’t been around for very long. Unlike weapons, day-to-day items need to be consistent in their effectiveness, and people need to be able to make minute adjustments to their functions. That makes them difficult to produce. Since they were originally developed for the court ladies who worked in castles, most of the day-to-day items are fashioned from precious metals, materials that are known for being very compatible with magic.”

“I see.”

Shizuku almost felt like she was in a social studies class. She got the urge to take notes.

Simply put, magical technology was an equivalent of sorts to mechanical technology in her world. Compared with the progress Shizuku had seen in mechanical technology, things here still appeared to be in a developmental stage.

“There are all sorts of magic implements, then,” Shizuku remarked. “Are people excited about the technological advancements still to come?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think many mages research day-to-day implements.”

“Huh? Why not? There’s a demand that hasn’t been met, so this could be their chance to make some money.”

Erik gave Shizuku a simple answer to her simple question.

“Firstly, mages have their own sort of magic, so they have no need for those

sorts of tools. Secondly, if too many convenient magic implements start circulating at affordable prices, the very existence of mages will lose meaning. Lastly, mages with research and development skills are usually affiliated with a castle, so they prioritize work related to defense and national security. Advancing day-to-day implements is pretty far down on their list of priorities. It's why the lives of common people hardly see any significant change." He paused. "I'm sorry I didn't have a more exciting answer for you."

"It's okay... That makes sense."

Essentially, mages were a privileged class when it came to skills. The more powerful mages worked for the upper echelons, so their abilities had no effect on regular people. Presumably, mages desired to keep their privileges, which ultimately resulted in inequality.

Erik's discontent with the current state of affairs was evident in his disgruntled tone. He placed his hands over his eyes and massaged his furrowed brow. It was rare to see him like this. Shizuku figured he must have been tired.

"You see, Farsas is unique in that magic implements are part of ordinary people's everyday lives, but that might only be the case because so many citizens of Farsas can use magic. Even in that country, there seems to be very little progress when it comes to commonplace magic implements. Maybe there's no demand for them, or maybe Farsas wishes to preserve its special status as a magical powerhouse, so there's no desire to export such tools. Regardless, I expect it'll be a long time before the lives of people in other countries see any change."

There were many complicated situations at play in this world. Shizuku merely nodded and said nothing.

Then an idea suddenly came to her. She wetted a handkerchief, wrung it out as much as she could, then put it on Erik's forehead. He seemed a little surprised at first, but then he thanked her and placed his hand on top of it.

Perhaps there was no world in existence where everyone was happy and wealthy. People were still people, after all.

In a way, Shizuku kind of understood what was going on. Her world grappled with similar dilemmas, too.

Magic was useful. In fact, seeing it in action was so surreal that Shizuku felt constantly awestruck by it.

And yet magical power was just like any other natural human skill... You were born with it, or you weren't. It was beyond your control.

How would this world eradicate the inconsistencies that reality created?

As Shizuku absentmindedly contemplated this question, her gaze drifted toward her traveling companion. What would he have picked if he could have chosen whether to have magical powers? It was a pointless thing to consider, but Shizuku couldn't help but wonder.



"I love you."

Clare didn't know why, but whenever she recalled those three earnest words, she felt like she'd imagined them.

A loud ringing sounded in her ears, and she clasped her hands against them.

The continent was so big. The world outside it was even bigger. But to Clare, the world extended no farther than the little village. Maybe no farther than her small, narrow tower.

The spire wasn't very well ventilated, and the air had a glum, sour smell.

The stench wafted stealthily through the darkness, as though it were trying to capture her. It carried with it a whiff of stale blood that forced Clare to cover her mouth.

The ringing in her ears was unbearable. She felt dizzy. She had nowhere to escape to.

Clare peered out of the small window.

It was a cold window with a stone frame. As slender as she was, it was too small for her to push her entire body through. Yet in that moment, she was suddenly overcome with the urge to throw herself out.

It was her only exit.



Just like Olya had said, it was impossible for anybody else to get near the

tower. It was surrounded by a tall hedge, blocking one's view of the structure's base.

Shizuku walked beside the hedge, hoping there might be a gap in it somewhere, but all she came across was an iron gate and overgrown plants far taller than she was.

It was the second day since they'd arrived in the village, and Erik was in Olya's house working on the repairs.

Olya probably wouldn't have minded if Shizuku came along, but Shizuku didn't feel like nodding along in response to another prickly conversation yet again. Erik seemed perceptive enough to pick up on her hesitation, as he'd said, *"Summon Mea if you need anything,"* before leaving for Olya's house on his own.

For the first two hours, Shizuku read a book and worked on her summer vacation report, but in the end, she ended up taking a break and going to look at the tower. She just couldn't shake her curiosity.

A window only slightly larger than a person's head was set into the facade at what Shizuku presumed was the highest level of the spire. The remainder of the tower's construction was entirely gray bricks.

Was there some particular reason why the place was used as a lying-in tower?

Shizuku remembered how Olya had called it the tower of a cursed family. She couldn't help but shudder at the thought. She assumed that if people's souls didn't linger around after death, then ghosts didn't exist in this world, either. Still, the mention of a curse was rather ominous.

"I think that's enough scariness for one day," Shizuku muttered. "Maybe I should head back..."

She turned to return the way she'd come yet found herself glancing back up at the spire.

A young woman looked down through the window at the top. She was beautiful, with dark-blond hair hanging loosely at her shoulders; she seemed rather like a portrait. However, her face was devoid of expression, and her vacant eyes sent a shiver down Shizuku's spine.

That was when she heard an old man call out to her from behind.

“You’re not from around here, are you, young lady?”

This surprised Shizuku so much that she almost leaped into the air. She hurriedly glanced around and spotted a hunched old man standing directly behind her.

The young woman was gone when Shizuku looked back up at the tower. Shizuku pressed her hands against her chest to calm her racing heart.

“Interested in the tower, are you? It’s part of the Noy family’s bitter legacy. I wish we’d just embrace it, but people seem to be terrified of the curse.”

“What curse?”

The tower was visible from everywhere in the village. Was knowledge of its curse unavoidable, too?

Shizuku’s curiosity showed on her face, but the man’s eyes narrowed upon seeing her reaction.

“It’s not a scary tale, really. It’s just a story about people.”

He gazed at the tower for only a moment before unraveling the web of the past to Shizuku.

The village tower was built one hundred and twenty years ago.

At the time, the settlement was home to a man named Detos. He’d left the village in his youth to live in another area for work. When he eventually returned, he brought a fairly large sum of money with him. Apparently, a man he’d befriended at his workplace died of sickness and left him some empty land. A high-quality crystal cave was discovered on the property, and Detos sold the plot and came into a considerable sum.

Detos used that money to build himself a new house in the village, and he brought over a wife from the castle city. That woman, who carried the name Tzitseah Noy, hailed from a family with a long and distinguished history, but as she had no siblings to carry the family legacy forward, the name *Noy* was henceforth passed down through Detos’s family lineage, and the man himself became Detos Noy.

The tower in question was built a year later. Tzitseah, who'd been corrupted by a strange religion from the castle city, insisted that the spire be built to protect their family from some terrible misfortune.

Nobody knew how Detos really felt about this, but he ended up hiring several crafters from the castle city to build the tower his wife desired. One of them was a woman called Milsea, a beautiful young mage. She'd been invited to cast some preservation magic on the part of the tower that had been completed. As the days went on, Tzitseah grew skeptical of the relationship forming between her husband and Milsea. The day before the tower was finished, Tzitseah, convinced that Milsea was pregnant with her husband's child, poisoned the woman.

However, Milsea was a mage, and so she possessed some resistance to magical concoctions and did not die immediately.

Even as she coughed up blood, Milsea confronted Tzitseah about her actions. Detos took his wife and sought refuge in the tower to escape the furious woman.

Milsea beat on the door of the tower for hours before she finally breathed her last.

Detos hadn't even considered helping her. Instead, he'd listened as Milsea invoked an hours-long curse, trembling as he waited for her to die.

Once the night was over and Milsea fell silent, he opened the door to find her corpse—and the traces of a curse.

Written in blood on the door were the words *You shall lose every son that carries your blood.*

Eight months later, Tzitseah gave birth to the baby boy she'd been pregnant with at that time, and almost as soon as he entered the world, he passed away.

"Detos never had an affair with the mage woman who died. Milsea was never pregnant. She had merely been falsely accused and murdered by an unsettled woman."

"Th-that's horrendous..."

The misfortune Milsea had endured was beyond belief. It was understandable that she sought to invoke a curse after being poisoned for something she wasn't guilty of. Shizuku thought the husband should've done more. The whole ordeal had caused so much suffering.

As horrible as the story was, however, Shizuku still didn't understand how the tower had ended up becoming a lying-in tower.

When she asked the old man why that was, he smiled awkwardly.

"Tzitseah's first child died shortly after his birth. However, she delivered her second in the tower, believing that Milsea's curse wouldn't affect her there. Just as she'd hoped, her next child entered the world without trouble—a girl this time. It's not clear whether or not the tower helped her evade the effects of the curse. Still, she thought it was better safe than sorry, so the tower has been used as the Noy family's lying-in room ever since."

"Has anyone in the family given birth to a boy since then?"

"No. In the many years since, the Noy family has produced nothing but girls."

"Whoa..."

It sounded like the curse was real.

Even if it wasn't, why risk giving birth in any other place when the tower seemingly guaranteed a safe delivery? It made enough sense to Shizuku.

She let out a sigh, then gazed back up toward the tower.

The dark spire carried an eerie air to it, set beneath the overcast sky. It seemed to spite the world surrounding it.

Shortly after Shizuku returned to the inn, Erik came back, bringing Mea with him. He was even more tired than the previous day. In fact, it looked like more than simple exhaustion. The sight of her companion's glum face shocked Shizuku somewhat.

"How...did the repairs go?" Shizuku asked.

"I'm nearly complete, but the person with the corresponding communication ring won't be around for another three days, so we won't be able to check that it's fixed until then."

“Right. Does that mean we’re staying in this village until then?”

“Yes. I’m sorry for delaying you so significantly.”

“Oh, that wasn’t really what I was getting at. You can relax and take your time.”

Shizuku waved her hands in front of her face in an effort to reassure Erik it was fine. He answered with an uncomfortable smile, then pulled out a chair and sat across from Shizuku.

“Have you been studying all day?” he asked.

“I did go out for a walk at one point. Oh, and I heard the story about that tower’s curse.”

Shizuku told Erik the story she’d heard from the old man. When she finished, she added, “I’ve heard similar stories before, though.”

Erik perked up at that. “Are tales like that common in your world?”

“Yeah. I’ve never seen anything like it play out in real life, but there are plenty of stories where somebody incurs the wrath of a deceased person, and generation after generation of their descendants are tormented as a result.”

“Really? That’s funny, considering you don’t have magic.”

“Oh, you think that’s necessary?”

Shizuku understood why Erik assumed magic had to play a part. His world had no concept of ghosts, so the idea that a dead person could impact the living they resented didn’t register to him.

Shizuku briefly explained that people in her world knew nothing about the afterlife, and how people theorized that the dead could become ghosts or vengeful spirits and bring harm after they were gone.

Erik didn’t seem particularly surprised to hear this. He just nodded along. That said, his expression rarely changed, so it was hard to judge if he was surprised.

He sighed and picked up the cup of tea Shizuku had shoddily prepared for him.

“In the past, people here were pretty clueless about stuff like that, too.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Only spirit sorcerers, an extremely rare type of mage, knew the truth. Spirit sorcerers possess a heightened sensitivity to such things. Their skills gradually spread among mages and, from there, were disseminated among intellectuals. Even now, many ordinary people still don’t know the truth. That’s why in some rural areas, beliefs in ghosts and spirits persist.”

“Oh... Is this curse another lie that people still believe in?”

“I don’t think so. I heard a little about it today as well. From what I understood, I think that spell was placed by a living mage—if what the locals say is to be believed, that is.”

“Oh! You heard something about the curse, too?”

“Really, it’s more like I was forced to...,” Erik admitted. “What an awful situation.”

He let out a profound sigh. Apparently, Erik had been a witness to an altercation at Olya’s house when he’d been working earlier. The work itself hadn’t exhausted him. Rather, he’d worn himself out trying to stop the fighting.

“It sounds like Olya’s son wants to marry Clare Noy...a woman from the family that owns the tower. But as you’d expect, his mother is very much against the idea. She can’t bear the thought of her son marrying into a child-killing family.”

“Child-killing?!”

Why did the conversation jump to that all of a sudden?

Shizuku’s mouth went agape. Erik gave her a pained smile.

“Olya doesn’t believe in the curse. She claims that there are boys born to the family, but they’re thrown from the tower after they’re born, and that’s why the Noy family doesn’t let anyone near the spire.”

“What? That’s ridiculous.”

“I think there’s some truth in it.”

“Really?”

Shizuku’s mouth went agape again, even wider this time.

Who had come up with the idea of the family throwing newborns out of the tower? Erik could be cold, but even he wasn't so wicked as to come up with something so completely lacking in humanity. That was how it seemed to Shizuku, at least.

As if having read Shizuku's mind, Erik started to draw a circle on a piece of white paper. In the center, he added two eyes and a mouth. His picture looked like it was supposed to represent a baby, but it was too bad to say for certain. Shizuku got so distracted by the drawing that she nearly forgot about the story. Then Erik finally offered his thoughts.

"I'd understand if the family only gave birth to boys every now and then, but there's no curse that can stop people from having them altogether. I doubt the family would go as far as to kill every male, but I did wonder if they were concealing their deaths."

"Oh..."

It wasn't a custom that Shizuku could bring herself to sympathize with, but she was aware that infanticide was practiced in certain corners of her world, too. Some people would kill one twin and let the other live, or they'd murder a baby of an undesired sex right after it was delivered and pretend it was stillborn. Olya suspected that the Noy family was doing the same, while Erik wondered whether they were intentionally covering up the effect of the curse instead.

How many girls had been born in the Noy family in the hundred and twenty years since the curse was placed? And how many boys hadn't been? That question alone should have been enough to rouse suspicion among the villagers. Shizuku pictured the tower that made the locals so uneasy.

"Th-this is all so terrible..."

"It's important to not let it bother you. Every place has its issues, as does every person."

"Okay! I'm going to concentrate on studying instead!"

"That's more like it."

Erik drank the rest of his tea, then noticed the dictionary at the edge of the

table. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then pointed at it.

“I think I might make one, too,” he said.

“Huh?”

“A dictionary. One that connects words from my world with those of yours. That way, I should be able to understand a little of what you write, and you can grow accustomed to the letters we use here. A good idea, don’t you think?”

“Sure...”

Shizuku had found herself wishing she had a manual that translated the written language of this world into her own on a few occasions.

The creation of such a book would get a little complicated when it came to verb conjugations, but she still wanted to see what they could do. As a researcher, Erik specialized in writing systems. Shizuku had dictionaries that exhibited a few writing systems from her world. If there was anything she couldn’t understand, she could just ask Erik.

“Let’s do it! I’d love that!”

“Should we jot things down on paper, tie the sheets up with twine, then have it bound once it gets too large? That’s what I usually do. As for the order...let’s start with frequently used words, then adjust things later on.”

“Got it! We can begin with loose-leaf paper, then.”

“You know, the paper from your world is remarkably smooth.”

Shizuku took some unbound paper and a folder from her bag. As Erik flicked through the folder, he happened upon a cartoon Shizuku had drawn in the margin next to her notes.

“What’s this picture of?” he asked.

“One of my professors. He has a catchphrase that goes ‘But there’s a twist.’”

“What do you learn at school?”

“Uhhh... How to think, I guess.”

Erik’s eyes widened slightly, bringing a sheepish smile to Shizuku’s face.



Four days had come and gone since Shizuku and Erik had arrived in the village. As Shizuku strolled along with Erik, she bit into the stick-shaped snack she was holding in her hand.

“...It’s hard.”

She’d expected as much from its appearance but hadn’t anticipated it would be so firm. Ultimately, she quit trying to chew through it and unclenched her teeth. For some reason, it had made her gums hurt, and she didn’t even have any cavities.

“It’s weird how much of an effect being caught off guard can have on you,” she said.

“I’m just impressed that you’re able to bite into something you’ve never tried before with such force.”

“Isn’t that important? It’s like how a running start allows for a longer jump.”

“Don’t your teeth hurt?”

Shizuku ignored Erik’s question. She didn’t want to answer it.

Erik was supposed to be able to check if the communication ring worked the following day. The pair, who’d been spending their time studying while they waited, had ventured outside today for a break and change of scenery.

Shizuku had asked for something sweet in one of the shops in the village and wound up purchasing the light-brown candy stick. She’d assumed it was something deep-fried, but contrary to her expectation, it was closer to hard candy.

She wondered whether it was something she was supposed to lick, rather than chew. She pointed at the tower as she licked the vaguely sweet snack.

“Don’t you think they should add some more windows or expand it or something?”

“Perhaps there’s a reason they can’t. Maybe the whole tower will collapse if they fiddle with its design.”

“That’d only be true if it was built in a bizarre way. It’s a tower, not a Jenga puzzle.”

“The size of that window feels so deliberate. It’s odd.”

“Big enough for a baby to get through, but not an adult,” a young woman suddenly interjected. “That’s its purpose.”

Shizuku turned to find a skinny woman behind her. She had dull gray eyes and an unsettling smile on her face. She was pretty, but Shizuku sensed a peculiar frostiness from her that made her whole body go stiff.

“You’re travelers, aren’t you? Have you taken an interest in the tower?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Shizuku replied. “It’s just very striking.”

“It sure is. I hear that you can see it all the way from the main road.”

What a strange remark. The main road was less than an hour away on foot. Had this woman never ventured out of the village?

Erik took a step forward, slightly inserting himself in front of Shizuku, perhaps having picked up on her discomfort.

“Are you Clare?” he asked.

“Yes... I imagine someone must have told you about me. They love spreading rumors.”

She smiled calmly, but it didn’t reassure Shizuku in the slightest. She may have looked normal at first glance, but she exuded a kind of depraved feeling. Shizuku felt the same thing coming from the tower.

As Erik continued, he kept in front of his companion.

“I asked Darce about you.”

There was nothing threatening about his words, but his statement immediately wiped the expression from Clare’s face. Her fake smile peeled away, revealing the gloomy vacuousness beneath.

Shizuku was so startled that her own face stiffened. It only took Clare a moment to reapply her grin.

“I wonder what he said about me. Whatever it was, I suggest that you not take it too seriously.” Clare looked wounded as she spoke.

“Who’s Darce?” Shizuku whispered to Erik.

“Olya’s son,” he replied.

This had to be the woman Olya didn’t want her son to wed.

Shizuku was a little confused, but things made more sense now.

“In this village, the tower catches your eye whether you like it or not. So people make up whatever rumor catches their fancy. Not that I care much about what others say,” Clare stated.

Erik cast the woman a questioning look. “The spread of false rumors doesn’t bother you?”

“The truth is subjective, isn’t it? If you let silly things trouble you, there’ll be no end to them. I’m stuck in this village for the rest of my life either way...”

For a moment, Clare seemed like a world-weary old woman. She was the daughter of a cursed family. What kind of life had she known in this place? Shizuku fought down a sad sigh.

Other people’s views of you inevitably varied from your own to some extent.

Shizuku couldn’t strictly relate to Clare’s experience, but she’d grown up compared endlessly with her sisters.

On numerous occasions, she’d felt inclined to refute other people’s impressions of her, even though she knew there wasn’t any malice to them. However, she hadn’t bothered most of the time. As Clare said, once you fussed about every little thing that people thought about you, there was no end to it. Plus, Shizuku didn’t dislike her sisters. She told herself there was no need to worry about others’ opinions and moved on.

That said, everyone, including Shizuku’s parents, looked at her older sister first, then her younger sister, leaving Shizuku for last. This had always given her a tinge of sadness that she couldn’t shake.

When Shizuku reflected on her feelings, she wanted to apologize to Clare. She understood how challenging it was to tolerate people’s preconceived notions about you. Shizuku herself had been frightened by Clare’s presence based on what she’d heard from others. Now she was embarrassed for having felt that way.

Erik, still shielding Shizuku somewhat, looked at Clare and tilted his head slightly to one side. “You said that window is just the right size for a child, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Clare replied. “It’s almost like they measured it for that purpose.”

“That sounds as though you’re perpetuating the rumors. Or was your remark merely your own idle thought?”

“I wonder... If you’re interested in the tower, why not come and take a look? I have the key.”

This invitation was completely unexpected. Shizuku’s eyes widened. However, she realized Erik was bound to decline.

He was willing to accept requests that came his way, likely due to his good nature, but he also didn’t seem like the kind of person to pry into things that were none of his business. That might have been because he was admittedly uninterested in other people, but Shizuku didn’t find that aspect of his character especially cold. He was probably just a realistic person.

That was Shizuku’s impression of him anyway. So when he replied, “I’d love to, if it’s all right with you,” Shizuku nearly yelped. When Erik turned around and saw her reflexively clasping her hands against her mouth, he gave her a strained smile.

“You’re welcome to go back to the inn,” he told her.

Shizuku sensed he was worried that she’d be too frightened, so she shook her head, hands still covering her mouth. She was interested in seeing the tower she’d heard so much about. The idea of ghosts haunting the place was scary, but so long as the spire wasn’t haunted, she thought it would be fine. Hopefully.

Although she’d been the one to invite them, Clare looked stunned that the pair had accepted. When she locked eyes with Shizuku, Clare flashed a helpless grin.

“Okay... Follow me.”

After sparing a moment for a glance at the looming tower, Clare started to walk. That uneasy smile she’d given Shizuku had seemed the most natural

expression so far. Shizuku found that reassuring, although only somewhat.

As she followed Erik, she asked, “Why did you agree to this? Are you curious about the tower?”

“More the curse. I’ve never seen one that’s lasted for over a century. I find that a little intriguing.”

“You know they say curiosity kills the cat, right?”

The two followed Clare until they reached their destination. In the shadow of the great tower, Clare used the key she was holding to open the iron gate.

As Shizuku stepped apprehensively into the garden, she noticed it was smaller than expected. It was like a wide, donut-shaped passage with a tower in the middle. None of the plants had been tended to, and only a few spots of withered grass survived to cover the soil in patches.

The entrance to the tower waited on the far side from the gate. Once the three had circled around, they came to a stop before the door.

“It’s said that a woman was killed on this spot,” Clare announced nonchalantly.

Had Shizuku been ignorant of the curse, she might have jumped back. Instead, she inspected the surroundings, but nothing caught her attention.

Erik appeared to be doing the same. He looked around, his gaze never settling in one place for long.

“It’s not here,” he muttered to himself.

“What’s not?” Clare asked.

“The curse. I thought it’d be where the person who placed it died, but there are no spells here.”

“Curses are a type of magic?!” Shizuku exclaimed.

Clare’s expression suggested she was wondering the same thing.

“Magic is magic. You use magical power to place a curse. The difference is that curses can be imbued with whatever words or meaning the caster likes, unlike traditional spells, which abide by set conventions. That’s why I was

curious. Perhaps the curse is inside the tower.”

Shizuku boggled for a moment. “Huh? I thought this place became a lying-in tower specifically because the curse couldn’t affect those inside.”

“Supposedly,” Erik agreed. “However, religion played a role in the original construction of this tower, didn’t it? Maybe that will explain it.”

Clare turned toward the tower in an effort to conceal the stiff, nervous look on her face. “The original door from a hundred and twenty years ago was stained with blood and hexed lettering, but they replaced it.”

She pushed the wooden door with her hand. No sooner did it creak open than Shizuku sensed something that had accumulated within flow out. She swallowed anxiously.

Clare lit a candle by the entrance, then stepped inside. Erik followed, and Shizuku went after.

The place was gloomy, although not as dark as Shizuku had imagined. The light pouring in through the tower’s sole window reflected off a number of mirrors, which brightened up the place.

The three of them slowly began to climb the spiral staircase that ran along the walls.

“There’s only one floor at the top,” Clare explained.

Without any landings, Shizuku didn’t know how tall the spire was precisely. However, it felt like it was four or five stories. She felt the urge to cling to Erik’s clothes as she walked straight ahead, but she managed to fight it off.

The winding stairwell let out into a very small room that couldn’t have been more than three square meters. A bed stood in the center, covered with a pure-white sheet that looked a little grubby. Shizuku found it hard to breathe.

The room’s only window was square and measured around thirty centimeters across. A small woman would probably have been able to squeeze her head and one shoulder through, but that was all.

Shizuku stuck her head out. The door to the tower was directly below.

Once she’d pulled herself back in, Erik took the opportunity to do the same.

He peered straight down, then nodded and let out a thoughtful murmur.

“Did you spot anything interesting?” Clare asked.

“Not particularly. I can’t find any magical mechanisms or curses. Still, I encourage you to destroy this tower. It’s falling into disrepair. It’ll be unsafe before too long.”

“I know...”

A faint smile crossed Clare’s face, but her eyes suggested the expression was false. Erik had failed to find any proof of a curse that had presumably burdened the woman all her life, yet she didn’t seem pleased at all. She faced the window with a vacant look.



“You haven’t forgotten anything, have you?”

“Don’t worry! I’ve got everything with me!”

Shizuku adjusted her bag so that it was comfortable, then followed Erik, who’d been waiting in the hallway, out of the inn room that had been their home for five nights. After testing the communication ring, they’d be off for the castle city.

Shizuku caught the shape of the tower out of the corner of her eye through a hallway window.

Although Erik had insisted that there was no magic affecting the tower, Clare refused the suggestion to destroy it. She had an elderly mother to consider and lacked the funds to demolish the structure or the means to start a new life somewhere outside the village.

It didn’t sound like Clare had a particularly bright future awaiting her. Shizuku presumed that her only salvation was her boyfriend, the only man who hadn’t succumbed to the prejudices all the others had.

With their luggage in hand, Shizuku and Erik paid a visit to Olya’s house. While Erik confirmed the communication ring was operating correctly, Shizuku decided to wait in the corridor. Olya’s son, Darce, was leaning against the opposite wall, peering through the open door at the communication ring. When their gazes met, the two shared a smile.

“I heard you met Clare. Lovely girl, isn’t she? I’ve promised to marry her soon.”

“Really?”

Was that true? Clare hadn’t seemed at all excited for her approaching wedding. When Erik had mentioned Darce, she’d looked hurt.

There was such a discrepancy between Darce and Clare that Shizuku found herself furrowing her brow.

At that moment, however, she heard the voice of an unfamiliar man coming from the communication ring.

“Olya? Can you hear me?”

“I can. It’s completely repaired,” Olya replied.

“I’m glad to hear that. It’s been eight months, hasn’t it? I’m happy things are finally back to normal.”

Darce explained that the man speaking through the communication ring was a relative who worked as a craftsman in the castle city. He regularly did jobs in the castle itself, apparently.

As Shizuku listened to Darce, she felt relieved that Erik had successfully managed to repair the communication ring.

He rarely displayed magic in front of Shizuku and openly admitted that he wasn’t a very powerful mage.

From Shizuku’s perspective, though, he seemed like a perfectly reliable sorcerer. He’d been told that the communication ring would be challenging to repair, and yet he’d still managed it. As Shizuku stroked Mea, who was perched on her shoulder, a relieved smile formed on her face.

Now they could leave.

Olya spoke with her relative without any evident trouble for a while. Just as Shizuku thought to take a look inside the room, someone pushed her out of the way, almost making her teeter over.

When Erik caught sight of this, he frowned and hurried to catch her.

Darce, who'd shoved Shizuku aside in his hurry, shouted, "Mom! What did you just say?!"

"Don't be such a bothersome child, Darce. I only asked him if he knew any nice girls you could marry. It's about time you took a wife, don't you think?"

"But I already have Clare!"

"What are you talking about, you fool? You can't take a Noy woman as your wife!"

"You don't know anything about her! This curse nonsense is so stupid!"

Shizuku noted that parent-child disputes in this world were no different from those in hers. This was hardly the time for such a casual observation, however.

"I've had enough. If you refuse to listen, then I'm leaving!" Darce yelled.

As soon as the words left his mouth, he dashed out of the room and down the hall.

Erik scowled.

"This isn't good. We need to follow him."

"Huh?"

Erik led Shizuku by the hand as he took off at a run. They passed their luggage, which had been left on the dining table. Shizuku looked flustered but still forced her legs to work as she and Erik pursued Darce.

He was headed for the tower. That was where Clare would likely be.

For all her confusion, Shizuku tried to focus on running. Unfortunately, that became difficult after Erik's comment.

"I told a lie yesterday," he admitted with detectable distress.

"Wh-what...kind...of...lie?" Shizuku asked, sprinting as fast as she could. Erik, on the other hand, didn't sound exhausted at all.

"There is a curse. We can't let Clare see him in that tower."

"...Huh?"

There was a curse.

Erik's words bounced around Shizuku's head.

The curse that a woman had placed after being murdered due to a misunderstanding. The curse that had led to the loss of that baby boy.

Did Erik mean to say that it was all real?

Shizuku's chest felt tight, and her sides ached, but she kept moving.

The tower that climbed toward the cloudy sky stood waiting just ahead.

By the time the pair reached the spire's entrance, the door had already been flung open. Shizuku looked up, but nobody was watching from the small window. Erik was already rushing up the staircase. In a panic, Shizuku climbed two steps at a time to catch up.

"When...did...you...notice...the...curse?"

"When we first entered, but I was only certain once we reached the top floor. There was nothing I could do about it, though. That's why I..."

"That's why you told her to demolish it."

"Yes."

On reflection, Shizuku thought Erik was uncharacteristically audacious to suggest Clare destroy the tower. If the place wasn't cursed, it could have been left alone.

Shizuku wanted to swallow nervously, but she was too out of breath for it. A man and woman's argument traveled down from above. Erik quickened his pace.

Before she knew it, Shizuku had been left behind. She was clutching her knees by the time she reached the top floor, for they now refused to cooperate. She arrived just in time to see Erik seize Darce by the arm and twist it.

"What do you think you're doing? Get out of my way!"

"Taking your anger out on her won't help. If there's something you want to discuss, do so outside."

"Stay away from me! This has nothing to do with you!"

Clare stood rooted to the spot beneath the window, clutching her arm. Red

marks adorned her narrow wrists, likely remnants of when Erik had ripped Darce away from her.

Shizuku steadied her breathing, then moved in front of Clare to defend her. Mea chirped from her shoulder.

When Shizuku glanced at Erik, unsure what to do next, he gestured toward the stairwell with his chin. He seemed to wish for her to escort Clare outside.

Shizuku turned around. "Let's get out of here...," she said.

"Why? This is where I was born," Clare replied. The woman's expression rendered Shizuku briefly speechless.

A beguiling smile was plastered on her face. It was the last thing Shizuku expected to see, and it was so horribly abnormal that she thought it was chilling.

"Everyone despises this tower. I simply can't understand why."

Clare placed her hand over her mouth and laughed. And coupled with the red handprint on her wrist, the whole scene was truly eerie.

"What do you mean?" Shizuku pressed.

There was something strange going on. Really, it was *all* strange.

Gripped by a tight, suffocating feeling, Shizuku clutched her neck. It wasn't because of all the running.

Resisting the urge to retreat, Shizuku instead pushed closer to Clare.

"Let's go down," she said. "We can drink some tea and talk things through. I'm sure that'll be best."

Shizuku was frightened. Undeniably so. Knowing the curse was real made that terror worse. However, she understood this wasn't the time to give in. She held fast to that strong resolution.

She stared into Clare's eyes, even as they seemed to threaten to swallow her. Shizuku reminded herself that Clare and Darce were only human, just like her.

Plus, if that curse was a form of magic, then it was merely the work of another person as well.

Her fear wouldn't win. Shizuku was determined not to give in. It was too early to admit defeat.

Clare winced beneath Shizuku's unwavering gaze, yet her grin never faltered. She looked angry and on the verge of tears at the same time. The expression was proof that she had reached a breaking point.

If the curse was real, what kind of effect did it have on Clare?

Shizuku wavered apprehensively between wanting to ask Erik and acknowledging that this wasn't the time. Ultimately, she chose the latter, pushing close to Clare again.

"Clare, let's go down."

"We can't. I'm a child of this tower."

"There's a bad atmosphere up here. It can't be good for your mood."

No matter how many times Shizuku insisted they leave, Clare refused. Meanwhile, Darce hurled abuse at his wife-to-be all through it.

"Didn't your friend say this tower wasn't cursed yesterday?" Clare asked.

Shizuku frowned. "Well..."

"That means there's no magic here. Women from my family threw infant boys from the tower window after they were born."

The color drained from Shizuku's face. She was at a loss for words. The air came to a standstill, and all sound died save for Clare's cackling, which echoed through the tower.

Her words didn't feel real. Shizuku felt as though she'd stepped into a nightmare.

Darce was the one to interrupt her, speaking with astonishing calm. "Did my mom say something to you? I never thought you'd believe that old lie."

"It's not a lie," Clare insisted. "It's the truth."

Willing to say no more, the woman turned around and gazed out the tower's only window.

"I had an older brother once. Three years before I was born, my mother was

pregnant and shut herself away in here. That's why everybody in the village knows the truth. At one point, they couldn't hear my brother's cries echoing from the tower. He was thrown from this window and died. Didn't you know, Darce?"

"...What?"

Darce looked at his girlfriend with dismay and incredulity. Clare only laughed the way one would at a joke. Her eyes never left the window.

Erik frowned pensively, unsure whether to believe Clare's gruesome claim. More baffled than fearful now, Shizuku watched Clare.

"In the Noy family, we doom ourselves. We're so frightened of the curse that we flee to this tower, and if we give birth to a boy, we worry about invoking the curse so much that we kill our children ourselves. I wonder why nobody sees that act itself is the real curse... There's truly no hope."

Clare started pushing herself through the window. Her left shoulder squeezed out. She leaned back, almost as if she were reclining against the window frame.

If she truly wasn't being tormented by the curse but instead by her family's many sins, could she ever be saved?

Thoughts popped into Shizuku's head, but they vanished too quickly for her to grasp. What could she say that would get through to Clare? She racked her mind for an answer, and while she did, Darce spoke up.

"Even if that's true, you've done nothing wrong. There's no point in worrying about it."

"There's no point?!" Clare dug her right-hand fingers into the wall of the tower. Her left arm was stuck against the window frame. The nails caught a groove in the stones and bled. Clare continued to scrape her fingers against the rock as though she felt no pain.

"What about the lingering sorrow of the children who died right after they were born? What about the curse of the woman who was murdered? Is it okay for us to forget it all and pretend it never happened? Should nobody shoulder that guilt?"

Clare's behavior was so bizarre that nobody could think of anything to say.

She turned away and stretched her left arm out of the tower.

"I was born in this tower. I was cursed by sin from the moment I existed. Evil stares me in the face every moment of the day. This tower is my world. I'd never be forgiven were I to go anywhere else!"

Clare writhed about, trying to push her right hand through the window as well. Her shoulder caught in the frame, and the extra force twisted it out of shape. A brief moment later, Shizuku heard the unpleasant sound of Clare's shoulder joint popping out.

With her arm now hanging loose, Clare pushed it through. Both of her shoulders were crooked, but Clare refused to stop, even as her grazed arms bled. She kicked the floor a few times, then roared with laughter as she worked her way out.

The whole thing was so incomprehensibly bizarre that it left Shizuku aghast.

She knew this was a terrible scene, yet she couldn't look away.

"I'll never be able to escape from this tower," Clare said as she writhed about, struggling to fit herself through the window.

It was like watching a baby chick trying to break from its egg and enter the outside world.

"...Ah."

Shizuku suddenly emerged from the fog of her blank astonishment. She rushed to Clare and grabbed her by the waist.

"Stop...! You'll fall!"

Shizuku didn't know whether it was possible to fit through the window, but she fought against Clare regardless. She thought to pull the woman back inside outright, but that seemed like it'd injure her more.

Frantic, Shizuku clung to Clare's body. She was about to ask the two men behind her for help, but before she had the chance, someone grabbed her by the scruff of her neck.

“Shizuku, get Mea to help you.”

Someone spoke to Shizuku by name. Their words were strong and serene.

For a fleeting moment, Shizuku felt a surge of exhilaration coursing through her entire body. There was a warmth in her chest that could burn away all qualms. Her mind was almost blank, yet she still labored to do the best she could.

“Mea, please...break the window!” she cried to the small bird on her shoulder.

Mea’s powers surged.

Shizuku wrapped herself around Clare’s back, and while she held tightly, Erik dragged them back into the tower.

Shizuku, whose eyes were firmly shut, felt gritty particles strike her cheeks, leaving a sharp, stinging pain.

She didn’t know how long she kept like that, but eventually, Erik whispered in her ear.

“It’s over now.”

“Oh...”

Shizuku’s eyes came open hesitantly and took in the surroundings.

The small window and its wall were gone, revealing an unobstructed view of the village and the surrounding forest.

As Shizuku sat dazed, Erik explained:

“Your command was clearly too vague.”

“Ha-ha...”

The place hardly resembled a room any longer.

Mea had responded wholeheartedly to Shizuku’s command. Not only had the window been smashed into pieces, but half of the wall and ceiling had been blown off, too.

A breeze wafted through the tower. It was a true observatory now, and it

offered a magnificent view.

Shizuku tore her eyes from the vista, the evidence of her mistake, and examined Clare, who was still collapsed on the floor. She winced in pain from her twisted arms.

“Can Mea, uh...heal people?”

“No. It doesn’t seem like she can,” Erik said, his eyes flicking to the little bird. “I’ll take care of this, so just lend me your powers.”

Erik got to his knees and held his hand above Clare. Mea flew over to his shoulder. Before he could speak an incantation, however, Clare shot up and knocked his hand away.

“Don’t bother! I’m more concerned about what you’ve done to my tower...”

“I realize this was a rather slipshod way of going about it, but this tower does need to be demolished,” Erik responded.

“Without this place to act as a reminder, everybody will forget all our sins and all the people who were killed...,” Clare argued.

“But if it remains, there may be more crimes in the future. Why do you want to protect this tower so desperately? I thought you wanted to get away more than anyone else.”

Having said that, Erik returned to his incantation.

Clare’s lips quivered. Erik’s challenging question may as well have been in another language for how difficult it was for her to process.

She remained put, gritting her teeth in an apparent attempt to hold something in for a short while. In time, she looked down at her bloody fingernails, then at the sky. She had to squint against the bright light. Tears gathered in her eyes.

“But...my brother,” she began, but she was quickly interrupted by a new voice.

“What’s going on here?” the intruder asked. “How did the tower blow apart all of a sudden?”

Everyone turned toward the stairwell.

The door had been flung open. When Shizuku saw the man standing there, her jaw dropped.

Clad with a sword belt and crossing his arms, the tall man took in the four people with an amused expression.

When he spotted Shizuku, he looked like he wanted to whistle with joy, but he didn't say a word. Instead, he cast a sneer at Clare.

"Yo. I guess this is the first time we've met, isn't it—Little Sis?"

"Huh?" several people spoke at once, unable to grasp what was happening, Shizuku among them. She felt the sudden urge to flee.

The man had red hair and green eyes, and his muscular build exuded an air of invincibility. He was the one man Shizuku had hoped to avoid the most—a mercenary named Tarkis.

"This is too much of a coincidence..." Shizuku had thought they'd done a fair job of shaking him off. She'd certainly never expected to run into him in a place like this.

Strangest of all, he claimed to be Clare's brother.

Shizuku pulled a face at Erik, but he was too absorbed in healing Clare to look at Tarkis. The mercenary had cast Shizuku an unpleasant smile when he first saw her, but now he'd turned to face Clare.

"Little Sis'...? What are you talking about?"

"I'm your older brother. What else could I have meant? I was nearby, so I thought I'd take the opportunity to meet you."

Everyone but Erik was noticeably mystified by the man's claim, Clare most of all. She stared at him wide-eyed.

"Skeptical, aren't you? Here, I have this."

Tarkis unfastened a pendant he wore around his neck and offered it to the distraught woman. Shizuku didn't know what it was, but she could tell that it meant something to Clare. Her expression shifted visibly.

“Is this...?” she whispered. “Are you telling the truth...?”

“Yep. Our mother gave it to me.”

“You weren’t killed?”

“Nope. I was put up for adoption as soon as I was born. Our mother thought the curse might kill me if I remained a part of the Noy family. I think she planned on telling you, but it seems like she kinda lost her wits before she got the chance. I checked in on her before heading to the tower, but most of what I said didn’t get through to her.”

Clare’s face fell. Shizuku had heard that the woman had an aging mother to look after. Evidently, the situation was a little more complicated than that.

Shizuku kept quiet, knowing this didn’t concern her.

There was a mixture of hope and distress in Clare’s eyes as they darted around aimlessly.

If Tarkis truly was her brother, that knowledge should have eased some of her anguish.

She didn’t seem ready to accept it, though. She shook her head gently.

Tarkis awkwardly smiled as he walked over to her and placed his big hand on top of her head.

“I have work to do, and I’m not considered part of the Noy family, so I can’t stay in this village. But try not to let things trouble you too much, okay? You should live the life *you* want to. Leave this depressing tower behind.”

Tarkis looked up at the sky.

Claire hesitated, but eventually, she did the same.

A gentle breeze blew through the air, washing away a darkness that had lingered for a hundred and twenty years.



“Okay! Time to flee!”

“It’s a little funny how you say that with such an optimistic smile on your face.”

“That guy was the mercenary I told you about!”

Following Tarkis’s arrival, everyone had descended the tower and moved to Clare’s house instead.

Her mother, whose memories had become hazy in old age, was only able to give vague answers, but she cheerfully smiled when Tarkis held her by the hand supportingly. When Clare saw this, it appeared to prove to her that he genuinely was her brother.

“I’m sorry for getting so worked up,” she’d said, apologizing to Erik and Shizuku.

Although some of Clare’s other worries had been put to rest, it seemed like there was still a bit of bad blood between her and Darce. Time would tell whether they’d be able to put that behind them or not.

Shizuku had found an opportunity to drag Erik out into the corridor and tell him about Tarkis.

“If he captures me, I’ll be sold to the aristocracy and have my skin peeled off. And then they’ll hang me upside down and tear me to shreds. I’m sure of it.”

“I haven’t imparted some warped view of the nobility on you, have I? I’m beginning to regret a few things I’ve said.”

“Forget about that. We need to go and fetch our luggage so that we’re ready to run under the cover of night.”

“It’s not even noon yet.”

It was a ludicrous conversation. However, they did leave without telling Clare and the others, returning to Olya’s to pick up their effects. Olya wished to ask them about what had happened, of course, but the pair bade her good-bye and hurried off. They made their way to the stable to retrieve their horses next. As they walked, Shizuku asked Erik something that had been troubling her for a while.

“Is it okay that we left the curse as is? We didn’t really tell Clare...”

“It’s fine. You destroyed the tower.”

“/ did that?!”

“What are you talking about? An assistant demon’s master is responsible for their actions. If that worries you, then you need to rethink how you issue your orders,” Erik replied. “That said, things worked out well enough.”

“You think so?”

“I do.”

Erik looked over his shoulder at the tower. Even from a distance, it was obvious that the top floor was on the brink of collapse.

“It wasn’t the poisoned woman who placed that curse. Well, it could have been, but it’s not the curse from the story. That top floor of the tower serves as a magic ring.”

“What? What does that mean...?”

“The magic was cast when the building was still being constructed. It could be the craftspeople who built it who were responsible, or perhaps it was the religious sect the lady was obsessed with. The magic isn’t particularly potent, which makes it hard to notice. It gradually erodes the minds of those inside, leaving them obsessed with the room. Women who’ve recently given birth, or are about to, are particularly vulnerable because of the emotional and physical strain they’re under. Clare’s slightly odd behavior was likely one manifestation of that curse. Perhaps it explains her mother’s condition, too.”

Shizuku was astounded to discover the true nature of the curse. This explained why Erik hadn’t wanted Darce to go up the tower when he was in such an emotionally heightened state. The place eroded people’s sanity.

“Ugh... So the poisoned mage really had nothing to do with it, then,” Shizuku said.

Erik shook his head, however. “She probably did. I suspect she attempted to conceal the magic at work. Maybe staying outside the tower until she passed was her way of getting revenge. She was trying to convince the man and woman that the inside of the tower was safe, when in reality, it was the opposite. I might be overthinking it, though.”

Erik gave his theory nonchalantly, but Shizuku felt a chill run down her spine all the same.

She envisioned the poisoned mage spouting curses as she dug her nails into the tower door and the woman watching from the top-floor window, waiting for her to die. She wondered how badly each of them wished for the other's demise. They were so broken.

Shizuku shook her head to clear her mind.

"Shouldn't you have told Clare the truth, then? We had a pretty close call."

"If I told her the magic was slowly wearing away her sanity, it'd just make matters worse. I hoped to convince her to demolish the tower, but ultimately, you did it for her. Things worked out well enough."

Once the pair reached the stable, they got on their horses and left the village.

After a short ride to the main road, they finally resumed their trip toward the castle city. The top of the tower still peeked over the trees. It looked tiny from this distance.

They couldn't see the destroyed upper floor, but the damage was surely there. Clare was free.

As Shizuku watched the vast sky, her thoughts turned to Clare.

If the tower itself was able to distort people's minds to such an extent, some women might have thrown their children out of the window. A few might have been put up for adoption like Tarkis, too. Shizuku could say that for certain.

Still, the cycle was at an end. The living would create their own family trees. That thought brought Shizuku a little relief.

Sighing, she peered down the road ahead. Even if she never saw any of the people she'd met again, she hoped that their futures were peaceful. That was all she could do.

5. The Forbidden Dream



“We lack personnel. We could really use some proficient mages to help us.”

He spoke in a dignified way, but anyone who listened carefully detected the tinge of anxiety simmering beneath the surface.

The king, who reclined in his leather chair, looked around at his kneeling men.

“Anneli’s downfall was its own doing, but now Kisk, one of the Great Nations, seeks to intervene in Rozsark, the very country that attacked Anneli. However, Rozsark is one of the continent’s foremost producers of steel. If it were to fall under Kisk’s control, the balance of power in the major eastern nations would shift drastically. What’s more, the king of Kisk’s younger sister is lurking about. Our nation must act swiftly to acquire a means of defense.”

These words of warning were intended to instill a shared sense of urgency in all gathered before the king. A solemn atmosphere permeated the room. Several individuals nodded to signal their agreement.

“The matter has been entrusted to our royal chief mage, Idos. Begin your preparations as quickly as you can and be extremely careful not to let Farsas learn of what we are planning. That nation loves to consider itself the master of all things magic.”

The king rose to his feet slowly, turned, and exited the chamber. Those who were left remained still, even after they heard the door close behind him.

They’d kept frozen while their ruler spoke, too. Perhaps that’s why they failed to notice one man among them who did not act as the rest of the room had upon hearing the king’s intentions.

This particular individual had a very different plan in mind.



Shortly after they'd rejoined the main road, Shizuku noticed that Erik was scowling as he rode alongside her.

The small bird on Shizuku's shoulder looked behind them and chirped. When Shizuku turned, she saw a lone horseman in the distance hurrying toward them.

"Huh? Is that...?"

"It must be."

"L-let's go!"

Shizuku gathered up her reins, rattled, but Erik raised a hand to stop her.

"That's dangerous. You never rode a horse before arriving on the continent, right?"

"But..."

"We'll figure something out. I'll make sure no one skins you alive."

"That's not especially comforting if that's all you can promise!"

"I thought that's what you were worried about."

"It's just one of countless things I'd like to avoid!"

As the pair bickered, the third rider came close enough for them to make out his face. Shizuku glanced at him, pale. It was Tarkis.

The mercenary's steed swiftly overtook the pair. Once he was ahead of them, he slowed, blocking the path.

"It wasn't nice of you to leave without saying good-bye, Shizuku," he said with a wicked smile on his face.

"I don't remember being on first-name terms with you!" Shizuku snapped back. "I don't know what gave you the idea we were friends!"

"..."

Shizuku noticed that Erik was giving her an astonished look. She waved her hands in front of her face.

"Oh, it's different with you," she said in an effort to reassure him. "You're

helping me on my journey, after all.”

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?” Tarkis asked, stunned.

“Sometimes, you’re so daring that it defies understanding.” Erik’s expression had already returned to his usual stone-faced one.

Shizuku met both comments with a dry smile.

It was standard to refer to people by their first name in this world, but unfortunately, she found it strange when people she barely even knew addressed her by her first name.

Erik glanced at the wary Shizuku, then at Tarkis. It would’ve been generous to call the mercenary’s gaze friendly. His eyes, which were fixed on Shizuku, noticeably lacked warmth.

“Is it okay for you to travel so soon after finding yourself a younger sister?” Erik questioned.

“‘Finding himself a younger sister’?” Shizuku parroted. She detected an implication in his choice of words.

Tarkis raised an eyebrow and laughed.

“If I hung around for too long, she’d start to see me for who I really am. Plus, it’s taken me long enough to find you two. I want to know what you’re going to get up to next.”

“Who you really are...?” Shizuku whispered. “Does that mean...?”

“Yeah. This guy isn’t Clare’s brother. His arrival was far too good to be true.”

Shizuku boggled at Tarkis in stunned silence. He grinned, which suggested that Erik’s deduction was correct. Upon emerging from her shock, Shizuku grew furious over the deception.

“Why did you trick her?”

“Hmm... I guess I did trick her, huh? But the part about her having a brother is true. He passed away a few days ago from an illness.”

“What?”

“He was the one who asked me to go to that village. Would you have

preferred I left that lady be?” There was such confidence in Tarkis’s tone.

The pendant was gone from his neck. Had he given it to Clare? Shizuku blinked absently.

Erik, on the other hand, didn’t seem interested in hounding Tarkis about that matter. Instead, he posed the man a different inquiry.

“What do you want?”

“Haven’t you worked it out yet? I assume Shizuku told you about me.”

“You offered to take her to Farsas, didn’t you? I’m sorry to disappoint, but I’m not naive enough to jump for joy and fall for that offer.”

“But it’d make your journey so much quicker. I didn’t expect you to cross the mountains into Candela. If it hadn’t been for that dying brother’s request, we never would’ve run into each other. Apparently, Kisk plans to intervene in response to Anneli’s defeat. Seems like you made a good call avoiding the western highway.”

The mention of all these different countries confused Shizuku for a moment, but she soon remembered that Anneli was a nation that had fallen after battle and the Great Nation of Kisk was home to that dangerous younger sister of the king. Shizuku tried to picture the map of the continent to make sure she wasn’t mistaken.

Erik, meanwhile, ignored Tarkis’s comment about the turbulent state of affairs and carried on speaking in the same blunt manner.

“Shouldn’t you head in that direction, then? You’re a mercenary—this could be your chance to get rich.”

“I try not to get involved in battles with clear outcomes. If you side with the victors, people think poorly of you, and siding with the losers means risking your life. No small country will stand a chance against Kisk.”

“Then what benefits do you see in getting involved with Shizuku?”

“I don’t know yet, but my intuition is telling me to give it a go. I feel like she could be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You think the same, right, mage?”

Shizuku glanced at Erik, unsure how to respond. Then her jaw dropped.

The look he was giving Tarkis was so cold that it threatened to turn their surroundings to ice. Shizuku had never seen him like this before.

“Erik...?” she called, but her meek word proved too quiet for him to hear.

He likely would’ve caught it were he calm. He paid such close attention to her, after all. Presently, he was focused solely on Tarkis, however.

“A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity? What exactly do you think you’re capable of? If your only intention is to elevate your status, this is not the way to go about it.”

“You’re an unfriendly sort, aren’t you? I might be alone, but I can do plenty when I put my mind to it.”

“That sounds like delusion. It’s when people convince themselves that they’re capable of doing things alone that they make the biggest mistakes.”

Erik’s ruthless dressing-down left Tarkis looking flummoxed. Rather than entertain the discussion, the mercenary smiled at Shizuku, who was struggling to follow the pair’s exchange.

“So?” he said. “Wanna come with me? You’re making the journey either way. It might as well be comfortable for you.”

“Uh...”

Shizuku wasn’t able to refuse him right away, although not because she was captivated by the way he offered his hand. Rather, she was shocked.

The Erik she knew possessed an insatiable appetite for learning and was surprisingly proactive. Although he insisted that he harbored no interest in others, he never showed any sign of abandoning those in need. He was an unjaded, well-intentioned person who had his own unique way about him. He considered what Shizuku wanted and encouraged her to make it happen.

She struggled to reconcile the fact that the individual sitting before her, who’d callously highlighted the limits of Tarkis’s capabilities, was that same person.

Shizuku turned to look at Erik, searching for the right words.

His deep-blue eyes usually felt so sincere, but they now looked distraught for

some reason. Without thinking, Shizuku began to speak.

“Erik, I...”

She wanted to say something, but she didn’t know what. While she tripped over her own statement, he gave her a cold—no—wry smile. One tinged with resignation.

“I don’t mind. You can go with him.”

“Arrrrgh!” she exclaimed. “Stop!”

She had no trouble figuring out what to say this time, which was a surprising relief.

Her voice cracked, but she chose to ignore that. She held her hands out in front of her as though to stop the idea from reaching her, and Erik’s eyes widened.

“Don’t say stuff like that. It makes me sad. Please don’t leave me. I know I’m a nuisance. I’m ignorant, a little naive, and clueless when it comes to assistant demons...but I want you to stay with me until the end. Please.”

When Shizuku finished saying her piece, she bowed her head low toward Erik. Her mother had always told her that if she really wanted something from another person, she should prove her sincerity. That was the way the Minase sisters had been raised, and Shizuku abided by that principle. Some of her friends had described Shizuku’s simple and honest demeanor as self-effacing, but she didn’t see the issue with that.

Shizuku tried to be as genuine as she could to ensure Erik would continue to accompany her on this journey.

In the moment, it seemed the natural and normal thing to do.

Her head wasn’t lowered for long before the young mage who’d been traveling with her let out a sigh.

“I’m sorry. I was in the wrong. You can look up now.”

“Erik...”

“I really lost it there for a moment. I apologize for troubling you. It’s usually

the other way around.”

“Don’t worry about it! I do my best in my own way, so you’re welcome to lean on me whenever you need to.”

“I know. Thank you.”

Shizuku beamed, relieved that the atmosphere between them had returned to normal. Erik answered her with his own smile, then faced Tarkis.

“Do you get it now? She’s not coming with you.”

The mercenary shrugged. Shizuku remembered he had a longsword attached at his waist and bit her lip nervously. Mea, who was on her shoulder, picked up on her master’s anxiety and let out a quiet chirp.

Surprisingly, Tarkis laughed. “Fine. But if you ever change your mind, let me know. Like they say, there’s a time and place for everything. You never know when you’ll need a guy like me on your side.”

He casually waved to Shizuku, then took hold of his horse’s reins. In moments, he was galloping away, vanishing down the road.

Shizuku waited with bated breath as she watched his horse. Once Tarkis was entirely out of sight, she felt a profound relief wash over her.

“I’m glad he’s gone,” she said.

“I know. Still, he’s heading the same way as we are. We might run into him again.”

“I sure hope not...,” Shizuku replied lethargically, which brought an awkward grin to Erik’s face.

She felt like his smile looked more bittersweet than usual, but perhaps she was imagining things. Not only was he four years older than her, but he’d also grown up in a different world and walked a different path. She obviously couldn’t know everything about him. Regardless, she was grateful that he’d agreed to make this journey with her.

Shizuku hummed. “I wonder if they’ll demolish that tower properly.”

“They might just keep it off-limits for a little while. Tearing it down will be

costly.”

“Wait... Wasn’t it connected to some sort of religion? There might be similar ones all over the place.”

“I can’t deny that’s a possibility, but it was built over a century ago. Who knows what’s become of its possible siblings?”

Shizuku was relieved that she and Erik were back to chatting as they usually did.

Twelve days later, they reached Candela’s castle city.



Candela’s castle city was bigger than any town Shizuku had seen so far and buzzed with activity.

Most of the stone buildings that lined the city’s main street were over five stories high, and almost reminiscent of the downtown high-rise areas Shizuku was accustomed to back home. The paths outside the city were alive with people riding by horse and carriage, and they teemed with travelers. Children kept approaching Shizuku and Erik, trying to sell them baskets of fruit or flowers.

When Shizuku saw the dark-gray castle looming in the distance, she threw her hands into the air in a show of astonishment. She knew it was a stupid way to react, but it was a *real* castle, just like the ones she’d seen in picture books as a kid. As she stood there frozen to the spot, Erik unsurprisingly questioned her with a serious look on his face.

“What are you doing?”

“Expressing how excited I am.”

“I didn’t realize that kind of reaction was customary in your world.”

“It might be somewhere. But probably not.”

“So you’re just strange, then.”

“Think before you speak, will you?!”

The pair stabled their horses and found an inn to stay at.

With that done, they had a decision to make. They could either leave the city on the main road heading northwest when it was time to go or try to gain access to the castle city's transit ring.

The transit ring would be quicker, but a war had broken out nearby, making the situation unstable. Erik and Shizuku would be subject to harsh checks if they wanted to transport themselves abroad from the castle city.

Continuing northwest along the road was the easier option, but according to Erik, they'd have to traverse a dangerous region along the way.

"For now, we should just remain here and see if we can get approval for the transit ring."

"I'll stay positive, but I'm not getting my hopes up," Shizuku said as she opened her notebook inside their room in the inn. "Now, let's do some studying."

She and Erik were working on creating a dictionary that translated words from her world's languages to words from his.

Erik examined the entries that Shizuku had recorded.

"Kanji characters are interesting, aren't they?"

Erik was a man who researched writing systems. The construction of words undoubtedly fascinated him. He'd asked Shizuku about the similarities between English and German and everything to do with word structure, be it prefixes, suffixes, or the origins of the words themselves. He'd also questioned her on what particular kanji characters signified. Presently, he was scribing some notes on these topics while working on the dictionary.

He had Shizuku write down some kanji characters that contained the radical for *water*. When he saw them, he hummed in admiration.

"Oh. That character's used in the word *to pour*, so that's why it's a water-related word. Is it an ideogram?"

"I don't know much about that kind of thing, but you can't really say it's an ideogram just because it has the water radical in it. There are actually some kanji that are only used to represent a specific sound, rather than a particular

meaning.”

“I see. Still, I suppose the radicals can help you guess what a character means.”

Erik stared at the characters, pressing the back of his pen against his temple. Then Shizuku pointed at one of the characters and laughed.

“That one’s my older sister’s name. *Umi*, meaning ‘sea.’”

“I suppose you did mention you had an elder sister. Were you all given names with a shared theme?”

“Our last name... Our family name is *Minase*, meaning ‘shallow water,’ so that’s where the inspiration came from. My younger sister’s name is *Mio*, which means ‘waterway.’”

“And *Shizuku*?”

Hearing Erik speak her name momentarily startled Shizuku, but she gave a clumsy smile when she realized he was inquiring about the kanji’s meaning. She wrote two kanji characters on the piece of paper in front of her, then pushed it toward him. She poked one of the characters with her pen.

“This is the character for the original word I get my name from—*shizuku*, which means ‘droplet.’ But I write my name with *this* character, which is also pronounced *shizuku*.”

“That one doesn’t have a water radical in it.”

“No. It’s the kanji for *rain* and the kanji for *below*, sandwiched into one. *Under the rain*.”

The truth was, when Shizuku first learned to write her name, something about it secretly bothered her. Both of her sisters’ names contained the kanji radical for *water*, but hers didn’t. Why hadn’t her parents written *Shizuku* the usual way so she wouldn’t be left out?

Now that she was older, though, she was glad for her parents’ choice. She’d grown fond of her name. It was only when she compared herself with her sisters that she began to feel unsure. Such was the case with various aspects of her identity.

Erik examined the two kanji characters. Then he looked at the one that Shizuku used for her name and nodded.

“I like it. Very pretty.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku tensed. She knew he was talking about her name, but his casual compliment made her shy. Her heart felt like it was soaring. Not wanting to reveal her excitement, she pressed her hands against her burning cheeks.

“Nobody’s ever said that about my name before. You surprised me,” she admitted.

“Really? I think it’s a perfectly normal thing to say.”

“What we consider ‘normal’ is different, though, isn’t it? I’ve never really been complimented before.”

Not only was it rare that anyone said anything nice about her name, but Shizuku had also barely ever received any compliments about herself. Her sisters occasionally showed some appreciation for her, but that was it.

When Erik heard this, he looked bewildered.

“Why not? I don’t think you have any obvious flaws.”

“That’s exactly it... My flaws might not stand out, but I don’t have any noticeable strengths, either. There’s nothing strikingly unique about me, I guess.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

Erik’s straightforward reply left Shizuku struggling for words. She didn’t want to say yes; it’d be disrespectful to all the other people who were in the same boat. However, she knew from experience how hard it was for unremarkable people like her to attract any attention.

Shizuku laughed, trying not to allow the bitterness she’d kept under wraps for so many years to seep out.

“Not necessarily, but when nothing about you is remarkable, nobody notices you, for better or worse. Even if you manage to make somebody pay attention,

it doesn't change the fact that you're uninteresting."

She didn't want to blame her life in the shadows on how bright her sisters shone. Shizuku had only herself to blame. She'd failed to define herself as a person. Even in a different world, that fact remained unchanged.

Shizuku forced a smile and stared at her notebook.

"You exist regardless of whether people notice you," Erik casually remarked.

Shizuku looked up. She didn't get the impression that he was trying to console her. From his perspective, he was stating a fact.

A smile suddenly spread across Shizuku's face.

"You're right... I'm sorry."

The two of them returned to focusing on the words on the many pages before them. That was how their first night in Candela's castle city was spent.



Candela was founded two hundred and twenty-two years ago, after Delas, a state to the east under the control of Mensanne, fell.

The king presiding over Delas at the time had suffered a mental decline with each passing year. He'd executed vassals and plunged the royal court into terror.

Eventually, a man from a low-ranking noble family, who possessed no title of his own, objected. He claimed to be a descendant of the previous king's illegitimate child. His affable demeanor and eloquent speech won him allies. Once he'd raised an army, he conquered Delas.

That man became the founding ruler of Candela, and his lineage persisted throughout the generations. The incumbent ruler, King Aurow, was the seventh generation to lead the nation.

Aurow, who recently turned sixty-three, was slightly stubborn and narrow-minded, but he'd still stewarded Candela for thirty years without much trouble.

People had grown accustomed to living in peace. However, the country had undergone a transformation across its two hundred and twenty-two years, despite its flawless facade.

“It’s a real castle. This almost makes me want to cry.”

“Were there no castles in your world? Wait, that can’t be right; the word exists in your language.”

“We have them, but in my country, they’re very much Japanese-style ones. They have golden fish on the roofs and stuff.”

“Why fish?”

“Who knows? Maybe because they’re cute?” Shizuku offered a theory without giving it much consideration, then returned to gazing at the castle.

It was noon on their second day in Candela. After Shizuku had asked if they could take a closer look at the castle, the two had taken a walk to the castle gates.

Military guards stood stationed before the entrance, and the gates were shut. Nevertheless, seeing the castle at such close proximity was enough to inspire awe in Shizuku.

It was easy to assume that this world’s culture matched that of early modern Europe, but that didn’t always seem to be true.

The rooftops of Candela’s castles were not pointy like one might expect. Instead, all but one was domed, and most were made of glass.

While the castle resembled a classic storybook castle from afar, it seemed more like an example of modern architecture up close. The one thing that differentiated it from the masses of high-rise structures Shizuku was used to, though, was its primarily stone construction.

Shizuku was probably the only person on the entire continent who found the combination of its historic-looking walls and modern design a little bizarre.

Suddenly, she remembered her phone. She’d almost forgotten it even existed. She felt a slight urge to take a photo.

It wasn’t the picture itself she wanted, but a record of this scenery.

Deciding to go with a different approach, Shizuku retrieved a memo pad from a pouch on her hip and took a few steps away from the castle gates. She set to work on drawing a rough sketch of the structure’s exterior.

Erik walked over to see what she was doing.

“I didn’t know you were good at drawing.”

“I wouldn’t say I’m *good*, exactly. I’m just relatively quick at tracing things or sketching stuff that’s already in front of me.”

“That’s amazing. You’ve got a good grasp of the castle’s form.”

“I thought I could keep this drawing as a memento from our trip. Like Kiyoshi Yamashita.”

“Yamashi-what?”

It would have been a nuisance to explain that Kiyoshi Yamashita was a Japanese artist who created art depicting the many places he visited during his travels around Japan, so Shizuku just concentrated on her drawing. About ten minutes later, her small, rough sketch of the castle was complete. She passed it to Erik, who seemed very interested, then stretched her arms in the air.

After gazing at the drawing intently for a few moments, Erik said, “How interesting.” He sounded almost impressed. “I’m tempted to ask that you draw some spell diagrams for me.”

“‘Spell diagrams’? Are they some sort of magic thing?”

“You use them to show and explain to other mages what kind of spell or mechanism you’re using. I’m quite poor at drawing them. Whenever I try, people complain that my diagrams don’t make sense.”

“R-really?”

Shizuku didn’t know how to respond. She gave Erik a forced, tense smile.

It was impossible to tell what somebody’s strengths and weaknesses were. Shizuku’s only point of pride was her sense of direction. Countless other people were better at drawing. Perhaps as a result of her tendency to be overshadowed by her sisters, Shizuku wasn’t sure how good she had to be at something before she could be dubbed proficient. Whenever someone praised her talents, she received it half-heartedly.

On the contrary, she possessed a relatively clear grasp of her weaknesses, her main one probably being her lack of proficiency with ball sports. This ineptitude

left her with nothing but terrible memories of physical education at school. When she moved on to college, hoping she'd never have to deal with such things again, she found herself forced to play tennis and volleyball. Needless to say, she'd made a show of herself.

"Don't worry about it," Shizuku said in an effort to reassure him. "I mean, I'm terrible when it comes to spiders and snakes."

"That seems a little different," Erik replied.

The groan of heavy iron brought an end to their discussion. As the pair turned to look, they saw the gates slowly opening inward.

A number of soldiers and official-looking people walked out, nodded at one another, then dispersed in their respective directions. One member of the group, however, spotted Shizuku and Erik and approached.

When Shizuku noticed the soldier moving straight for them, the color drained from her face.

"Sh-should we make a run for it?" she asked Erik.

"Why? We haven't done anything."

"But he's coming over to us! What if he skins us alive...?"

"Enough of that."

Shizuku wanted to insist that this was still a very real threat, but she chose to keep that to herself. Before she knew it, the soldier was too close to flee from. Nervousness flooded Shizuku, but the stone-faced soldier didn't spare her so much as a glance. His attention was focused entirely on Erik.

"Are you a mage?" he questioned.

"You could say that," Erik responded.

"Then take this. It's a notice from the castle," the man said haughtily.

He thrust one of the dozens of papers he was carrying at Erik, then immediately walked off. Shizuku found the whole thing pretty anticlimactic. Erik inspected what he'd been given before summarizing the contents.

"Seems they're looking for mages. They need people who are good at spell

configurations, so that's what they'll examine candidates on... It's only for a few days' work, and those who make the cut will be rewarded handsomely."

"Ohhh. A part-time position, huh? I didn't expect the castle to do stuff like that."

Shizuku didn't know why, but people seemed to know that Erik was a mage from his clothes. It wasn't like he had a long robe trailing behind him or a cape over his shoulders, though. What else could have given it away?

Before Shizuku had the chance to ask him, Erik muttered, "This might be useful."

"What do you mean?"

"The reward won't necessarily just be money and valuables. It sounds like I could earn preferential treatment within Candela. If all goes well, they might allow me to use the transit ring."

"What? I know this is a great opportunity, but you'll be working inside the castle... A-are you sure you'll be okay?" Shizuku asked hesitantly.

Erik had admitted that he wasn't the most powerful mage. Would he be able to pass the screening process?

The young man smirked awkwardly at Shizuku's nervous question. He showed her the notice, pointing at a particular line.

"Look at this. It sounds like the emphasis is on spell configuration. I should be able to manage that. If they told me to fight a demon, that'd be another story."

"I—I see..."

Shizuku had never asked what role spell configurations played in magic specifically, but she gathered they were related to assembling one's magical power to execute a spell. To Shizuku, it sounded like a computer programming term. Still, Erik was academically inclined. He undoubtedly possessed some proficiency in the subject. After all, he'd been capable enough to repair a complicated magic implement.

Shizuku nodded, having mostly persuaded herself. Erik, on the other hand, crossed his arms and looked up at the sky.

“The truth is,” he began, “I’ve always avoided this sort of work because I’m so bad at it...”

“You are?!”

“Not spell configurations. I mean spell diagrams,” he explained. “But now...”

He glanced at Shizuku, forcing a faint smile. As she realized what he was about to say, her jaw hung open.

“Wait, you’re not... You want *me* to help?”

“Yeah. Let’s see if you can draw one.”

Shizuku pointed at herself, eyes wide. She’d stumbled backward into a new job.



“They’re recruiting mages?” the woman asked.

As she read over the notice, her red lips curled up at the corners, and a sinister shadow fell over her beautiful face.

The old man who’d given her the paper he’d received from a guard stole a glance at her legs, which protruded audaciously from her mage attire, then snorted.

“What are the higher-ups thinking? Are they planning on repeating the mistakes of that fallen nation? They say that if a pillar leans too far in one direction, it’ll never stand straight again,” the man said, doing little to hide his disdain. An ominous aura hung about him.

The woman narrowed her red-brown eyes.

“If they’re looking for people talented at spell configurations, perhaps they intend to put together a large-scale spell.”

“Surely not *that* one?”

Silence filled the room. The pair’s thoughts seemed to ooze into the ground beneath their feet.

The woman flicked her fingers to create a red flame, then set fire to the piece of paper. The old man let out a hoarse laugh.

“Either way, this is a good opportunity for us. We can put our secret weapon to work,” he said.

“Is that right? It’ll be a real spectacle to see how many of this town’s citizens can keep themselves safe. And should they all fall prey, well, that will be quite the show as well.”

The woman picked up the thick book beside her. Its dark-red leather cover and gold decorative border lent it the appearance of a tome found only in the castle’s private library.

The old man glanced at her. “Will you be content merely to spectate, Aviella?” he asked.

“That’s a very good question,” she replied.

Aviella rose to her feet. Once she’d left the room, she examined the book she carried.

It had no title. Very few knew why. Even she, as the tome’s current owner, wasn’t completely sure. Despite this, she had already decided how she would put the knowledge within to use.

She began to cackle.

“Histories undocumented, events that never occurred—all this needs to be divulged. Once that task is complete, this continent shall be reborn. Rough diamonds hold no value. Only those who overcome all odds earn the right to inherit the next era. And it begins now.”

Her face lit up with tremendous joy. Her smile was radiant and free of notions like good or evil.



“Minase? Which one?”

As soon as Shizuku heard this, she instinctively hid in one corner of the hall. She waited out of sight as the familiar voices of the boys echoed down the hall.

“The older one, obviously. The one in our class.”

“Sure, but you gotta admit, her younger sister is the one who makes an impact.”

“The younger one’s pretty feisty, though. I know she’s cute, but still.”

“She totally destroyed a third-year in an argument the other day. Pretty scary stuff.”

“According to my older brother, the oldest Minase sister is a real natural beauty.”

“Really? I guess the middle one is the bland girl, then.”

Shizuku was used to hearing these kinds of conversations. However, she never grew comfortable with the dull pain that came with them.

She hung her head, her lips quivering...



“I just think you’re being inconsiderate!” Shizuku shouted.

When she looked up, she saw a stupefied young man staring back at her. She went stiff.

He had deep-blue eyes like no Japanese person she’d ever seen and golden-brown hair. His androgynous face looked younger than usual, perhaps because he was surprised. He must have been watching her while she was napping.

He meekly retreated a step.

“Maybe I was. I’m sorry.”

“W-wait! I was dreaming! *Dreaming!* Dreaming about something that happened in the past!”

“Oh, I see. Did somebody say something inconsiderate about you?”

“Yes.”

Shizuku awoke in such a strange way that it left her feeling curiously alert. She’d been looking at existing spell diagrams so that she could learn to draw them herself. These magic configuration arrays reminded her of geometry, which made them enjoyable to look at. However, she’d found herself growing sleepy at some point and had eventually dozed off.

Shizuku ran her fingers through her bangs, shaking off what remained of her drowsiness.

“Both of my sisters really stand out. People often compared me with them and said inconsiderate things about me.”

“Oh. So you lashed out at them?”

“Nope. If I stood my ground every time it happened, I never would’ve had time for anything else. I just walked away.”

“If the memory was painful enough to invade your dreams, you should’ve spoken up.”

Erik’s rebuttal was refreshingly curt, leaving Shizuku unsure of what to say. Whether she argued back or not, it had been a painful experience. That was a fact.

Still, her past self had elected to stay silent. She didn’t think voicing her discontent would change anything. She couldn’t deny she felt there was truth to what those boys said, too.

“To be honest, the idea of arguing back didn’t really occur to me at the time...”

Shizuku knew she’d grown better at expressing herself, but perhaps that was simply because of her present predicament. Being stuck in another world was an extraordinary situation.

“What must your sisters be like for them to stand out more than *you*? I can’t imagine it,” Erik muttered as he sorted through his notes from his seat opposite Shizuku.

“I think you’ve got the wrong idea about me. I’m a really plain person.”

“Plain? How?” he replied, mystified.

Shizuku struggled to answer. She pointed at her own face, which was considered unusual in this world.

“My face, for example. Unlike my sisters, I’m not beautiful or cute. Even personality-wise, I’m the epitome of mediocre.”

“Is that right? I guess I just don’t know what’s considered pretty.”

“Argh.”

Erik had said that he took no interest in people, but Shizuku hadn't expected him to be *this* oblivious.

During their travels, she had come to realize that beauty standards in his world didn't deviate significantly from those she was already familiar with. However, Erik's attitude toward people never changed, even if he was confronted by someone exceptionally lovely. It was so bizarre that Shizuku sometimes wondered if he saw others at all.

The young man, who had a rather handsome face himself, glanced around.

"I know the symmetry of someone's features factor into it, but nothing more. Don't you find that personalities tend to show on people's faces, though? That's the part I find more interesting," Erik said.

"That does apply to some, but...aren't there women who are really pretty but have horrible personalities?"

"That's exactly what I mean. Their personality shows through, so they don't look pretty anymore."

"Oh."

Shizuku sort of understood, yet at the same time, she didn't. Erik's stance seemed way too philosophical for a twenty-two-year-old man.

No matter how someone made themselves up, Erik saw right through them to the inside. Shizuku thought it was a bit cold in a way.

She was struck by a desire to ask Erik what he thought of her face, but she immediately pushed the temptation from her head. She couldn't bring herself to do it. It was too scary. Although she was extremely curious, if he told her she resembled a ring-tailed lemur, Shizuku knew she'd never be able to get that image out of her head. Besides, ring-tailed lemurs probably didn't even exist in this world.

"R-ring-tailed...", Shizuku whispered.

"What are you talking about now? Is that some kind of incantation?"

"Oh, it's nothing... My curiosity and shame just got the better of me and spilled out..."

She held her head in her hands for a moment, then looked up to find Erik staring at her. Filled with an urge to flee, Shizuku half stood from her chair.

“Wh-what is it?”

“Nothing, really. I was just thinking how small your head is. It’s like a doll’s.”

“Are you telling me I look like a Hakata doll?!”

“What’s that?”

There was no way of explaining what the traditional dolls looked like if Erik had never seen one. Shizuku sat back down and picked up her cold cup of tea. Erik continued to stare at her, which she found uncomfortable. She felt so uneasy that she couldn’t work out the tea’s taste at all. When Erik’s gaze fell on her, she found herself avoiding his eyes.

“You’re not as ordinary as you think you are,” he stated.

“...What?”

That was the only response she could manage. It was hard to know how to reply.

Erik stood and made them some more tea.

The two spent some time absorbed in their respective studies. Erik devised a spell to submit to the castle, while Shizuku continued doing her homework, which she was supposed to hand in after summer vacation.

An hour later, Erik looked up and inspected the book Shizuku had open, looking fascinated.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Writing a report about a text from more than a thousand years ago,” she answered. “This part of the book is a criticism of the written word.”

“A criticism of the written word.”

Erik’s curiosity was piqued. He urged her to continue with his eyes, which brought an awkward smile to her face.

“I guess I can try to summarize. ‘When people study the written word, they tend to rely so much on written information and become forgetful. They put

less effort into recalling their own memories and, instead, lean on external written materials to recall things.”

Shizuku tapped the loose sheet of paper with the tip of her pen.

“The written word always elicits the same response in the reader, and when a text is misinterpreted, the writer must assist by clearing up a misunderstanding. As such, written text is nothing but a replica of the words that a real, living person once spoke.”

“I see... There’s some truth in that.” Erik nodded, looking impressed. He pointed at the library book Shizuku had open. “And those exact words have been preserved in written form in this book for all this time.”

“That’s right.”

The pair shared an awkward smirk. It was ironic that the criticism of the written word was conveyed using the written word itself. The person who’d drafted the complaint over a thousand years ago must have been aware of that irony.

Erik put down his teacup.

“What they probably mean is that words are just a tool to express thoughts—for better or worse. While I agree with the point they make about memory, from a broader perspective, both the spoken word and the written one are mere tools for communication. There’s a limit to how much you can express verbally. The text might also be telling us not to rely too much on tools or neglect cultivating our own knowledge.”

“Tools...?”

“Yeah. Words always elicit the same response in the reader, but there are advantages to that, too. The written word can last much longer and spread farther while still remaining unchanged. With the spoken word, the opposite is true. There’s potential for people to misinterpret speech as well... Words are inherently restrictive.”

What Erik said felt so complicated that Shizuku needed to concentrate to understand. She felt like she’d stepped into a lecture.

“Restrictive in what way? I thought words were useful,” she remarked, taking notes as she spoke.

“They are. But they still have limits. You can’t let yourself forget that.”

Erik picked up the eraser lying on the table. It was small and white—Shizuku had only just started using it. Erik squeezed it between his fingers and showed it to Shizuku.

“What color is this?” he asked her.

“White,” she replied.

“Yeah, it looks white to me, too. But what color is it, really?”

Shizuku was unable to follow. “What do you mean?”

Erik smiled, looking amused. He made his point carefully.

“This is just an example, but let’s say it looked red to me. I say it’s red, but I think *red* is the word for *white*. In that situation, the eraser might appear ‘white’ to you and ‘red’ to me, but in reality, we’re just using different words to describe the same color.”

“Oh! I get it! Words mean different things to different people, so that can create misunderstandings.”

“Exactly. We can’t look inside each other’s minds, so even if we wanted to check if there was a misunderstanding, we’d have no choice but to communicate verbally. This makes it impossible to conclusively deny whether there was a disagreement. Whether you’re speaking aloud or expressing yourself through writing, it’s inevitable that other people will misinterpret you to some small extent.”

His view was slightly bittersweet and, at the same time, levelheaded.

Shizuku grasped Erik’s point, and for a moment, she was astonished by how outrageous this idea was.

Even if somebody told her they loved her, their definition wouldn’t necessarily align with hers.

In that case, what did it mean to love somebody? Even if you employed an

extensive array of words to try getting to the bottom of someone's feelings, the discrepancies in your interpretations of those words would prevent you from ever being on the same page.

Shizuku felt isolated, lost as she wandered an endless maze.

For as long as humans remained human, they were fettered by chains they could never escape.

This newfound wisdom left her anxious.

Since her arrival in this world, Shizuku's greatest source of comfort was her ability to communicate with others. Yet now she questioned whether it was right to trust that.

If there was no way of confirming whether another's understanding matched yours, then misconceptions would arise. That was especially true for Shizuku, who'd come from a different world. Speaking the same language was almost irrelevant.

For the first time in a while, Shizuku found herself remembering how anxious being an outsider made her.

Noticing that she was growing upset, Erik waved his hand at her. Although his expression remained the same, he seemed somewhat flustered.

"That was an extreme way of putting it. I mean, there aren't that many things in the world that you can disprove entirely, and everything has its limits. In reality, nouns and simple words leave very little room for misinterpretation."

"...Okay."

"This is just something you need to be aware of when using the tools that we call words. It's when you know their limits that they are the most powerful."

Erik concluded things there. Shizuku felt relieved.

If she was to express that emotion in words, how much of it would reach him? After all, her feelings formed part of her own private world that no one else could touch.



Castle cities in this world were the equivalent of capital cities in Shizuku's.

When she thought about it that way, it made sense that they were so busy and offered many things that caught her eye.

At one point, she found herself distracted by a sculpture that decorated the outside of the shop, and Erik pulled her by the arm.

She'd been so close to bumping into a passersby that he had to shield her with his arm. With a solemn look on his face, he issued her a word of warning.

"I'm not going to tell you to keep your eyes ahead of you at all times, but you need to make sure not to bump into people."

"I-I'm sorry. That thing just looked so strange, I got distracted. What is it? Is it this world's version of the *Shigaraki yaki* raccoon-dog statues we have in Japan?"

"*Shigaraki yaki*," Erik repeated, struggling to pronounce the type of stoneware. "That's hard to say."

Shizuku pointed at the object dangling from a nearby shop wall. It was a weird, black, spiral-shaped thing. Many other buildings sported the same little trinket, too. Shizuku wondered if you could create something similar by painting a traditional mosquito coil black and hanging it from its center.

"I'm not sure. They seem to be everywhere," Erik said.

"Huh? You're not familiar with them?"

"Not at all. They almost look like snakes."

"Oh yeah, I can see that."

In her mind, Shizuku replaced the image of a mosquito coil with that of a curled-up snake. The thought of it twisting its long body into a spiral and rearing its head made her skin crawl, but it fit the otherworldly street scene better than a traditional Japanese insect repellent.

"Maybe they're fashionable," Shizuku remarked. "I didn't see them in any of the other towns we visited, though."

"Perhaps they affirm a shop's position on something—a visible signal to customers."

“Like a *no soliciting* sign?”

Erik and Shizuku exchanged glances but said no more on the subject. Instead, they wandered to a back-alley magic-implement shop. This particular venue didn’t have one of those black coils on display, only a faded signboard.

The pair had spent a few days testing out different spell designs, but they were yet to begin creating a spell diagram to submit to the castle. They were visiting the shop to buy some magic implements to draw one with.

Erik walked around, picking up a ruler he happened upon.

“You can draw circles with this.”

It was a ruler with a round hole in it—the exact kind that children used to play with in Shizuku’s world. The silver instrument was extremely thin, and the circle in the center was about the size of her palm. Along the edge, there were short graduation markers, each of which had a small stone embedded into it. All the little studs were positioned at the center of the markers.

Shizuku took the ruler from Erik and turned it over.

“Huh? But all the circles I draw will end up the same size, won’t they?”

“Try moving the stones.”

Shizuku did as asked and tried moving one of the pebbles to the right on the scale—and the hole in the center of the silver slab rapidly shrunk. This curious sight left Shizuku stunned.

“Wh-what just happened?”

She moved the stone on the same marker in the opposite direction. As soon as she did, the circle widened. It expanded up to the markers at the edge, almost large enough to overtake the ruler itself. The other stones all seemed to alter the circle’s shape in some way. For example, by distorting it diagonally or bending it. Even the slightest movements caused the circle to change.

Shizuku’s eyes sparkled as she flicked the stones in different directions.

“This is amazing! I love it! It’s so interesting! I want one!” she exclaimed.

“Give it back so I can buy it, then.”

While Erik was at the register, Shizuku took a look around the shop, still brimming with excitement. From what she could tell, there were lots of magical drawing implements. She was simply amazed by the way silver metal could move as smoothly as liquid and wondered what the others might do.

When Erik returned, he passed Shizuku the ruler. She let out a cry of delight.

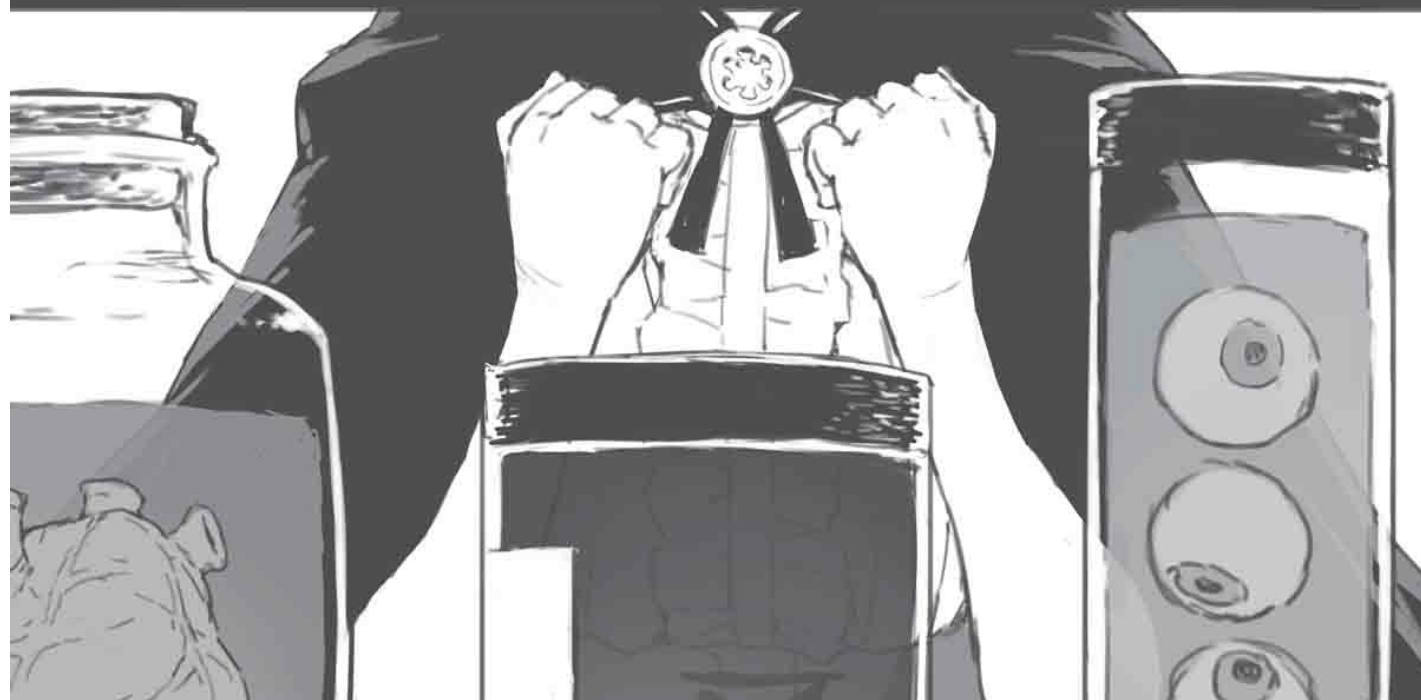
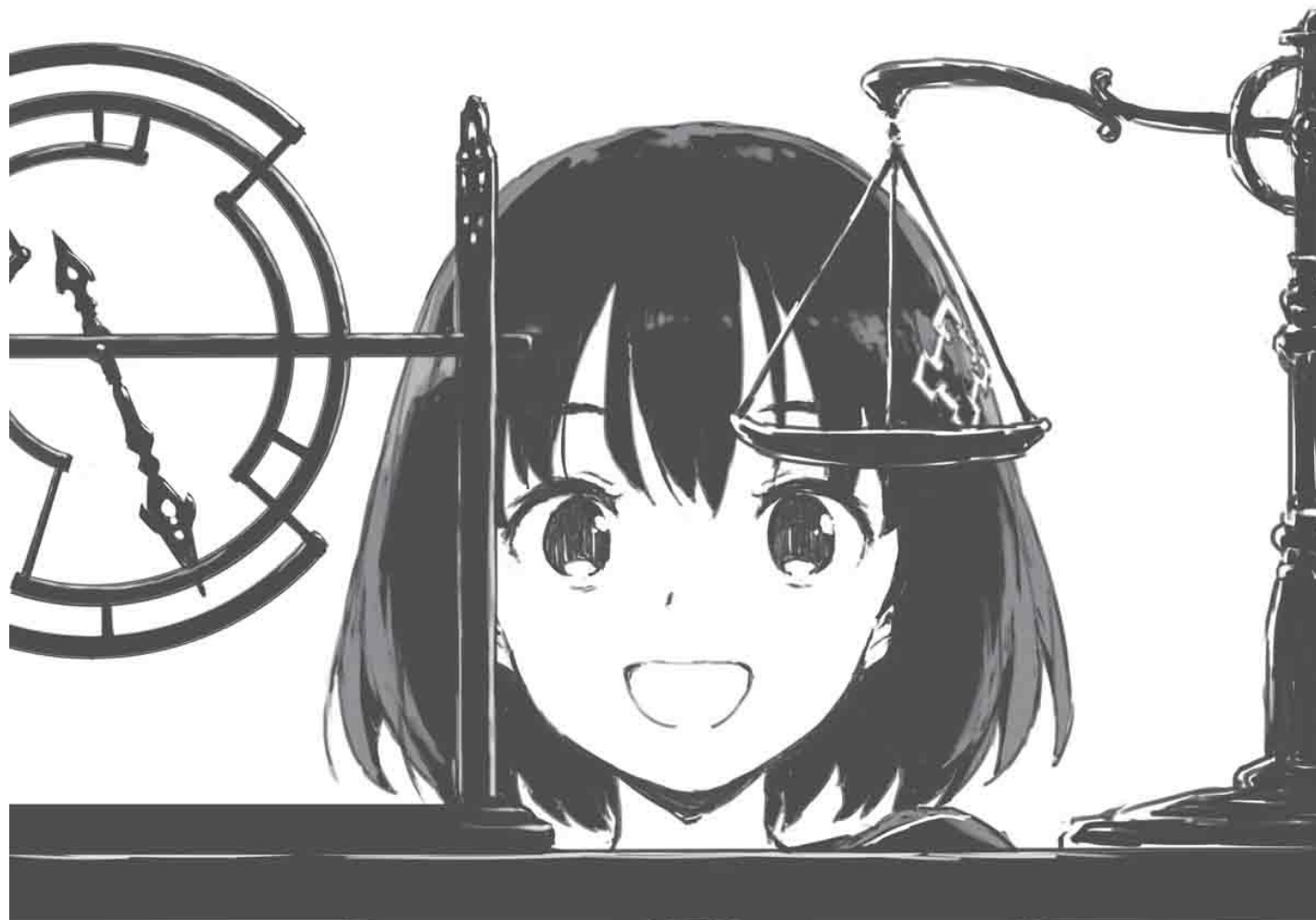
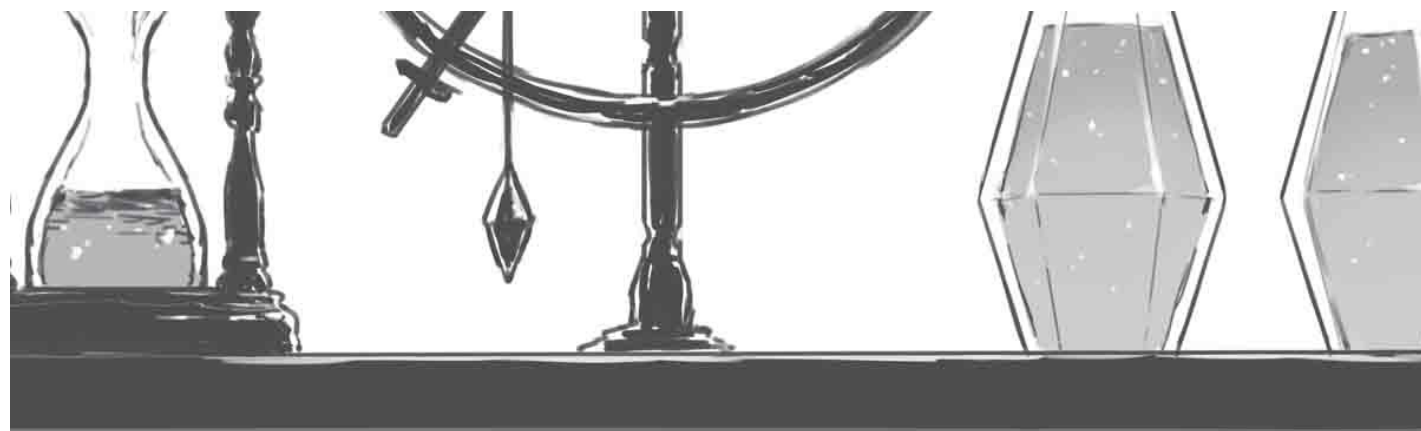
“Magic’s amazing, isn’t it? Do you have anything else? Anything that allows you to draw CG images by hand?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but yeah, I have plenty of different stuff. These items are relatively small, and the magic is infused into the silver during their creation, so they’re not too expensive. They’re essentials for anyone making diagrams.”

“That’s cool. In my world, we accomplish the same thing with machines. You can even do it with devices like the ones I take photos with.”

“Really? That’s interesting.”

Shizuku and Erik left the shop, bought some dinner, and returned to the inn. Erik watched from across the table as Shizuku experimented with the ruler, resting his chin in his hands.



For a short while, Erik seemed lost in thought. However, he gently raised his hand to catch Shizuku's attention at one point.

"Can I ask you something?" he asked.

"Sure, go ahead."

"I know I should have asked this earlier, but how advanced is civilization in your world? Compared with this one, for example."

"Hmm..."

Shizuku wondered about the answer. The one thing that definitively set his world apart from hers was the existence of magic. Spells allowed people to do things that they couldn't in Shizuku's world, but that held society back in other ways. Shizuku mulled over her answer for a bit.

"That's a good question. If we take magic out of the equation, then my world's civilization is probably more advanced. We've made a lot of progress with mechanical technology... We can fly in the sky in metal boats that carry hundreds of people at a time."

"That's incredible. Are only specific people allowed to operate them?"

"Yes, but there's no division between those who have magic and those who don't. Flying one of those vessels requires a highly specialized field of study that takes years to master. I have a totally different skill set, so I wouldn't be able to use that technology. I don't have the required understanding."

As someone who'd been born into a wealthy country, she was able to enjoy modern conveniences, but that didn't mean she had a clue how they worked.

Erik lightly tapped his temples with his fingers.

"So you're telling me that anybody can build or control these things as long as they've studied and gathered the required knowledge, no matter who they are."

"I guess... Our machines are very complex, but they're still just tools. They're like magic implements but without the magic part. If the laws of science are the same in this world, you should theoretically be able to use them here as well. It'd probably be difficult to acquire the right materials, though. Something built

here might not be to the same standard as in my world.”

The majority of machinery required electricity to operate. Since Erik’s world had lightning and static electricity, it was likely that the fundamental laws of nature were similar in that respect. If someone with the necessary knowledge and expertise had ended up in this world, they might have been able to create something. Shizuku suddenly felt very useless.

Erik was busy thinking about what Shizuku had told him, but when he noticed how glum she looked, he tilted his head to one side.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s just... I wasn’t sure why you asked me that all of a sudden.”

“Oh. I was curious how much value you carry.”

“Huh?”

What did he mean by that? Would he have preferred if she was educated on the inner workings of machines? If so, he had to be extremely disappointed. Shizuku’s knowledge was limited to a broad, surface-level awareness of the humanities.

She sighed. “Oh. I definitely won’t be helpful in that respect...”

“Why are you acting like that’s a bad thing? It’s good that you’re not a specialist. You’ll be less at risk.”

Erik’s deep-blue eyes widened as he spoke, as if to convey how serious the young man was. He didn’t look disappointed in the slightest. If anything, he seemed relieved. He lifted a finger and pointed straight up.

“If it got out that you were from another world and that you know the secrets of its technology, you’d definitely be captured.”

“That sinister hypothesis came out of nowhere.”

“It’s a genuine possibility,” Erik insisted. “Do you know what they’d do if you knew about advanced machines?”

“Umm. C-coax the information out of me, maybe?”

“Yeah. *Especially* if it’s knowledge that anybody can use. As is often the case

with groundbreaking discoveries, rulers will seek to weaponize it. Your know-how would be thoroughly exploited for crafting instruments of war.”

“I’ve never been happier to be a humanities student!” Shizuku cried.

Her sincere exclamation brought an uncomfortable smile to Erik’s face. He stared at the mountains.

“If you were to ask me for my personal opinion, I’d be opposed to introducing that sort of knowledge into this world, even if you were well-informed enough to do so. Magic aside, your world is more advanced than ours, isn’t it?”

“I’d say so... If I compare the aspects of our lives that are similar, your civilization is probably a few hundred years behind.”

“Even more reason not to. The technology in your world has reached its current state after centuries of debates and discussions. If we were to skip all that and just drop in those marvels, I doubt it’d end well. Plus, bringing in knowledge from a whole other world could potentially throw ours off its natural path.”

“Yeah...”

There was probably some truth to what Erik was saying. New technological discoveries didn’t just come out of nowhere. They were the results of decades of debates regarding their uses and respective benefits and dangers.

Plus, those debates were based on the societies, histories, and cultures of Shizuku’s world. It’d be inappropriate to bring those technologies to a different one. People here weren’t guaranteed to react the same way to a particular creation as those from Shizuku’s world.

“Would it be like disrupting an ecosystem by bringing in creatures that originally lived somewhere else?” Shizuku asked.

“Close, I guess. Listen, if the technology from your world is feasible here, then there’s a chance it will develop on its own. However, this world presently lags behind yours. There must be a reason why that is,” Erik explained. “I suppose magic must be to blame. But still...”

Being a mage himself, Erik looked a bit ruffled. He quickly assumed a straight

face again.

“If people from this world discovered and developed those new technologies, there wouldn’t be a problem. That should be welcomed. But if someone from another world who happened to arrive here as a result of some freak accident introduced those inventions, it’d be frightening. Without that outside interference, we might never have achieved that advancement. It would forever change the path we were supposed to take.”

“...I guess so.”

Such an event would create an unforeseen mutation in the fabric of history. That was only true if Shizuku knew how to make those devices, though.

If someone captured Shizuku and extracted information from her about how advanced machines worked, it’d be enough to give them an advantage over other people. The presence of tools that were never supposed to exist in this world could lead to gradual change. Shizuku was in no position to guess whether the results of that change would be good or bad, and she wouldn’t be able to take responsibility for them, either.

Shizuku thought about her phone, resting in her bag. She used to look at it daily in her old world, yet she hadn’t picked it up in weeks. To some extent, she felt like she understood why now. That prompted her to ask Erik one last question.

“What if knowledge from a different world made things really convenient for people, even saved lives? Would you still be against it being brought over?”

Erik’s eyes widened at the inquiry. He smiled, although the expression was a bit uneven.

“I see your point. It could end up being a good thing. If that new technology gave us a way of treating diseases for which there is no known cure, I’m sure it’d make a lot of people happy. But the line between necessary and convenient is hard to draw. If this world requires something, I trust someone here will make it eventually. It doesn’t matter how inconvenient things might be for us... If this is the way things are supposed to be, then I’ll gladly accept our world’s lack of convenience over corruption from outside influence.”

His deep-blue eyes were bright, and his voice was confident.

A shiver ran down Shizuku's spine as she stifled a gasp of admiration.

Erik was stubborn and inflexible.

There had to be positives and negatives to importing technology, but Erik rejected it for the sole reason that his world wasn't supposed to have those creations yet. He dismissed the topic in the way a teacher who only bothered telling his students the answer to a problem, and not how to solve it, might have.

Shizuku doubted that everyone in this world would feel as he did. In fact, there were undoubtedly a lot of people desperate for the kind of transportation, communication, and medical technology that was widespread in Shizuku's world.

Still, Shizuku found the way Erik had expressed his view to be very noble... She strongly desired to become the same way. Erik remained true to his will and conveyed his own thoughts outwardly. He was a good example of the kind of person Shizuku hoped to be.

That said, she couldn't have envisioned that his words would stay with her for so long. They lingered even after she came face-to-face with the unease that this world kept hidden.

On the day she had to make a decision of her own, Erik's words came rushing back.



They didn't complete their spell diagram until the day of the deadline.

The finished product resembled an intricate architectural framework drawn in 3D, although it was generally spherical in shape. Shizuku reviewed her drawing several times, then let out a sigh of admiration.

"What do you think about this?" she said, passing Erik the fifth clean copy she'd made.

His eyebrows rose as he examined it.

"It's great. I have no complaints."

“I don’t know whether or not it’s right, though.”

“It is. I just need to write in what each sequence does, and then it will be complete.”

Happy to hear that her work was effectively finished, Shizuku threw her hands in the air. She wanted to cheer, but she ended up collapsing on the desk instead, exhausted.

The spell diagram needed to show the three-dimensional spell configuration from multiple different angles.

The overhead perspective in particular had to be as clear and precise as a three-dimensional architectural blueprint. Shizuku thought an architecture major would’ve done a better job than her.

The diagram Erik had asked her to create was more complex than the ones in the books she’d referenced. Erik couldn’t draw what he pictured well enough to explain to Shizuku what he wanted, so he’d been forced to describe the design verbally. On multiple occasions, Shizuku had questioned whether she’d be able to complete the diagram. After dozens of rough drafts, however, she’d finally managed it—albeit just before the deadline.

Erik stood from his chair, seemingly done with the writing, and gathered up the papers.

“Good work. I’m going to submit these to the castle. Is there anything you’d like as a token of appreciation?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m just glad to have you along for my journey. This is the least I could do to repay you.”

Shizuku meant that. There had been plenty of situations that had reminded her that she was a burden. That she’d been helpful to Erik brought her true joy. For all the challenges of drawing the spell diagram, it had made her feel like she had a purpose in this world.

“Oh, do you mind if I go for a short stroll?” she asked.

“Sure. Take Mea with you, though.”

Shizuku looked up. The small bird chirped from atop her head. Shizuku had

spent so long working on the spell diagram that she hadn't given herself the chance to speak to Mea for a while.

After getting ready, Shizuku took her feathery sidekick outside.

"What nice weather..."

She'd spent the last four days holed up inside, so the afternoon sunlight stung her eyes. The energetic hum of voices brought a sense of liveliness to the city's streets, and bouncy music could be heard over the beckoning calls of shopkeepers.

Were Shizuku in her old world, she would've liked to enjoy a cup of coffee in a nearby park while watching the world go by, but coffee didn't exist here. Instead, she joined the stream of pedestrians sauntering down the street, peering at all the different storefronts as she walked.

"Whoa, what pretty clothes..."

She spotted what looked to be a fashion store. Through its big, glass window, she spied some elaborate-looking dresses on display.

They weren't garishly colored or made from gaudy fabric, either. Their material looked heavy and thick, and each was adorned with ornate floral-pattern embroidery. The skirts of the dresses all had beautiful, curved shapes and were so voluminous that they must have had crinolines.

Shizuku stopped and stared, entranced by the dresses. They looked like the kind that girls from respectable families would wear regularly. Their skirt portions had notes pinned into them, but Shizuku couldn't read what they said. She worked her mind to decipher the writing, but ultimately, her focus returned to the dresses.

"They're beautiful, but I doubt they'd suit me..., " she grumbled, sighing.

This expression of doubt, however, prompted the bird on top of her head to let out a soft chirp.

Shizuku had worn a luxurious dress once before, in that castle at the bottom of the lake. However, she felt like it didn't fit her Japanese features. It was too over-the-top.

Currently, Shizuku wore a blouse and skirt like all the other city girls. She'd grown accustomed to seeing herself like that.

The dresses in the window were plain in color, so perhaps she could pull them off. Shizuku couldn't seem to decide.

Of course, none of the outfits were appropriate for traveling on horseback. Even so, part of Shizuku wanted to try on some fancy clothes just for the fun of it. It wasn't every day she had the opportunity.

"In my old world, I used to wear lighter clothing in the summer that showed my arms and legs. It was nothing like how people dress here."

To all others, Shizuku was speaking to a bird. Perhaps they saw her as an eccentric. Shizuku understood Mea as a friend, not a bird, though. Luckily, none of the passing pedestrians gawked, perhaps owing to the crowded street.

Shizuku gazed at the dresses for another moment, then forced a smile as she shook her head.

"Let's keep moving," she said to Mea.

Letting go of ideas was easy when Shizuku judged it to be necessary. She knew there were some things she needed to prioritize over others.

Shizuku walked past a signboard for another shop, which quickly caught her eye.

Beside the signboard, which was decorated with pictures of flowers and apparel, someone had hung a black snake ornament on the wall.

The final place Shizuku stopped by was the magic implement shop she'd visited with Erik a few days earlier. Back then Erik had come with a specific purpose, allowing Shizuku little time to admire other items. Her curiosity had remained unsated since.

The dimly lit room resembled the corner of a fortune-telling shop that sold myriad kinds of mystical trinkets. Shizuku's eyes wandered, eager to take in all that was on offer. No two items were the same.

There were tons of accessories and unusually shaped tools she wanted to pick up, but she wasn't sure if that was a good idea, considering she wasn't a mage.

Instead, she settled on bending down and visually inspecting items one at a time.

Before long, she spotted a black, circular pendant with a hole in the middle. She froze the moment her eyes fell upon it. It reminded her of those snakelike sculptures she'd seen throughout the city.

Shizuku decided to inquire with the shopkeeper at the back of the store.

"Excuse me, but do you sell any of those snakelike black things? The ones that people hang at the front of their shops..."

"You must be thinking of Shula sculptures. Sorry, but no. They're not magic implements," the shopkeeper replied.

"Huh?" said Shizuku. "What are they, then? Are they just fashionable ornaments or something?"

"Of course not. They're religious symbols, good luck charms."

"A religion?"

Shizuku's voice came out more hysterical than she'd intended. She clasped her hands against her mouth.

Really, it wasn't a surprising explanation. In Japan, there were countryside homes that kept talismans by the entrance. The shopkeeper's explanation made sense.

Shizuku turned around and looked out of the window.

"I see them everywhere, but I noticed your shop doesn't have one," she remarked.

"No. Mages tend to be atheists, after all. I'm not a mage myself, but I'm not a believer, either. Maybe the fact that I run a shop like this has something to do with that."

"I see... Thank you for your help."

Once she'd expressed her gratitude to the shopkeeper, she carefully inspected a few more of the shop's knickknacks, then left.

Shizuku felt bolstered by her little excursion; however, her mood quickly

soured when she stepped outside.

Immediately, she spotted a man standing in the street. It nearly seemed he'd been waiting to ambush her.

She winced, looking like a street vendor had accosted her.

"Hey, Shizuku. What a coincidence this is," the man greeted.

"...Argh. I think I'm cursed."

It was evident from Shizuku's sigh that she was disappointed to see him, but the man didn't even flinch.

Tarkis, the wandering mercenary, looked down at Shizuku's sullen expression and laughed.

When did he manage to track her down? She didn't believe it was a "coincidence" at all. Shizuku tended to be pretty oblivious to what was going on around her, so following her wouldn't have been much of a challenge.

As they walked down the street together—rather, as Tarkis trailed Shizuku from behind, he came to an abrupt halt in front of a particular shop.

Shizuku made to keep walking, but Tarkis grabbed her arm gently and pulled her toward the business.

"Hey! What are you...?"

"No need to worry. Just look."

Tarkis pointed at the dresses Shizuku had been admiring earlier. She looked so taken aback that it made the mercenary roar with laughter.

"Want me to buy you one? I bet it'd look great on you."

"Y-you were watching me?"

"Of course not. Forget about that. You want one, don't you?"

"...No," Shizuku replied succinctly.

She tried to leave, but Tarkis took her hand and pulled her back again.

Shizuku furrowed her brow and scowled fiercely.

"Let me go!" she demanded.

“Come on now, there’s no need to hold back,” replied Tarkis. “You’d look great in any of those. You just need a little rouge on your lips and cheeks and some scented balm in your hair to make it shimmer like glossy black silk. Like your eyes. You’d look really striking.”

The man seemed to think he was offering her a genuine compliment, but it was a rather bold thing to say out loud. Shizuku waved a hand in front of her face as though to fan away the remark.

“That’s enough. I can decide what I want to wear myself. Leave me alone, please.”

She didn’t want to spend any more time with him and risk exposing that she was from another world.

Shizuku’s cold refusal prompted a crooked smile from Tarkis.

“Protest all you want, but I can’t help that I’m curious. Who *are* you? Why are you heading to Farsas?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I know that you can’t read.”

“Huh...?”

This left Shizuku at a loss. She almost began to panic as she tried to figure out when he’d deduced as much. Then it clicked. It must have been when she was trying to read the notes attached to the dresses in the shop window.

Shizuku paled, unable to respond.

This made Tarkis laugh.

“I’m pretty quick on the uptake, you know,” he said. “There’s something peculiar about you. Like a portent. You have something that sets you apart from everyone else, don’t you? I see no reason not to capitalize on that.”

It felt like he was trying to entice that “special something” out of her with his interest, but he failed in every conceivable way.

Shizuku exhaled, aware that the stress of this situation was affecting her.

“You’re mistaken, I assure you. I’m a useless young girl who can’t even travel

by herself.”

Unlike her sisters, Shizuku was an unremarkable sort of person. She had no special powers, either. Even if she was knowledgeable about stuff, she wouldn't feel comfortable sharing that expertise. She didn't want to change anything about this world. Her only desire was to go home.

And if at all possible, she wanted to develop a clear understanding of who she was as a person.

The bird on Shizuku's shoulder chirped. It sounded somewhat sharper than usual—threatening and wary at the same time. The bird was prepared to exterminate the man in front of them at any time, so long as Shizuku ordered it.

Shizuku raised her hand and stroked Mea to keep her from acting out.

“Now that you understand, I'll be leaving,” Shizuku said, a hint of weariness in her voice.

Tarkis narrowed his eyes. It was the first time Shizuku had seen him look serious.

She started to walk away but found herself coming to a stop. Tarkis's expression was too unusual to ignore.

He reached for her, but Shizuku instinctively retreated. Instead, he placed his large hand on her head.

“Listen, Shizuku...,” Tarkis began. “This might be a bad way of putting it, but you don't need to put yourself down so much.”

“I don't,” Shizuku rebutted, but she wasn't confident about that.

She was used to giving up on things, but only those she didn't need to see through. She didn't quit on everything.

However, whenever she had to choose whether to persevere, she tended to make her choice quickly.

Unlike her sisters, Shizuku wasn't special. She couldn't be like them. Yet she refrained from holding on to resentment and opted to forge her own path, one that suited her as she was.

Was that really for the best, though?

Tarkis bent over and looked at Shizuku, his hand still resting on top of her head.

“Bluffing is more fun than you’d think. When you believe in yourself, you can do things you’d never thought possible. Sometimes, it’s important to present yourself in the best way you can.”

Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to push Tarkis’s hand away. She could tell that this was a sincere attempt to encourage her.

Shizuku looked up at the traveling mercenary, taken aback.

“But what if people find out you were bluffing?”

“You have to work hard to ensure they don’t. Then the sky’s the limit.”

“And if you barely get off the ground?”

“You can cross that bridge when you come to it.”

How old was this guy?

It sounded like he’d seen more trouble than Shizuku, at least. Life in her old world had been peaceful. The slight bitterness in Tarkis’s voice implied that he already carried a wealth of experiences under his belt.

Tarkis ruffled Shizuku’s hair like one would a child’s.

“Have confidence in yourself,” he said. “You’re putting in enough work.”

Shizuku couldn’t discern why he’d say something like that. How much did he know?

Still, she could tell there was no artifice to his words, so she allowed herself to feel a tinge of happiness.

When Tarkis saw she wasn’t frowning anymore, he casually waved her good-bye.

“One more thing. Don’t stress needlessly,” he added.

With that, he rejoined the crowd of people. Shizuku figured he probably had something else to take care of. As she watched him leave, she couldn’t help but

smile a bit.



“That’s all of them,” announced the voice.

It was an abrupt declaration, and a long-awaited one.

The people standing in a line all straightened up anxiously.

The man, whose hard footsteps echoed throughout the room while he paced, stopped abruptly and gestured toward the paper hanging on the wall.

It was a spell diagram depicting a huge configuration. Antideterioration magic kept it pristine.

“Kisk seems to have given up on meddling in other countries’ business for the time being, but we never know what’s around the corner. If the mere hint of action from one of the Great Nations is enough to instill fear in us, our future will be pulled out from beneath us sooner or later. Now is the time to act.”

The man slowly traced the outside of the complex spell diagram with his finger.

“Split the mages we have gathered into five groups and assign one section to each team. Ensure that none have the full picture, though.”

Several people voiced their consent, but the man’s eyes remained glued to the spell diagram.

“If any of the mages seem like they will be an inconvenience, feel free to dispose of them once their work is done. I don’t care whether you capture or kill them. Securing our future is paramount.”

It sounded like the man was well accustomed to seeing others as tools, but nobody raised an objection. The group of people bowed their heads in silence, then dispersed to attend to their respective duties, taking their opinions with them.



The results of the screening process would be revealed within the next day or so.

Once Erik had returned from submitting his work, he opened some books and

started studying the written characters in detail, and Shizuku joined him.

While reading a German text he'd found inside one of the thinner books, he slowly lifted his head and asked Shizuku, who was busy creating a basic vocabulary dictionary, a question.

"German shares similarities with English, but some of the words are unusually long, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Shizuku replied. "In German, you make a compound word. The same is true with Japanese. You link different words together to create a new one..."

Shizuku picked up her mechanical pencil and jotted down the Japanese for *Tokyo Special Patent Approval Office*, which was pronounced *Tokyo-tokkyo-kyoka-kyoku*. Then she drew lines to separate the components in the term from one another.

"Like this... You stick several words together to create one term."

"Huh? And you can still understand what it says?"

"I'm used to it. There are limits to what I can parse, though..."

When there was a string of excessively complicated kanji characters lined up together, it freaked her out, and understandably so. That said, she was usually able to tell where one word began and another ended.

Shizuku pointed at the supplementary German reading material Erik had.

"This is part of a language textbook, so it's on the easier side, but the technical texts we use to study are a whole other story. German doesn't just join vocabulary together, but whole sentences, too. Sometimes, you can get ten lines of nonstop text," she explained. "Although, that's the case with Japanese, too."

For some reason, this made Erik chuckle. Shizuku stared at him in blank amazement. It was rare to see him laugh.

"What is it?" she asked. "Did I say something funny?"

"No...", he replied. "You just looked so stressed."

"This *does* stress me out," Shizuku replied.

In specialized classes, it was typically the professors, advanced students, or graduate students who led the reading-comprehension sessions, but that didn't mean Shizuku sat back and let it all wash over her.

Most of the first-years tended to give up right away, but Shizuku diligently sank her teeth into the text every time, dictionary in hand. Even if she only picked up what some of the words meant, that was better than nothing. She'd already started to remember some of the frequently mentioned technical terms. If she intended to translate by herself one day, it wouldn't hurt to start putting some effort in early.

That was what she'd told herself. Unfortunately, the fact remained that it was taxing work.

"I didn't bring any technical texts with me, but these books are a piece of cake by comparison. These ones always have subject matter everyone's already familiar with, too, which helps."

"What's this text about?" Erik inquired.

"A legend called the 'Pied Piper of Hamelin.' It's pretty well-known in my world."

Shizuku explained the story to Erik in simple terms. It told of a man who played a pipe to lure out the town's rats. When he didn't receive the reward he was promised for ridding the town of its rat problem, he used the tune of his pipe to lead away the town's children instead.

Erik listened with a fascinated look on his face. When the story was over, he leafed through the book and examined the illustrations.

"I get it now. It's a legend."

"That's the theme, at least. That book is actually about the true story behind the legend. About eight hundred years ago, a hundred and thirty children vanished from that very town. The exact date is even recorded."

"Is there no record of a cause?"

"There are theories, but the truth remains unknown. Some people think it wasn't children who disappeared, but settlers. This book suggests that the

children might have gone up into the mountains to play and ended up falling in a bottomless marsh one by one.”

“That’s horrible,” Erik remarked.

Shizuku thought the same. There were still so many different suppositions on what happened. It was a real-life mystery.

After eight centuries, it seemed unlikely anyone would discover the truth. Throughout humanity’s long history, there had been quite a few mysterious occurrences like that of the Pied Piper. And much like the strange event from two hundred and forty years ago that had prompted Erik and Shizuku to set out for Farsas, their real explanations still proved elusive.

Although his expression remained unchanged, it seemed like Erik was thinking something similar. He smiled when he noticed Shizuku’s eyes on him.

“Our mystery is easier to investigate than your one from eight hundred years ago,” he assured her. “The books were amended. Farsas must know something.”

“Replayed memories re-created scenes from the past, right?” Shizuku said. “I know some people who went missing were later found in entirely different locations, but were there incidents where people vanished entirely?”

“Plenty,” Erik replied. “We know what was behind a few of those, but not all of them.”

“You know what caused people to disappear? What?!” Shizuku exclaimed.

The sudden glimmer of curiosity in her eyes brought an uncomfortable tinge to Erik’s expression. He closed the German book.

“The culprits varied—natural disasters or plots by other countries, for example. Oh, and forbidden curses, too.”

“Forbidden curses?”

“It’s a general term for magic that you’re not supposed to use. That’s what we call magic with problematic casting conditions or dangerous effects. Spells that use human flesh or souls as catalysts are extremely taboo.”

“Whoa. It’s like black magic, then.”

Erik smirked. Evidently, he found the term *black magic* amusing. However, his face righted itself in no time.

“People say that forbidden curses were a frequent topic of research in the past during the Dark Age, a period of horrendous warfare. Apparently, forbidden curses used to be triggered by accident, resulting in terrible harm. There are numerous reports of entire countries being wiped out as a result. Nowadays, the mere mention of forbidden curses is enough to make any mage scowl. Forbidden magic is the very definition of taboo.”

A hint of gloom crossed Erik’s face. It looked like a gruesome memory had come rushing back to him. Everything had a dark side, and magic was no exception.

Shizuku picked up the supplementary reading material that Erik had been leafing through. On the page he happened to stop on, there was a picture of a man holding a pipe with a wide smile on his face.



The white room seemed to go on forever.

Before she knew it, she was sitting on a chair.

Part of her thought this strange, yet it also felt wholly normal.

She had no reservations about sitting on the chair, nor was she surprised to find herself in this place. It felt like she wasn’t herself at all. The version of herself that was confused by the scenario was simply elsewhere.

There was nothing else in her periphery. Nobody other than her.

“She” reached out toward the desk, toward the three books lying on top of it. Something like this had happened before.

Shizuku’s vague confusion was dispelled immediately, like a popped bubble.

She confidently opened the red book and looked down at the page.

“...The rift was as small as the eye of a needle, a fissure connecting to the depths of the world, where the deepest part of the human soul is born. The small aperture was never supposed to open, but it formed, nonetheless. It seemed like a mistake, and yet at the same time, it was inevitable.”

Nobody but “her” heard the voice.

“The first man who peered into that hole was captured. The second lost his sanity. The third considered it the source of all souls, the very essence of humanity, and referred to whatever slithered out of it as a god...”

The text went on and on. “She” simply followed along, word by word.

The cyclical dream had no beginning and no end, and “she” was trapped inside it.



“Wake up,” the young man whispered in her ear.

“Argh!”

This sudden command made Shizuku spring up. She’d been lying against the desk. She looked around, reflexively covering her ears with her hands. This was Erik’s room.

Shizuku remembered coming here in the morning to study. He’d left to check whether they’d passed the castle’s screening process. Shizuku figured she must have fallen asleep after that.

“Are you tired? I kept trying to wake you,” Erik said.

“I-I’m sorry,” she replied. “I think I was having a weird dream...”

She almost asked for the result of the screening but didn’t know if she was in a position to initiate that conversation. Perhaps things differed in this world, but test results were a pretty delicate subject in hers. Erik didn’t seem like the type to be touchy about that, but it was still safer to wait for him to broach the matter.

Sure enough, Erik dropped a bunch of papers onto the desk and announced the result.

“I passed. They said I need to pack my things and head inside the castle in two hours’ time.”

“What?! That’s great news!”

“You did half the work.”

Shizuku laughed shyly.

Drawing a spell diagram that depicted magic she couldn't see had been challenging. However, she'd hoped it wouldn't be the last time she saw such a diagram—the finished product was truly beautiful. She was glad that Erik's spell configuration had done well. If they were allowed to use the transit ring, she'd be over the moon.

"How long will your work at the castle take?" Shizuku asked Erik.

"Two or three days, I imagine. We probably won't be able to leave until it's done. Will you be okay on your own?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I'll keep a low profile. Good things come to those who sleep, after all."

"You're not going to nap for three whole days, are you?"

"That wouldn't bother me. Three years might be pushing it, though."

Now that Shizuku thought about it, she hadn't told Erik about seeing Tarkis yet. She'd simply forgotten to mention it, but she knew that bringing it up at a time like this would only cause him to worry. She could just spend three days holed up inside the inn. She didn't necessarily have to sleep the whole time.

Shizuku casually waved her hands in front of her face in an attempt to reassure Erik. He stared intently at her, then nodded. It looked like he'd convinced himself that all would be fine.

"I'll come and fetch you when I'm done and tell you where we're heading next. Even if we can't go directly to Farsas, I'll do my best to make the next leg of our trip easier."

"Thank you."

"Don't let Mea leave your side, okay?"

This reminder made Shizuku feel sheepish.

The two of them ate an early dinner together in the inn's dining hall, then prepared to split up for a few days.

As Shizuku bade farewell to Erik, she was momentarily struck by a sense of

loneliness—but she made sure not to let it show.

“It’s up to us to hold the fort now, Mea,” Shizuku said.

Her assistant demon chirped in acknowledgment.

The sunset cast blended reds and blues through the window.



It was extremely rare for a castle to employ mages on a temporary basis, but it wasn’t unheard of.

Since the screening process was mainly focused around spell configuration skills, Erik had surmised that the castle’s objective was to assemble a sizable group of individuals to cast a large-scale spell. Performing such a feat required mages to link their spells. Most importantly, a significant number of people needed to take part. If the task at hand involved reinforcing the castle city’s wards, any preparatory work must have already been handled.

Now that he’d made it through the screening process, Erik was eager to get the job done as quickly as possible, regardless of what it was going to be.

He stood in the corner of the room where the mages were gathered. The names of the successful applicants were being read out, and he let them pass through one ear and out the other. Once all but two mages were confirmed present, an administrator of some kind stepped forward.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said. “You will now begin the construction of a large-scale spell. For this task, you will be divided into five groups, each overseen by one of our castle mages. If you have any questions, refer to your respective supervisors.”

The administrator also issued them several warnings. They were obliged to stay inside the castle until their work was done, and leaking information was strictly forbidden. Erik had expected these rules.

The administrator concluded his speech with “We will consult with you individually once the task is completed to decide your remuneration.”

The five court mages led each of their groups away. Some of the mages looked around nervously, appearing to find this a little suspicious.

Even if each of the groups was responsible for different aspects of the large-scale spell, few of the mages seemed to have anticipated that they'd be working from different locations. Erik found the castle staff's cautiousness a touch odd, too, but he also knew how secretive royals and nobles could be.

Erik's group was guided into a hall beneath the castle.

The room was dimly lit, with candles serving as the only source of light. It was spacious enough to fit about four or five of the town's shops comfortably.

There was a faint spell diagram etched onto the stone-tiled floor. It looked like this was supposed to be their guide.

The spherical array nearly filled the ground. Five crystal balls rested in the center of the diagram. Erik sensed enormous magical power radiating from them.

The man leading Erik's group instructed its members to stand along the circular line—equally spaced. Once done, he handed each person some documents he'd brought.

"This is the spell diagram you will be collaborating on. The papers I have distributed depict only the section you personally will be assembling. Sequences three and twenty-five connect horizontally, while sequences seven and thirty-one are linked diagonally. Please keep these positionings in mind while assembling the spell."

The part of the spell diagram that Erik had been assigned left him nervous. It wasn't a particularly difficult spell, nor did he feel daunted by the gravity of the task. Rather, he felt uneasy about the castle staff's unexpected thoroughness.

It was perfectly reasonable not to give the mages the complete spell diagram. That was confidential information. However, that each mage was only permitted their own fragment indicated that significant precautions were in place.

To Erik, it appeared less about preventing the leakage of castle secrets after the task and more about withholding information from the mages about the nature of the spell they were creating.

And there was only one kind of magic that needed to be kept secret: a

forbidden curse.

Erik felt a slight shiver come over him as he contemplated what sort of magic the castle staff sought to create. The supervisor paid no attention to Erik's anxiety. Once he'd finished giving each of the mages their respective spell diagrams, he stood in the center of the room.

"Magical energy is stored inside these crystal balls, so feel free to use it. If you want to leave the hall for any reason, make sure to let me know. I will have a soldier accompany you. Any questions?"

Nobody said a word. The man glanced to each of the mages in turn before casually raising his hand and dropping it, signaling the beginning of work.

As chants began to echo around the chamber, Erik took another look at the fragment of the spell he'd been assigned. A slight frown marred his handsome, androgynous features.

Still, he chose to set his fears aside for the time being. He joined his fellow mages in chanting.

A large number of them drew the magic out of the crystal balls together as they carefully assembled the spell.

Many of the mages took breaks from their work over the hours that followed, but the construction of the spell progressed smoothly. As Erik worked on his own section, he kept an eye on what the mages around him were doing, hoping that might grant him a better idea of the whole they were creating.

The portion of the spell that his group was assembling didn't offer much insight, however. Not at first. The whole thing would probably take about three days to complete, and they'd only been working on it for a few hours so far. It was far too early for in-depth analysis.

Erik continued reciting his chants to avoid arousing suspicion from the court mages observing the group. Internally, he wanted to heave a large sigh.

If this was a harmless spell, it wouldn't bother him. In fact, there'd be no need to probe into it whatsoever. Catching the attention of the court mages wouldn't be worth the trouble.

However, if this large-scale spell fit the definition of a forbidden curse, Erik had to stop it from being completed by any means necessary.

Forbidden curses were the embodiment of the dark side of magic. They were something never meant to exist.

The Dark Age saw the birth of many forbidden curses, all of which wrought only horrific consequences. As a scholar of that history, Erik knew how important it was that such foolishness was never repeated.

The rational voice inside Erik's head told him he was powerless to change anything on his own, but even if that was true, he wouldn't be able to bring himself to turn a blind eye to a forbidden curse. Especially not if he was partially responsible for its formation.

Erik caught hold of some of the magical power filling the vicinity and molded it. As he did so, he hoped that his anxiety was unfounded, and that he'd be able to return to the girl waiting for him at the inn in three days.



"This isn't what you said would happen!"

The panicked roar echoed off the walls. A man's fist slammed against the table, disturbing the sculpture of a black serpent. It shook for a few moments after the impact.

"Isn't it? In what way?"

"The spell! You said it was a forbidden mind-control curse, didn't you, Aviella?!"

"Who knows?" Aviella replied callously. "I don't remember claiming as much. Maybe you should ask your bishop when I said such a thing. He might not give you the answer you're hoping for, though, faithful follower Selue."

As Aviella continued to play dumb, the man named Selue grew red in the face.

The man, who worked as a priest of the Shula faith in Candela's castle city, glared at the woman, infuriated.

"Idos has infiltrated the castle as the royal chief mage. The plan was for him to advise the king, then swap out the spell for the forbidden curse!"

“And things have proceeded according to that expectation, haven’t they? All is as you wished.”

Selue gave Aviella a hateful scowl. She wasn’t a devout follower of the Shula faith. She’d just appeared one day and managed to impress the bishop with her extensive knowledge. After that, she’d simply remained.

Selue knew she’d planted an idea regarding their plan in the bishop’s head, but he’d yet to deduce precisely what.

The king, who was completely ignorant of the Shula faith’s involvement, still believed that the forbidden spell being assembled in the castle was a large-scale warfare spell.

Meanwhile, Idos, operating undercover as the royal chief mage, believed the spell would be a forbidden curse to control the populace to the benefit of the Shula faith.

However, both had been deceived. So what was the magic truly for?

Aviella’s eyes rose from beneath silver-dusted eyelashes as she filed her nails methodically.

“Mind control... Mind control, huh? Well, that’s one aspect of the curse. You’re still getting what you hoped for.”

“Our hope was for this entire country to achieve enlightenment and worship the Shula god, not for the nation to be destroyed!”

“‘Enlightenment’? Is that what we’re calling mind control nowadays? How strange,” Aviella replied, making no effort to conceal her derision.

Her voice had a certain allure to it, but the contempt it carried was most noticeable. Her enchanting smile only amplified this effect.

Were she a flower, people would’ve been more captivated by her thorns than her petals, if they were able to overlook their repugnance.

“I don’t want to hear your jokes! Just tell me what the spell is! What’s going to happen?!” Selue demanded.

Aviella stopped filing her nails and tossed a cloth away. She reached out with her long fingers to take the serpent sculpture lying on the table.

“Nothing you need to worry about. The people’s minds will be controlled, just as you desire. But that’s not your only wish that will come true. That thing you people revere will begin to enter the world. That’s all.”

“Huh...?”

Selue didn’t know what to say. What Aviella suggested had never happened in the entire history of the continent.

Not even his faith was strong enough to still his trembling legs.

“When it emerges...what will become of this land?” he asked hoarsely.

“You must know the answer to that,” Aviella replied. “You’re the Children of the Third Man. You know better than anyone what happens to those who encounter that thing.”

Aviella sounded like she was sentencing him to death.

However, she was right. Selue did understand. That’s precisely why all the color drained from his face.

“Are you saying...that our nation’s people will meet the same fate as the first and second men?”

Aviella’s slight laugh assured him that his suspicions were correct.

She dropped the Shula sculpture on the table. The iron effigy made a harsh grating noise as it rolled across the table.

Selue couldn’t blame Aviella’s actions on her mere lack of faith anymore. He drew closer to her.

“How could you be so stupid?! Our whole country will be wiped off the map!”

“There might be one survivor, though. Somebody who won’t fall under that thing’s mind control.”

“And you think it’ll be you?!”

“Not necessarily.”

Aviella looked over her shoulder. A black-robed man waited against the wall like a statue. He was her chaperone, a man whose true identity was a mystery to all but Aviella herself. He carried no weapons, but he exuded an aura that

suggested he could leap to Aviella's defense at any time.

His presence compelled Selue, who was already consumed by anger and confusion, to restrain himself. He took two staggering steps back, not prepared to give up entirely.

"I'll stop this...," he muttered.

"Do whatever you like. Are you going to run up to the castle and knock on the gates? The king is too blinded by his own power to believe that a spell could lead to the destruction of his nation."

Undoubtedly, the king would question how Selue came to know about the secret spell and detain him for interrogation. There was a strong possibility that the king would take extreme measures as well.

Complaining to the bishop would be fruitless, too. If what Aviella said was true, he desired for that thing to reveal itself. The only way to stop the plan was by exposing the truth to his coconspirator, the false royal chief mage inside the castle. Unfortunately, the plan was already in motion. It was too late to contact him by any normal means. Idos had been instructed not to accept any form of external communication to keep the Shula faith's involvement a secret.



The look in Selue's eyes remained stern as he silently turned and exited the room, leaving just the man and woman behind.

Silence settled over the chamber. Eventually, though, the black-robed man spoke.

"Are you okay with this, Aviella?" he asked.

"It doesn't bother me. Besides, it's not like I can do anything about it."

"In that case, you would do well to leave this country. Even from afar, you can still learn what unfolds."

The woman smiled but said nothing and gave no indication of moving. Her bewitching gaze was fixed upon the serpent sculpture on the table.

The black snake's empty eye sockets were pointed toward a corner of the room.



The sun was setting very quickly.

The edges of the sky had barely turned red when the translucent veil of darkness descended upon the city.

Shizuku, who had returned to her room in the inn, looked out through the window. In the distance, she could see the partially obscured shape of the castle, illuminated by the city's lights.

"Looks kind of eerie," she muttered.

Only then did Shizuku realize that this was the first night she would spend alone in this world. She'd always slept by herself, of course, but no one else she knew was under the same roof.

She thought this over as she sipped her tea and quickly realized she was wrong.

Shizuku wasn't alone. Mea was with her. She'd been in bird form for so long that Shizuku had forgotten she could become a girl.

"Could you return to your original form? We're inside, and there's nobody else around..." Shizuku said. "Guess not, huh?"

It was supposed to have been a peaceful night for the two of them. However, Mea's behavior suddenly took an odd turn.

The bird fluttered to the windowsill and let out a piercing cry. Green light shone faintly in her eyes. Noticing something was unusual, Shizuku leaped to her feet, panicked.

"What's wrong? Are you angry about something?"

Mea shook her small bird head. Puzzled, Shizuku knelt on the floor so that she was on the same level as her assistant demon. She followed Mea's gaze to see what had seized her attention.

"Oh...is it something to do with the castle?"

The small bird chirped in agreement. Shizuku scooped Mea up in her hands and stood frozen, unsure what to do. Erik was inside the castle, and now Mea was wary of the place.

Shizuku considered her options, nodding after a while.

"Okay. Let's take a short trip out."

Shizuku gathered up some of her things. She carefully collected her books together and placed them in her bag, then covered them with some clothes. She then placed a few smaller objects in the bag's side pocket, but she packed no more, thinking it best to travel light.

After confirming she still had on the ring Erik had bought for her, she bobbed her head at the small bird in the window.

"I'm ready. Let's go."

Erik had brought his belongings with him to the castle. That meant Shizuku could leave the inn whenever she liked, provided she took her luggage with her.

She didn't feel the need to depart the city, but if there was something going on at the castle, she wanted to take a look for herself. Shizuku spared a bit of time to pack up all her things just in case she needed to make a run for it. Mea definitely seemed like she was trying to warn her.

Ultimately, that turned out to be for the best.

Shizuku left her room at the inn with Mea on her shoulder. She ran down the stairs and made for the door, yet right as she was about to turn the corner, she retreated and hid in the hallway.

The door to the inn had just opened, and five stern-faced soldiers were entering.

Why were there *soldiers* here?

Shizuku felt her heart begin to race, but she tried to reassure herself that this had nothing to do with her. After all, she had no idea what she'd be in trouble for.

So long as she acted confident, no one would be suspicious. However, she ended up holding her breath and spying instead. When she sensed the soldiers drawing closer, she recoiled in fear. She took another step back so they wouldn't spot her.

Someone rushed out in a huff. Shizuku figured it was the innkeeper. His footsteps sounded unusually loud as they echoed through the dark rooms of the inn.

"How can I help you?" he asked apprehensively.

"We're looking for somebody. A young girl with black eyes. We have reason to believe that she's traveling with a mage."

Shizuku had to clap her hands over her mouth to stop a yelp. She exchanged glances with the small bird perched on her shoulder. There were no other girls with black eyes who were traveling with a mage here. These men were looking for Shizuku.

Unsure whether to reveal herself or not, she concentrated on gathering her thoughts. Sweat built on her fingers as she gripped her bag tightly.

"And why are you looking for her?" the innkeeper pressed.

"She hasn't done anything wrong. We just want to speak to her briefly about her companion."

Something must have happened in the castle, and it concerned Erik. Shizuku wanted to learn the details, but she wasn't reckless enough to expose herself

just to ask. She leaned in for a better listen while trying to remain undetected.

“Has there been some sort of dispute? I’d prefer not to get involved,” the innkeeper said.

“It’s nothing serious, but I must warn you that this is a formal edict from the castle. Keeping anything from us is a punishable offense.”

The moment Shizuku heard this, she turned around and started walking in the opposite direction. She wished dearly to run, but the sound would alert the guards to her presence. Sensing her legs begin to tremble, Shizuku chided herself mentally. Slowly, she made her way to the inn’s back entrance.

She couldn’t let the soldiers see her. They wouldn’t have threatened the innkeeper with punishment over an ordinary matter.

When Shizuku reached the back door, she lifted the latch and stepped out into the darkness.

Without saying a word, she turned the first corner she could, and then another. She leaned against the wall of a closed shop and stared at the sky. The castle peeked through the narrow gaps in the buildings. A faint light shone from its glass domes.

“What do I do now?” Shizuku wondered softly. Worry gathered in her stomach.

She used both of her hands to lift the bird off her shoulder to have a better look at her.

“Hey, Mea. What do you think I should do? You don’t happen to know where Erik is, do you?”

Shizuku had no way of locating him herself, but Mea was a demon. Plus, Erik’s name was on the contract that designated Mea as Shizuku’s assistant.

Perhaps Mea could use her magical powers to track Erik down. Shizuku gave her assistant demon a sincere, hopeful look.

Mea tilted her head to one side slightly, then began to rise into the air, although not at all how a bird would have. Shizuku hastily released her, and the small creature’s outline began to warp. The bird’s form became a vivid shade of

green.

Shizuku's eyes widened. The next thing she knew, an emerald-haired girl stood before her.

"Mea!"

"Be warned, Master," Mea declared. "Abnormal magic swirls in the vicinity of the castle."

"Abnormal? What do you mean?" said Shizuku. "What about Erik?"

"I can't sense any magical power coming from him."

"Huh?"

This blunt response made Shizuku shudder with horror. Erik had been born with magical power, yet Mea couldn't feel it. Did that mean...?

"Don't worry. It might be that the magic coming from the castle is so powerful that it's preventing me from detecting anything else. I'm not a very powerful demon, after all."

Shizuku had been growing pale, but upon hearing that, she nearly collapsed with tremendous relief. She covered her face with one trembling hand.

"He's okay, then?" she asked.

"I have no proof, so I can't say for sure, but if he is safe, he must be inside the castle."

"Has something happened there?"

"I can sense powerful magic moving about and slowly being molded into shape... It's like... I don't really know."

"Molded into shape?"

Erik had gone to the castle to carry out some sort of work. Shizuku stared at the structure.

He had to be there, and according to Mea, something unusual was taking place. What if he was in danger and needed to be saved?

The closer Shizuku got to the castle, the more likely it was that the pursuing

soldiers would capture her. Were that to happen, she could end up more of a hindrance to Erik than a help. If her priority was saving herself, finding a place to hide was best.

And yet...

“The castle, huh?”

...if something weird was transpiring, leaving Erik to fight for himself wasn't an option.

Shizuku hadn't embarked on this journey to save the world or to rescue someone important to her. There was no reason to sacrifice her traveling companion, the person she was so indebted to, for the sake of her own progress.

If sacrificing Erik was a necessity, Shizuku never would've embarked on this journey in the first place. She would have spent the rest of her life in that small town.

But instead, Shizuku had chosen to set out. Supported by the kindness of others, she aspired to pursue every possibility that was available to her.

Abandoning Erik or giving up on him had never been options.

Shizuku had no intention of casting him aside. She didn't want to.

She took a deep breath and released it slowly. Waves of anxiety had threatened to throw her into a panic, but this slow, deliberate breathing helped to steady her nerves.

Resolute determination took hold of Shizuku. It was the sort of mentality that had helped her cross the desert when she first arrived in this world. She envisioned herself walking ahead.

Shizuku adjusted her grip on her bag. When she noticed how stiff her fingers had become, she grimaced slightly.

“Okay, let's go. There might be some way for us to sneak in.”

Mea became a bird again in response to her master's words. Shizuku offered her left arm to the assistant demon and then set out.

With that, the anomaly that nobody had expected to arrive dissolved into the night and vanished.



Erik deduced the underlying plan rather swiftly. He was the first of the fifty mages in his group to work it out, at least.

It wasn't necessarily because he was excellent with spell decoding. Rather, it was owing to the fact that Erik was the sole individual present who possessed the necessary background knowledge. He'd seen a similar spell before in a cursed tower in a small village.

Once he noticed the similarities between the two spells, the answer came quickly. As soon as he gained a rough understanding of it, he chided himself for being so slow to catch on.

The Noy family's tower had been erected a hundred and twenty years ago after a woman was influenced by a religious sect.

That woman originally lived in the castle city, which suggested that religion had its roots here, too. More than a century had passed, but the faith still had some influence over the castle city.

"Wait... Wasn't it connected to some sort of religion? There might be similar ones all over the place," Shizuku had said.

She was right. That was the most sinister thing about this.

The tower Erik and Shizuku had come across had a spell meant to erode people's minds without them knowing.

And the spell Erik was working on now...

"This is insane," he muttered, although the words didn't truly leave his mouth.

Such an event had never happened before. The continent kept records spanning more than a thousand years, but there were no documented occurrences—only a number of unsuccessful attempts.

Failures or not, each had resulted in a great many deaths.

Undoubtedly, invoking such a destructive manifestation was a forbidden

curse, and Erik was helping to set it in motion.

He couldn't let the curse be completed. But how would he stop it?

The one remaining mystery was why this was happening in the castle.

Past attempts had been enacted by small groups motivated by religious fanaticism. No state had ever spearheaded the construction of a forbidden curse.

The reason was obvious. Once the spell was activated, everything in the immediate vicinity would be destroyed.

It was therefore likely that most people who worked for the castle were oblivious to the true nature of the spell. If Erik could persuade enough of them, he'd have a much higher chance of preventing disaster.

Once Erik had finished reciting a long chant, he assembled sequence twenty to twenty-five. These expanding sequences intertwined and connected with similar ones on either side.

It was essential that he keep an eye on the others. That way, he could work out who believed the false information about the spell and who knew the truth.

This was risky business. One wrong move, and he could be killed immediately.

Erik recited another chant, then intently surveyed his surroundings.

There were two royal mages in the room with him. One looked to be in his late thirties, while another was around Erik's age. The older one seemed to carry more authority, even judging by the way he was dressed. However, his grouchy-looking face suggested he'd be hard to convince, especially considering Erik was an outsider.

If he had to speak to one of them, the younger man seemed like the better option. Erik searched for an opportunity to make his move, and to his good fortune, it arrived far sooner than he expected.

Another mage entered and called the older man away. Aside from the soldiers, the only authority in the chamber was the young royal mage.

Erik devised a plan quickly. Once he reached a suitable point to pause his work, he raised his hand.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Could I go outside for a short break?”

“Sure, no problem,” replied the mage. “Do you want me to accompany you?”

“Please.”

Erik suddenly wondered what would become of Shizuku if he was killed.

He would’ve preferred not to consider that unpleasant possibility, but he needed to.

Shizuku was fairly well-adjusted. She had Mea with her, so she’d probably be able to return to Wanope by herself if necessary. Perhaps she’d find a different companion and continue her journey. It wasn’t like Erik was an irreplaceable presence in Shizuku’s life.

Still...she’d probably be upset. Erik could imagine her patiently waiting for him, oblivious to the fact that he would never return.

He didn’t enjoy that idea very much. Erik couldn’t understand why, but he didn’t wish to see her upset. They were still a long way from Farsas. Shizuku needed to get back to her old world.

Erik maintained his composure as he climbed the stairs, accompanied by the royal mage.

As they moved down a silent hallway on his way back from his short break, he broached the topic of the spell.

“Do you happen to know what kind of spell this is?”

In the brief amount of time that they’d spent together, Erik had judged the young royal mage to be a nice person, so he decided not to beat around the bush.

As expected, the man looked a little uncomfortable.

“The royal chief mage has explained it to me, but it’s confidential information that I’m not able to disclose. It sounds like it’s a spell that the castle has known about for a long time.”

“Does it have anything to do with a religion?” Erik pressed.

“I don’t believe so. Our country doesn’t favor any specific faith,” the mage

replied.

Erik didn't get the sense the man was lying. In other words, he didn't seem to know the truth. Erik was nonetheless relieved by how genuine the royal mage was. He didn't show any prejudice toward Erik for being a traveling mage. When it came to people like him, being polite and upfront was best.

Erik lowered his voice, a serious look on his face.

"The truth is, I saw this same spell in the archives in Farsas seven years back. Several centuries ago, a small group of religious fanatics unleashed a forbidden curse in the castle city, hoping to obliterate Farsas. Their attempt was thwarted, but fifty-seven people still lost their lives."

"What?"

Erik's words had a clear effect on the other mage, as intended. For a long time, he simply looked stunned. Then his surprise morphed into a mix of fear and doubt.

With a perplexed look in his eyes, the mage struggled to laugh away his concern.

"That can't be true..."

"You might not believe me yet, but I assure you, it is. This is just a personal suspicion of mine, but I think someone might have lied about this spell's effects when presenting it to the castle staff," Erik said. "In reality, while the first nineteen sequences that form the foundation of the spell are powered by magic, sequences twenty-seven and forty directly absorb the flesh and souls of those who come into direct contact with it. Once the magic is activated, sequences twenty to thirty will coalesce to create a circle, creating a hole—conceptually speaking."

"A hole? Conceptually speaking?"

"A hole leading out of this world...one that leads to the Sea of Negativity, an ocean deep below. Its existence hasn't been proven, but during a separate incident outside Farsas, a dense miasma formed inside a spell circle, leading many to go missing or perish outright. Some were also noted to have experienced mental abnormalities. There should be a record of it in the Magical

History Almanac, albeit a very general one. Of course, you'd be able to gain more specific information if you asked Farsas."

"That...doesn't sound good..."

Erik interspersed the facts with a few white lies. Survival was critical. The exact truth had to play second to that imperative.

Exaggerating a few parts of the story was Erik's only recourse. He was confident that he was right about curse's true nature, and provided his confidence wasn't misplaced, proof would reveal itself in time. Even if he found no evidence, individuals who knew the truth would surely present themselves if he built enough skepticism around the spell.

The young royal mage seemed shaken. It was obvious from the look on his face that he was trying to make sense of the things he'd been told.

Erik gave him plenty of time to consider, then offered another push.

"Personally, I don't think we should allow this spell to be completed," he said. "Do you think His Majesty desires the destruction of the castle city?"

"Of course not!" the royal mage replied. "His intent was to protect his kingdom..."

"All the more reason for us to stop this. Once it's complete, there's no going back."

The spell would inevitably bring about a monumental tragedy. Not only would numerous lives be lost and the castle city be obliterated, but no one truly understood how to seal such a hole.

The court mage, who'd turned white as a sheet, spent a moment considering before responding:

"I can't guarantee that we'll be able to stop the spell's construction right away—but if what you say is true, we should be able to halt its assembly," he muttered, somewhat hesitant.

"I understand. Thank you for listening."

This was a good start. The spell wouldn't be finished for another two days. The truth was sure to become clear before then, barring interference.

Erik advised the royal mage to be careful whom he spoke to. Then he went back down the hall the way he'd come.

The spell, which covered the entire chamber, now exuded an overwhelming presence. It seemed to sneer at everyone's ignorance.



When Candela's assistant royal chief mage received the report, he couldn't stop himself from tutting. After all, it was the king who'd sought the creation of this so-called forbidden, and its long-awaited construction had only just begun.

The huge spell had been brought to the castle around a century ago. Originally, it had been described as an array to form a magic projectile potent enough to burn away an entire town effortlessly. It didn't require any flesh or blood, but it was dubbed a forbidden curse for the large-scale destruction it would cause.

Once complete, it would provide Candela with immense power, defensive and offensive. The recent trouble in neighboring nations had caused Candela no end of concern, but this forbidden curse would be its trump card.

Unfortunately, a report came in claiming that the spell would have a different effect.

The assistant chief couldn't help but grimace. It felt like someone was trying to hamper the country's agenda.

The two mages standing in front of him looked puzzled as they delivered their report. It seemed like they felt the same way.

"Upon investigation, the Magical History Almanac does indeed detail two incidents in which religious fanatics used forbidden curses to unleash devastation. One took place a hundred and twenty years ago, and the other four hundred and ten. The latter failed because the spell was incomplete, and the former was foiled thanks to Farsas's intervention during the curse's assembly. Despite this, both incidents had a significant number of casualties. There was a similar occurrence three centuries ago in Farsas's castle city, but there's only a brief description about what the forbidden curse created there. We'd probably be able to find out more if we asked Farsas..."

“How could you even consider such thing?!” the assistant royal chief mage exclaimed. “This is a forbidden curse we’re talking about!”

Asking Farsas for that information would be like begging the most powerful nation on the continent to get involved. Farsas, a country that viewed itself as the overseer of all magic, wielded significant authority across the land. It would surely impose sanctions upon learning that Candela had tried to create a forbidden curse. That needed to be avoided at all costs.

The mages who’d delivered the news huddled together. The assistant royal chief mage did little to conceal his irritation.

“The magic is so complicated. It’ll take a long while to analyze. Even if we get someone to examine it in secret, three days won’t be enough...,” one of the mages said.

“Maybe that was inevitable... The spell has been hidden away for so long.”

For over a century, the only ones permitted to view the spell diagrams were kings and their royal chief mages.

The assistant royal chief mage had been astonished by the intricacy of the diagrams. He never guessed forbidden curses would be so convoluted. He couldn’t say for certain, but it seemed unlikely that anybody would be able to discern its true purpose in a few hours.

That said, turning a blind eye to the situation could lead to dire consequences. He furrowed his brow and scowled harder than he ever had.

“Should we pass your message on to the king...?” one of the mages asked.

“What message?” came a voice from the entrance.

The whole room tensed.

Royal Chief Mage Idos shot his subordinates an icy glare. It wasn’t clear how long he’d been there. He was accompanied by another mage who stood behind him, frowning. That man must have overheard the conversation and told Idos about it.

The tension was so palpable that it felt like it was piercing the assistant royal chief mage’s skin. He rose to his feet, trying to hide how unnerved he really

was.

“A—a message saying that the spell in question may have unanticipated effects...”

“Who said that?”

The assistant royal chief mage knew better than to answer this question honestly.

The wisest course was to say something needless to buy himself time while he worked out how to outwit Idos.

Idos was the royal chief mage. He’d been granted access to that spell for years, yet he’d never remarked on its effects. That’s what made the other mage suspicious and led to them seeking the help of the assistant royal chief mage rather than Idos.

Unfortunately, Idos’s intimidating presence proved too much for the assistant royal chief mage. In an attempt to shift the blame, he confessed, “One of the newly recruited mages mentioned it,” and revealed Erik’s name.

Idos had somebody fetch Erik’s application. He took a quick look at it, then nodded.

“A traveling mage talking nonsense...,” he said. “You should all return to your posts immediately.”

Judging by his tone of voice, he wasn’t prepared to tolerate any counterarguments. Once the others hurried away, Idos summoned his soldiers and gave them the documents on Erik.

“Lock this man in solitary confinement. Kill him if he resists. He’s only one traveler; I doubt he has any friends. No one will kick up a fuss if he’s never heard from again.”

“No, there was a girl with him. I’m sure of it,” one of the soldiers replied. “I saw them together when we issued the call for mages.”

“Then arrest her as well.”

One of the incidents the mage named Erik mentioned had never been publicized by Farsas. If it was true, then he had some connection to the

kingdom of magic. Even if it was a lie, there was a risk he or his companion might inform Farsas about the scheme in Candela. Were that to happen, so much work would be for nothing.

Idos arranged for a group of soldiers to search the inn recorded on Erik's application for the girl who was his companion, then ordered them to go.

He let out a deep sigh as he took a seat in his chair.

"Be patient for a while longer, Bishop," he said. "Soon, the minds of every person in this country will serve our god..."

For over a hundred years, an endless stream of fanatical believers had been strategically planted within the castle. Idos was just one of many.

He let out an exuberant laugh.

Little did he know that the mage's suspicions were correct. The forbidden curse wasn't the one the bishop had told him of, but something more sinister.

He also had no idea that his comrade, Selue, who'd uncovered the truth, was en route to the castle to disrupt the forbidden curse's creation.

The approaching chaos, which would come to be known as the Three Days of Silence, was about to begin.



Shizuku had never been more grateful for her good sense of direction.

She occasionally glanced up at Candela Castle as she weaved her way through the narrow alleyways. As she gradually approached the magnificent structure, it dominated more and more of her field of vision.

Shizuku suspected that traversing any of the larger roads would make her easier for the soldiers to spot, so she'd erred on the side of caution. Thankfully, she'd still managed to close in on the castle.

"Now it's just a matter of getting past the walls, I guess..." she muttered.

Up close, it was clear that the barricades were at least three meters tall, too tall to climb. Shizuku would need to locate a rear entrance or the like to sneak through.

Shizuku took the next right turn, which brought her even closer to the castle.

“Maybe we should have done some exploration beforehand.”

Shizuku hadn't gone anywhere near the palace since she and Erik had stopped by to take a look a few days ago. She could only guess at the possible location of a rear entrance. She assumed it would be on the side opposite the front gate and took off in that direction.

She wasn't running for long, though. As the castle drew closer, Shizuku heard a muffled explosion from behind the walls. Her gaze went up to the night sky at the sound.

“Huh?”

Shizuku had lived an extremely ordinary life. She'd never heard an explosion before, not even in her old world. She hadn't even seen a fire. There'd been a *boom* when Mea destroyed that tower, but Shizuku had been in too much of a frenzy to remember.

As such, she couldn't help but flinch when she heard the explosion. It sounded like a bunch of fireworks going off at the same time.

“...Boom?” Shizuku said, mimicking the sound in a somewhat goofy way. No amount of silliness would alter the reality of the situation, though.

After trading a glance with the small bird on her shoulder, Shizuku took a hesitant look at the castle from the shadow of the city's buildings.

She couldn't see any smoke or fire, perhaps because it was too dark or she was too far away. Shizuku didn't get the impression that things had calmed down yet, though.

Noise filled the streets. Other people must have heard the explosion, as well.

“L-let's go and check this out.”

Shizuku kept an eye on her surroundings as she took off again. She steadily approached the castle, making sure to conceal herself where she could.

The palace, which remained faintly lit even during the night, gradually became larger and larger.

Then a high-pitched sound cut through the air, a noise like clanging metal. Shizuku only just barely managed to hear it, and she cocked her head in

confusion.

Some people were sticking their heads out of windows, but not many of them appeared interested enough to venture outside to investigate the situation. Shizuku moved around those who did and past the many open windows. The castle walls were straight ahead. No immediate sign of an explosion presented itself, and there were no soldiers nearby.

Shizuku glanced at the tall wall across the street, then followed it around, toward the side opposite the main gate.

The faint metallic noise, which had been barely audible at first, gradually became clearer.

“Clang, clang?” muttered Shizuku, mimicking the sound. It sounded like she was making a stupid sound effect.

She still had no idea what the sound was, though. It reminded her of a blacksmith striking iron with a hammer.

The gentle slope of the castle walls guided her along. Shizuku wasn't exactly flying, but she did run almost as fast as she could.

However, as Shizuku's momentum carried her along, a bird screeched shrilly in her ear, prompting her to make a hard stop. She stumbled three or four paces before coming to a complete standstill.

That was all it took.

She'd stepped right into a battle zone.

“Don't falter! Proceed!”

White, gleaming light reflected off steel surfaces. As the men brandished their swords, she heard that same metallic sound again.

A dumbstruck Shizuku stood rooted to the ground as she watched the scene unfold. She needed a few seconds to grasp that it was really happening. Only then did she finally realized the noise was that of weapons clashing.

The castle walls had nearly collapsed, likely from the explosion a few minutes ago. The soldiers who'd dashed out from the castle grounds were engaged with another group of men dressed in black from head to foot.

Shizuku witnessed a man mercilessly bring his longsword to bear on the head of an injured opponent who knelt defenseless on the ground. It was all she could do to shield her eyes.

A few seconds later, she opened them slightly...only to find a man lying flat on his face. Something poured out of his fractured skull and spread across the ground. Others trampled on his body carelessly.

Shizuku had never seen anything like it. Even under the cloak of darkness, it was a gruesome sight to behold.

Someone swallowed nervously nearby. It took Shizuku a while to realize it was her.

Her legs were stiff as rods, yet they trembled helplessly. In spite of how warm she'd felt moments earlier, her body instantly turned as cold as ice.

Where is this?

What's happening?

Where is my family? My friends? Where am I? Why are such terrible, awful things...?

Words filled her head, splintered pieces of vocabulary linking together.

Shizuku's eyes shot wide with terror, and the instinct to flee overwrote all else. There was no plan; she simply couldn't consider an alternative.

The next thing she knew, however, a man who'd run out in front of her collapsed to the ground.

It was too dark to see him properly, but she knew she wasn't imagining his pained pleas for help and the smell of blood wafting from him.

When she met his gaze, she understood immediately that he was experiencing something more than agony.

Oh... It's a person.

Shizuku knelt beside him. Before she had the chance to think, her body started acting on its own accord.

"I-I'll help you," she told him.

If wanting to escape was a human instinct, then wanting to help others was, too.

She pulled out a handkerchief and pressed it against the wound on the man's side. The foul stench of blood made her want to gag, but she stifled that urge and pushed hard.

Sweat ran down her forehead in beads.

What was she supposed to do? There were no ambulances. Would a doctor be able to help him? She wasn't sure.

Shizuku couldn't use magic. Erik wasn't here. Would the man be okay? She had no idea.

She was scared.

She was useless.

She hadn't even managed to run away.

Somebody was approaching slowly. A soldier. He carried a sword and glowered at Shizuku and the man with a frightening expression.

Sensing him coming toward them, Shizuku looked up. The man slowly brandished his weapon.

It felt like everything was in slow motion. Even Shizuku's body felt sluggish and heavy.

Could she defend this man?

Shizuku wasn't hurt, whereas he was.

Her hands wouldn't move, though. Neither would her legs. Her mind wasn't passing on any messages.

She needed Mea. But...

A forceful impact sent Shizuku tumbling backward.

The man who'd been groaning and crawling along the ground had pushed her away as hard as he could.

He looked into her dark eyes for a brief moment, then shut his own. The

soldier standing over him thrust his sword into the man's back.

"Wait..."

Nothing stopped. Time wasn't passing slowly *or* quickly. It ticked on mercilessly, regardless of what was happening.

The man with the sword in his back convulsed violently before going grotesquely still.

Shizuku, still sitting on the ground, looked up at the young soldier.

His expression revealed a mix of distress and excitement. He was undeniably human.

"Oh..."

As Shizuku gazed up at the soldier, one thought crossed her mind.

Maybe this is where I die.

The young soldier had turned toward her, hesitantly readying his sword. It wasn't the first time Shizuku had wondered whether she was about to die, but it was definitely the first time she felt like someone else would kill her.

These things happened to other people, not her. Regardless of how distressing the events on the news were, Shizuku had never connected with them on a personal level.

Now, though, she was coming face-to-face with her own mortality. It had appeared right in front of her, taking the form of another human being.

Still, Shizuku couldn't fully process everything that was happening. It seemed too absurd. She felt a little bad that she wouldn't be able to return her books to her college. That was it.

Shizuku closed her eyes.

She was scared.

To feel fear was all she could do anymore.

No words would come out.

She was too frightened, and she could only wait.

A high-pitched clash of metal on metal sounded from right beside her.

Shizuku reflexively covered her ears.

Her eyes opened cautiously. It was still nighttime. Yet she saw what was before her as clear as day.

The soldier looked astonished.

Two swords met.

“No true guard would strike a young girl without even letting her speak,” a man said, sounding extremely relaxed.

Shizuku recognized the man’s voice. As soon as she’d grounded herself again, she frantically retreated backward and rose to her feet.

The man, who’d blocked the soldier’s attack with his sword, looked over his shoulder. There was something undeniably shady about his smile, but it had warmth as well.

“Come on now, Shizuku. I know exploring the city at night can be fun and all, but you need to rein it in.”

Tarkis shoved his opponent back. While the soldier staggered, Tarkis traced a broad cut with his blade in an apparent attempt to scare the man. The soldier leaped back, flustered.

A young soldier ought to have anticipated another attack and defended himself, yet he stood motionless, his mouth agape.

Tarkis pulled the young woman he’d rescued by the hand and led her away from the castle.

As the structure bounded into the distance, Shizuku turned pale.

“Huh? Hold on. Wait.”

“This is what we call a strategic withdrawal,” the man who’d saved her said. “You can tell me what’s troubling you over a cup of tea or something. For now, we’re running.”

Shizuku felt only confusion, but she did as he advised and focused all her attention on moving her legs.

Nobody chased them. The sound of swords colliding faded away, yet in the dark, death felt omnipresent. Shizuku's emotions felt too much to bear, but she endured, nonetheless.



When Idos, the royal chief mage, learned that one of his soldiers had attacked the girl they were supposed to capture at the inn but missed, he was furious. However, another revelation made his blood boil even more.

The mage who'd expressed concerns about the forbidden curse had disappeared, and nobody knew how or why.

Idos scowled at the news. By the time the soldiers whom Idos had sent to arrest him entered the hall in the basement, he was gone. Apparently, he'd wandered off saying he'd forgotten something, and nobody knew where he went.

Rattled, Idos ordered his men to search the entirety of the castle.

That's when a new report arrived. The castle walls had been destroyed, and a group was invading.

"Dammit! Dispose of the attackers immediately! Don't let them set foot inside!"

If Idos had gone to the battle and investigated the situation himself, he might have discovered that the invaders were adherents of the Shula faith and followers of his compatriot Selue. Instead, he'd convinced himself that the invaders were mage escapees who were planning on stopping the forbidden curse.

The attackers did wish to stop the spell, but the details were quite different from how Idos understood them. As a result, he saw these invaders as enemies, issuing commands from the safety of the palace.

Only a small number of people knew the truth, and he wasn't one of them.



"Chaos is unfolding."

Aviella stood by the window, looking down at the city. There were no flames. She referred to the surging magical power.

A battle had broken out, just as she'd predicted. She flashed a beautiful smile.

The elderly man sitting in the chair chuckled softly.

"I take it you told Selue the truth to incite him to stop the forbidden curse," he said. "You truly are a terrifying enchantress."

"Conflict is what we want, isn't it? I just gave him a reason to initiate a fight."

"Peace never lasts. Still, thanks to you, completion is within sight. The more blood spilled, the closer we get to the end."

The bishop grinned sinisterly from beneath his hood.

The woman feigned surprise. "*You're* the cruel one. After all, you're the one who deceived your own followers to get them to construct this forbidden curse."

"In the past, our faith's followers would have gladly sacrificed themselves for the sake of our god. Can we say the same today? The Shula faith's emphasis on 'living in the present' has proven appealing and promoted proliferation among the masses, but it has also led to a decline in compliance. I'm simply urging everyone to return to our religion's source."

The black-robed man standing behind Aviella narrowed his eyes at the bishop but remained silent. Aviella parted her lustrous lips to speak in his place.

"I suppose the Sea of Negativity is the origin point, now that I think about it," she said.

"One can't turn a blind eye to an inextricable part of their faith," the bishop stated.

"Do you think everyone should share your perspective?"

Silence fell between them, settling on the floor like mud.

The old man's eyes were closed. The woman laughed. Her pale fingers traced the gold embellishments on the cover of a book she held.

"The curtain is about to fall. Are you content to remain hidden until then?"

"When the end comes, I'll show myself. I need to welcome my god, after all," the bishop replied. "I imagine you'll be leaving soon, Aviella."

“Yep,” the woman responded.

“I suppose I should thank you for your help. Without your book, I wouldn’t have been able to replace that spell with a true forbidden curse.”

Generations of bishops had spent a long time intricately weaving the roots of their conspiracy. They’d gradually sought to establish control over the country by spreading their faith among the citizens and installing chosen individuals within the palace.

They had brought the forbidden curse to the castle over a century ago, where it had been carefully preserved ever since. Once activated, the minds of all the city’s residents would fall under the control of the spellcaster.

However, that spell had been swapped out right at the last moment. After learning from Aviella’s crimson book, the present bishop had ordered the royal chief mage to alter the spell’s structure.

“I must ask you before you leave... What is that tome?”

Aviella’s book wasn’t supposed to exist. It detailed numerous forbidden curses that were believed to have been erased from all records.

The bishop was suspicious of Aviella’s mysterious volume, but he’d never asked for the truth behind it before.

Aviella looked down at the volume she held. She felt it tremble slightly in her hands, as though it were trying to answer the bishop, but she might have imagined it.

Sensing something moving outside the window, Aviella looked down. There, she saw a man running along the street, leading a young woman by the hand.

The scene didn’t interest her in the slightest, so she smiled and turned back toward the bishop. She held up the tome and smirked.

“Good question,” she said. “I think it’s just...somebody’s personal records.”



Having escaped the chaos of the attack on the castle, Shizuku found herself being pulled along into a tavern.

The poorly lit room was already crowded. Whispers danced around her, their

sounds reminiscent of waves landing upon the shore.

The tavern's patrons, their faces illuminated by candlelight, varied greatly in terms of appearances. There was a reserved man, a mysterious-looking woman, and even a rough-looking guy with scars on his face.

The aroma of sweet fragrances and alcohol mixed together, filling the tavern with a well-balanced odor.

Feeling like the atmosphere was overwhelming her, she asked Tarkis, the man who was always one step ahead, a question.

"Where are we...?"

"Huh? It's a hideout where guys like me go to lie low. Nobody from the palace comes here, so no need to fret."

Tarkis spotted a free table farther inside. He sat Shizuku down first, then took the seat opposite her. They hadn't placed an order, but someone came and brought them two glasses, nonetheless.

"Go on, drink up," said Tarkis.

"What is it?" asked Shizuku. "Alcohol?"

"Of course."

"But I'm not old enough..."

"I thought you were eighteen," the man said, chugging down the amber-colored liquid like it was water.

Shizuku peered into her glass. The mysterious beverage's smell was so strong that it burned the back of her throat. She couldn't bring herself to take a sip.

As she looked around the tavern, scenes from earlier came flooding back.

The man who'd died a painful death. The soldier who'd killed him. Shizuku had seen people act in ways she'd never seen before, and yet they were undeniably human.

She was too drained to cry, but at the same time, she couldn't shake how she felt. Her emotions seared her insides more intensely than the potent stench of alcohol.

“Are you upset?” Tarkis asked her.

“I don’t know, am I?” she replied.

Perhaps she was. Shizuku stared at her hands. Her fingers, which she’d seen so many times before, shook slightly.

Death was merciless.

Shizuku had come perilously close to meeting her end. She’d remained still and stared at the man trying to kill her, unable to do a thing.

Tarkis, on the other hand, had to be accustomed to those situations. He conducted himself as he always did.

When he noticed Shizuku dolefully hanging her head, he pushed the glass toward her.

“Drink it. You don’t look too good.”

“I don’t want it. I’m sorry, but I don’t drink.”

“You’re missing out. This is pretty good stuff.”

The man took her glass and casually drained it. It was a bold gesture, one that served as a reminder of how different Shizuku and Tarkis were. Her expression turned glum.

Shizuku knew she was useless alone, but she hadn’t realized to what extent. If Tarkis hadn’t showed up, she would have died without so much as a fight. She never would have seen Erik again or made it back to her world.

Shizuku turned to look at the small bird on her shoulder. If she’d asked for Mea’s help, she would’ve escaped, but she’d hesitated. After recalling that half-destroyed cursed tower and seeing the fear and excitement in the eyes of the soldier who was trying to kill her, she couldn’t bring herself to do a thing.

It wasn’t that Shizuku wanted to die. She was just a coward, too scared to decide. She’d retreated inward, unable to carry on by herself. Nothing could have come from that, but she hadn’t been able to manage anything else.

“...Thank you for saving me,” Shizuku whispered.

“You’re welcome,” Tarkis replied. “But it was really no big deal.”

"It *was* a big deal," Shizuku argued.

Shizuku put her elbows on the table and rested her head in her hands. A deep breath did little to pacify her turbulent mind.

At last, heat gathered behind her face, but Shizuku held back the tears that threatened to cascade down her cheeks.

When she closed her eyes, there were flashes of that bright, glistening sword. The stark reality of what she'd been through allowed no room for anything else.

She'd been frightened—desperate for someone to save her.

That's why she'd felt so relieved when Tarkis showed up.

Still, the truth was that she hated herself for being that way. Her own inability made her want to sob.

Death awaited all humans. Everybody knew it'd come around eventually.

Shizuku had never been made to confront it so violently before, but this hard truth wasn't unique to this world.

Shizuku had merely been fortunate enough to live in a peaceful environment. Countless books documented the immense bloodshed that had taken place in her world.

There were some realities too uncomfortable for her to acknowledge, but for humans who were forced to fight to survive, they were an inevitable part of life.

Shizuku knew she was powerless.

That was her starting point. Next time, she'd force herself to make a decision. She wouldn't cower, at least.

The commotion she'd witnessed proved that something strange was happening in the castle, and Erik was caught in the middle of it. The fact that soldiers had come to arrest Shizuku, his companion, was evidence enough.

She needed to find some way of communicating with him.

After a long silence, Shizuku quit staring at the table and lifted her head. She leaned in toward Tarkis, who looked intrigued, then pointed in the direction of the distant palace.

“I want to sneak inside the castle. Do you think I could enter through the collapsed part of the wall?”

“No chance. There’ll be more guards there than anywhere else now. You’ll never get through.”

“Oh...”

In that case, Shizuku needed to come up with another method to get in. She needed to think of the most feasible strategy possible, one that someone like her could manage.

Abandoning Erik wasn’t an option. He’d believed everything she’d told him, no matter how outlandish it sounded. He’d come on a journey with her and even rescued her from that castle at the bottom of the lake.

Neither of them really believed they were friends, but they possessed a better understanding of each other than most acquaintances.

Shizuku enjoyed talking to Erik and learning from him. He was an irreplaceable figure in her life. She lacked the words to describe their relationship for now, but she knew that he was already an important person to her.

She had to explore every avenue she could.

As Shizuku mulled over her options, Tarkis cracked a wry smile.

“Aren’t you going to turn to me for help? You can, you know.”

“I’d like to, but I don’t have any way of repaying you. It wouldn’t be worth it for you.”

“Is that right? There’s plenty of things I’d like to ask you. How about you reward me with some answers?”

Shizuku refused on reflex but realized she had to give his offer careful consideration.

Answering his questions would probably reveal where she was from. He’d learned she was from another world—an unprecedented occurrence.

Tarkis made no effort to conceal his curiosity.

If she disclosed her secret, what would become of her future? Would things become even more complicated, or would they take a different turn altogether?

Shizuku was helpless. Even if Tarkis knew the truth about her, she believed that there wasn't much to gain by exploiting that information.

Tarkis stared at Shizuku, making his fascination quite obvious. Shizuku thought for a moment, then looked up at him.

"How many questions do you want?" she asked.

"Let me think... Three seems plenty, doesn't it?"

"Three, huh?"

She wondered if the genie in Aladdin's lamp got nervous whenever he offered three wishes, too.

Unlike Shizuku, that genie was extremely powerful. For that reason, he probably enjoyed the whole process. She doubted he ever felt as nauseatingly anxious as she did.

Narrowing her eyes, Shizuku said, "Will you really help me enter the castle?"

"I'll figure something out. I'm a mercenary with a reputation for taking on all kinds of different tasks."

"Jack-of-all-trades, master of none?"

"No need to be so blunt. Forget it. Can you make up your mind already? I know you're worried about that mage."

Shizuku frowned, wondering how he'd figured that out. It was a reasonable assumption to make. Erik wasn't around, after all.

Shizuku's priority was confirming Erik's safety, and speaking to him, if possible.

She needed all the help she could get.

"Fine. I accept your conditions. So please...get me into the castle."

"I'll make sure of it, client."

Tarkis sounded serious, but the look on his face was so childish that it left Shizuku feeling somewhat taken aback. The deal felt fair enough, but the mercenary's expression made her feel like she'd been deceived.

Tarkis offered his hand with a smile, but his eyes watched the space behind Shizuku.

"That's our agreement sorted, so what do you guys want? I have a vague idea, but I need to hear the specifics."

"Huh?"

Prompted by Tarkis's words, Shizuku turned to look, and her mouth fell open.

At some point, four men had appeared right behind her. All of them were wrapped entirely in black. The evident leader, a man in his thirties or forties, had an anguished look on his face. The group started fixedly at Tarkis with clear displeasure. Shizuku had seen people wearing clothes like theirs during the battle. They were the outfits of that mysterious band who'd been fighting the soldiers.

The older man was the one who answered. He spoke with a sour tone.

"Mercenary. We've heard that you are willing to take on any task, no matter how complicated. Will you accept ours?"

"Depends what it is," Tarkis replied. "If it's interesting, I might consider it." He placed his hand on Shizuku's head. She still looked startled. "We're moving," he said to her.

"Are we going to a different tavern?"

"No," he answered. "Just follow me."

Tarkis immediately headed to the back of the tavern. He gave a signal to the proprietor with his eyes, then opened a small wooden door and entered the room it led into. It was a small, private room that was likely used for confidential discussions.

Once everyone had settled into their respective seats, the older man laced his fingers together. He seemed to be the boss of the men dressed in black. He introduced himself as Selue.

“I’ve heard that your extensive network of connections makes you an efficient go-between, mercenary.”

“If you want me to work for you, you could at least call me by my name,” Tarkis said. “You’re right about me having a lot of contacts, though.”

“In that case, Tarkis, there’s just one thing we want you to do for us. We want you to initiate an attack on the castle before the end of tomorrow.”

Shizuku bit her lip to stop herself from making a noise. These really were the men who’d fought the soldiers earlier. It didn’t sound like they were ready to give up, either. What did they hope to achieve?

Tarkis glanced at Shizuku out of the corner of his eye, then looked back at Selue. “It’s rare that people hire a mercenary to wage war against a nation, but it’s the scale and time frame of your plan that are the most unusual. There’s so few of you, and tomorrow is just around the corner. Do you know how reckless this is?”

“We have no choice,” Selue argued.

“Why’s that?”

“This whole country is going to be destroyed.”

Understandably, this direct admission left Tarkis at a loss for words. Shizuku covered her mouth with her hands.

What in the world was happening?

Once Tarkis had regained his composure, he pressed Selue for information.

“Why? That sounds a little far-fetched.”

“Because of a forbidden curse. If it’s completed, it will engulf this entire nation and kill everyone. We need to stop it from being finished.”

“A forbidden curse...”

Shizuku had only recently learned the term. Erik had told her about forbidden curses at the inn. The term applied to any magic that shouldn’t be cast. Numerous countries had been wiped out by forbidden curses in the past.

It felt surreal to hear the term. While Shizuku tried to digest what was being

said, Tarkis chuckled from beside her.

“This isn’t the first time someone’s used that alarming term to win my help. What proof do you have?”

“I’m not in a position to say.”

“Then I refuse,” Tarkis declared. His statement was so blunt that it felt anticlimactic.

The man who’d referred to himself as Selue went pale. As Tarkis made to stand, Selue stopped him.

“Wait! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you, so just hear me out!” *We are the source!*”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“It’s us... We’re the ones who devised the plan to get the castle staff to create the forbidden curse.”

Tarkis and Shizuku exchanged glances. As they looked into each other’s eyes, they processed what they’d heard...then returned their gazes to Selue.

“Are you stupid?” Tarkis and Shizuku said at the same time.

“O-of course not! Had I known the truth, I would have stopped it long ago!”

“Oh... Right... Fine. I get it. Just lower your voice, will you?” Tarkis limply waved his hand.

Selue, who’d almost risen to his feet, sank back down. When he spoke next, he made sure to stay quiet.

“So...are you convinced? Do you accept my request?”

“I understand what you’re getting at, but...am I right in thinking that the forbidden curse being created is not the one you thought it was?”

“Correct.”

“That’s your own fault, then. Don’t expect other people to clean up your mistake.”

Selue tensed so suddenly, he seemed to be choking. While he sat in silence, Tarkis continued mercilessly.

“I don’t know what kind of forbidden curse you hoped to produce, but you shouldn’t have been messing with that kind of magic in the first place. This whole country is doomed anyway if Farsas finds out.”

“...I know that.”

“You guys are part of some religion, right? Judging by your clothes, I’d bet it’s that Shula faith that’s spread throughout the city.”

Selue couldn’t bring himself to answer, but his silence said it all.

“The Shula faith?” Shizuku parroted back at Tarkis.

“You know those black snake sculptures that are hanging all over the city? These guys go around distributing them,” Tarkis explained.

“Oh. Now that you mention it, someone mentioned that name to me,” Shizuku said. “Wait, a religious group wants to create a forbidden curse?”

“That’s right. I bet these guys have agents inside the castle, too. They’re playing the long game and waiting for their allies to gain influence in the palace so they can manipulate things. The king probably doesn’t even realize he has Shula followers in his midst. They pretend to be loyal to him, but they’re working for the sect.”

“Whoa...”

The fact that there was a religious sect that had infiltrated the city to the point where it was the mastermind behind the forbidden curse made Shizuku frown. Were incidents like this one the reason so many mages were atheists? Shizuku wasn’t religious, either, but she always tried to respect other people’s beliefs. She couldn’t guarantee that she’d remain indifferent next time she spotted those snake sculptures around the city, though.

Selue had kept quiet while wearing a distressed expression, but at long last, he sighed and elected to speak again.

“So...are you going to help? Or are you going to flee the country?”

“Let me check a few things first. How are we going to stop this? We obviously can’t destroy the whole castle.”

“The castle’s royal chief mage is one of ours. If he doesn’t know the truth,

then explaining it to him might be all it takes. Otherwise, we simply need to kill all the mages working on the spell.”

“Wai—,” Shizuku started to yell, but Tarkis stretched out his arm and covered her mouth in a smooth motion.

Shizuku struggled to break free, but Tarkis refused to let go. He ignored her attempts to lash out and forced a smile.

“This is a real mess. And the clock is ticking, too. This isn’t the kind of task you should entrust to a wanderer like me.”

“Then we’ll ask someone else. As you say, there is no time to lose.”

“Hold on, let’s not be too hasty. I’ll do it. If nothing else, this is pretty interesting.”

Despite being the one who’d made the request, Selue was momentarily dumbfounded by the nonchalant acceptance. It seemed like he’d half expected Tarkis to refuse again. The three other men who were dressed in black appeared similarly surprised.

Tarkis looked at Shizuku, his hand still over her mouth, and laughed.

“Plus, I have a request from this girl to complete, too. She wants me to sneak her into the castle.”

Shizuku’s eyes widened. Tarkis winked at her.

She glanced over at Selue. He regarded her as one would a mad fool, which left her uneasy.



Once the discussion was finished, Shizuku was dropped off at a small inn.

After Tarkis brought her there, he said, “I have a lot of preparation to handle. Our work begins at dawn, so get some rest.” And with that, he disappeared into the night.

Shizuku wasn’t entirely sure whether he’d return, but it was late, and she was exhausted. The castle was visible from the window. If there was any more significant commotion, she’d see it.

Feeling rather weary and not wishing to burden the mercenary who’d agreed

to help her, Shizuku curled up on the bed without changing her clothes. Mea seemed wont to keep watch, for she hopped onto the windowsill and let out a soft chirp. Shizuku replied to her assistant demon.

“Good night.”

Shizuku swiftly fell into a deep sleep, likely aided by the terrible stress. She had intermittent dreams about sharing a meal and laughing with her family in her old world... She knew it wasn't real, and as she smiled with her sisters, she wanted to cry.

“Wake up, Shizuku.”

It wasn't even daybreak when Tarkis came to rouse her. The sky through the window was pitch-black, and the city was utterly silent.

Dazed, Shizuku shook her head and stood up. Tarkis was in the doorway, gazing at her with surprise.

“I noticed this in the stagecoach as well. You really can sleep anywhere, can't you?”

“Isn't it normal to sleep on a bed?” she replied. “Thanks for waking me, though.”

“You're welcome. Do you want me to carry your things?” Tarkis offered.

“I can do it. Just so you know, it really hurts to get hit with this.”

Shizuku slung her bag on her shoulder and walked over to Tarkis. When she stopped in front of him, he offered her a lengthy, thin object.

“Take this. You never know when you might need it,” he said.

“...A sword?”

“It's not too long or heavy, so you should be able to use it.”

Shizuku stared fixedly at the rugged black handle he was holding out in front of her. She couldn't help but recall how Erik had offered her a dagger and she'd turned him down.

“Won't people assume I'm willing to fight if I'm armed?”

“What are you talking about? You became a rebel the moment you decided to

sneak into the castle.”

This exchange was enough to show Tarkis that Shizuku wasn’t eager to carry a weapon. He bent to look her directly in the face.

“Take it. You might regret it otherwise.”

“Will I need to attack people with it?”

“It’s for defending yourself.”

Shizuku wasn’t necessarily a staunch pacifist; she just lacked confidence. She feared that carrying a tool capable of harming others would change the way she thought. It’s why she’d refused the dagger.

Erik carried it on him instead, but the weapon had been meant for Shizuku.

“I have no desire to bring a sword. I don’t want to use it against anyone,” Shizuku stated as she reached out and took the weapon from Tarkis.

The man smiled, looking amused. It was the kind of grin that only someone with more life experience could wear.

“Then you’ve got to put in the effort. There are plenty of things that are scarier than weapons.”

“I know.”

Shizuku partially unzipped her bag and slid the sheathed sword, which was slightly longer than a dagger, inside at an angle. Only the hilt stuck out, but it was visible, nonetheless.

She figured it was kind of like when people let the handles of their tennis rackets stick out of their sports bags. However, Tarkis frowned, clearly displeased.

“What are you doing? That doesn’t look cool at all.”

“That’s not my priority.”

“Well, whatever,” he said. “You look ridiculous.”

“Shut up!”

“Eh, I guess it’s not that bad.”

Tarkis swiftly turned and strode out. Shizuku followed after him.

When people died in this world, that was it.

It was a scary thing to come to terms with. You only had one life. Once it was over, that was it.

Never had the notions of life and death carried such profound weight for Shizuku before. The reality of death was so cold that it was enough to make ordinary existence feel like a miracle. Her brush with death had really made that apparent.

That's why she didn't want to shove other people aside for the sake of her own progress. Shizuku refused to end someone else's life for her own sake.

That said, she had no intention of letting anybody else snuff her or Erik out for their benefit, either.

"Mea, I'm going to need your help," she said.

The bird nodded at the sound of her master's voice. It was early morning, and the sun was yet to rise. Amid the silence of the city, the second day began.



A musty smell drifted through the cramped room. Crates were piled on top of one another.

Erik looked around the windowless room. He paused in the middle of his work and stood, sparing a moment to examine the white magic circle he'd etched into the floor. It wasn't as accurate as he would've liked, but he knew it was the best he could hope for in his current circumstances.

After giving his array a quick look over, he got back on his knees to add more to it. Exhaustion hounded him, and as he sighed, the sound turned to quiet words.

"I never expected to encounter a forbidden spell again... Am I still paying for my sins, Katiliana?"

His whispers, which were meant for a distant past, traveled to the door. For a moment, there was great weariness in Erik's eyes, but he dismissed this fatigue with a long blink and returned to his work.



The Shula faith had spread throughout Candela's castle city. Its core tenet was focusing on the present.

Life was fleeting. It was constantly in flux, and change was inevitable. There was no knowing when one might lose or win. That was precisely why the faith taught people to cherish the present and do their best in the now, rather than pin their hopes on an uncertain tomorrow.

The black serpent sculptures were modeled in the image of Shula, a god purported to guard over people's lives. Few knew that Shula was the same evil deity that had existed during the Dark Age centuries ago. Under the name *the Negativity*, it had emerged from a hole opened in the depths of the world and encroached on the land of the living. Only a handful of Shula's followers were privy to that terrible truth.

At intervals throughout history, this heretical religion reemerged like the crash of an abrupt wave. The true doctrine of the faith, which was responsible for many appalling crises, was "Embrace despair."



Day had not yet broken, and no lights illuminated the alleyways.

Shizuku had followed Tarkis outside and walked into him when he came to a sudden stop. She placed her hands on his back to shield her head from the impact, but she ended up pushing him forward slightly.

Tarkis looked over his shoulder, his eyes menacing.

"...What do you think you're doing?"

"If you're going to stop, then tell me so."

"Do I need to alert you to every little thing? Okay, I've stopped now."

"Too late for that."

"Who's that girl?" a voice called from nowhere.

The speaker sounded as though they were right next to them. Their voice was so low, it might as well have been crawling on the ground. Shizuku shuddered, but Tarkis didn't seem bothered at all. He smiled, acting in his usual way.

“Another person who’s enlisted my help. She’s harmless, so take no notice of her.”

Tarkis sounded like he was talking about a bug, which Shizuku didn’t particularly like. Still, she was aware that she was a hindrance to him. Shizuku promised herself that she’d remain harmless, if nothing else.

While she did, she peeked past Tarkis and down the dark alley. Several people were gathered at the dead end.

Shizuku strained her eyes to count how many of them there were, but the shadows were heavier toward the end of the alley, so she couldn’t quite tell.

Tarkis seemed to know these people and addressed them calmly.

“The plan remains as discussed. You’ll proceed as we planned in thirty minutes. The second attack begins at daybreak.”

“If we’re still alive by then, that is,” one of the people responded.

“The castle’s huge. Once you get in, you’ll figure something out.”

“There’s a magical abnormality building in the palace. It might kill us as soon as we enter.”

Shizuku was already aware of this possibility, but hearing the man, concealed in darkness, voice it out loud made her feel anxious. After all, Erik was in there already.

“Please let him be safe,” she whispered to herself.

Tarkis laughed into the darkness, amused by the man’s suggestion.

“If it kills us as soon as we step inside, then those within the castle are already long gone. That’s how vicious these forbidden curses are, apparently. They’re beyond human control. My conditions remain the same.”

No further arguments were voiced. No one walked away, either.

Tarkis laughed. His low voice had a certain incisiveness to it.

“If you have no complaints, then get to your positions,” he said, his excitement palpable. “A chance like this doesn’t come around often. I want you to enjoy it.”

It had taken Shizuku a long time to catch on, but at that moment, it finally clicked.

Tarkis relished these high-pressure situations that involved a lot of people. He was the kind of person who found joy in critical moments where the outcome of a single battle could change everything.

He was full of curiosity and always ready for a challenge. The man constantly hunted for something he could jump into. Clearly, he viewed Shizuku as one of those “somethings,” but at the moment, he was gearing himself up for the task at hand.

Shizuku stared at the hilt of the sword Tarkis had given her. She couldn't imagine what the rest of it looked like. Hopefully, she'd never learn.

As everybody leaped into action, Tarkis tapped Shizuku on her shoulder.

“Come on, you need to go. You're part of the unit that's sneaking in. I still have some other stuff to take care of.”

“I hope it goes well.”

While one group entered the palace, several others would create distractions.

That was all Shizuku had heard. She didn't actually know what sort of diversions they would be.

The people in the alley weren't the whole team. Apparently, they were just the leaders of their respective parties. The plan sounded terrifyingly grandiose. These people had to be at least somewhat skeptical. They were launching an attack on the castle, after all.

Following Tarkis's orders, Shizuku proceeded to a back alley two blocks from the castle. Armed men, purportedly part of the infiltration unit, were waiting for her.

After bowing her head to the mercenaries, Shizuku crouched and looked up at the night sky.

The sole woman of the group sat a short distance away. Shizuku had heard that the woman was an unarmed mage who would play a crucial role in this operation.

After the other team's distractions exerted pressure on the castle wards, she would forcibly destroy the barrier and create a transit gate inside.

It sounded like quite a challenging task. Although the mage resembled a prim and proper clergywoman, Tarkis had described her as "really terrifying."

This woman, whose name was Lydia, was Tarkis's acquaintance and had been called to the city very early this morning, as evidenced by her furrowed brow and closed eyes.

Shizuku looked around at everyone and took a deep breath in.

Her objective was quite different from the others'. She was doing this to see Erik.

Her teammates' only goal was to stop the forbidden curse. They were even considering killing the mages if the situation demanded it.

Shizuku needed to find Erik before it came to that. What would transpire after that, though? She wanted to stop the forbidden curse if possible, but she hadn't yet decided on what to do exactly.

"Five minutes to go."

As Lydia's voice reverberated down the alleyway, the atmosphere shifted. Shizuku rose to her feet.

Aside from her phone, she had no way of telling the time. She didn't know whether five minutes in this world were the same as five in hers. It didn't feel too different.

According to Erik, the number twelve was regarded as a stable number, so multiples of twelve were probably used in timekeeping as well.

The units of time in Shizuku's world were based on astronomical movements. Given that this world also had a sun and moon, perhaps there were similarities.

Such wonderings came and went. Shizuku adjusted her bag. It had felt unbearably heavy once, but these days, it didn't bother her so much. Had she gained some muscle during the journey?

Lydia spread her arms wide to begin a chant.

While Shizuku watched nervously, someone gently whacked her from behind.

“Scared?”

Tarkis had appeared out of nowhere. Shizuku knew he had a lot to do, so the realization that he’d come back to check on her made her eyes widen.

“Huh? I thought you had to be somewhere else.”

“You’re still my client. I need to protect you until you get inside the castle.”

“Because you wouldn’t be able to ask me questions if I died?”

“Now that you mention it, that’s a good point. I’d forgotten about that.”

Tarkis scratched his temple, his gaze momentarily going to Lydia.

“You’re right. Now that we’re both here, I want you to answer something,” he continued. “You never know; maybe I’ll die first.”

“I doubt it,” Shizuku shot back.

“Don’t say that, Shizuku,” he replied. “Tell me, who are you, really?”

A tremendous *boom* sounded in the distance. Shizuku cocked her head to one side, then looked up at the sky. A number of successive ruptures followed, echoing through the early morning sky.

The chanting stopped. A kind of distortion resembling a watery curtain manifested before Lydia.

The armed men leaped into it without saying a word.

Shizuku turned to look at Tarkis. She wasn’t as anxious as she’d anticipated. Perhaps she’d gone numb already. Sensing nothing but her racing pulse, Shizuku smiled slightly.

“I’m just a liberal arts college girl,” she said.

Tarkis responded with a dubious expression before starting to run. She headed toward the distortion that everyone else had vanished into, then stepped inside it.

She closed her eyes. In that moment, the world around her changed.

It felt so much quicker than when she was first cast into this world.

After appearing in the outer court, right beyond the castle walls, Shizuku spared a moment to peek at the sky, then launched into a run.

That quick glance was all it took for her to reorient herself. That's why she'd done the same upon arriving in that alleyway.

The men who'd reached the outer court ahead of her had already drawn their weapons. Astonished soldiers intercepted them as they charged the palace.

"Don't look."

Tarkis reached out from behind to forcibly redirect Shizuku's gaze, presumably assuming that witnessing the gruesome battle would leave her paralyzed by fear.

And yet Shizuku continued running regardless. She dodged the nearby guardhouse where the soldiers emerged from and plunged into a cluster of trees that ringed most of the outer court.

Shizuku pushed through the darkness, beating back the dense, luxuriant foliage blocking her way. She thrust branches aside and stepped over shrubs as she made her way along. Pain shot through her as several scraped her skin.

"Get down," ordered Tarkis.

Rather than respond to the brief order, Shizuku crouched where she stood. Not a moment later, something cut through the air above.

When she looked up, taking care not to raise her head, she realized that a soldier to her left had swept his sword at her.

Tarkis had defended her with his.

Still stooped low, Shizuku shuffled forward. Fortunately, no other soldiers had caught up.

She slung her bag off her shoulder and gave it a forceful, horizontal swing. The bag, which was packed full of thick books, struck the soldier who was fighting with Tarkis right behind his knees.

There was a *thud*, and the man let out an anguished groan as his legs buckled. Shizuku swiftly stood and swung the bag again.

“Hey!”

The soldier’s shout sounded nearly casual. The bag struck him right on his shoulder, making another loud *thud*. He collapsed under the weight of the blow, falling to the ground. Tarkis dealt him one final strike by hitting him hard in the back of the neck with the butt of his sword.

“What do you even have in that bag of yours?” Tarkis asked.

“Books,” Shizuku replied. “What if I’ve made them crooked?”

Emergency situation or not, she’d used her college’s books as blunt weapons.

When Tarkis saw Shizuku’s genuine worry, he forced a smile and started wading his way through the foliage.

“Come on, let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Shizuku checked that she had Mea and all her things with her, then followed after Tarkis.

They didn’t get far before there came a sound like something bursting. Shizuku heard shrieking, too.

She spun in the direction of the noise, alarmed by the tremendous, firecracker-like *bang*. However, she could only see the thicket’s dense flora.

Tarkis, who was walking ahead of her, laughed.

“Lydia must be on a rampage,” he said.

“Lydia?”

“She’s just as powerful as any court mage. And when it comes to hands-on experience, she’s on a whole other level.”

“Whoa.”

Was she the mage whom Tarkis had mentioned before—the one who could open a gate leading straight to Farsas? As Shizuku stepped around plants underfoot, she called to Tarkis.

“We need to turn a little to the right. We’re veering off course.”

“Are we?” he replied. “I thought we went straight ahead.”

“Nope.”

Shizuku’s assertion brought a skeptical look to Tarkis’s face, but he followed her advice anyway.

Branches rustled as the pair shoved them aside to clear their path. Their surroundings started to brighten. Day was breaking.

That meant that the deadline for stopping the forbidden curse was getting nearer. On the third day, the spell would be complete. The battle that was unfolding would determine whether progress came to a halt.

“Couldn’t that Selue guy find a way of contacting the castle’s mage?” Shizuku asked. “I thought they were friends.”

“Apparently not. The link between the castle and that religious organization is a strictly guarded secret, so emergency contact can only be made via the bishop, and nobody knows where he is right now. Selue didn’t say so explicitly, but it’s possible that the bishop knows the true effects of the forbidden curse and has tricked his followers.”

“Ugh. That doesn’t sound good.”

Instead of heading straight for the palace, Tarkis and Shizuku moved parallel through the plants. They were planning to sneak in via a distant entrance while the soldiers were preoccupied.

Shizuku listened carefully to the sounds of combat as she walked. The din faded farther into the distance with each step.

“Why can’t we just tell everyone at the castle that their forbidden curse will actually lead to this country’s downfall?” she asked.

“They’d wonder how we knew about the forbidden curse in the first place. Just focus on yourself, Shizuku.”

Tarkis made a good point, so Shizuku held her tongue. For now, she had to concentrate on what was ahead of her. Allegedly, more than a hundred people were involved in this plan. Shizuku couldn’t think of anything that likely hadn’t already been discussed.

“This whole country is going to be destroyed.”

No matter how many times she replayed that statement in her head, it didn't feel real.

How could an entire nation be wiped out that easily?

If they failed here, would it really happen?

The end of the thicket came into view. Directly to their left stood a white tower. On their right stood the castle walls.

Luckily, there were no other people around. Shizuku and Tarkis nodded at each other, then burst from the heavy foliage. From there, they hurried to a small door in the tower. Tarkis pulled out a knife and twisted its blade in the gap to remove the latch. While keeping a close eye on his surroundings, he checked past the door to ensure no one was waiting for them, then he shoved Shizuku inside.

This structure, stationed in the northeast corner of the castle, was a supply storehouse frequented by court ladies. Presently, it seemed abandoned.

The two of them opened the nearest door, and the next one they came across led to the room they'd been hoping to find.

Castle-employee uniforms were kept here. Myriad sets of clothing were neatly folded and arranged on the wall-mounted shelves.

Without saying a word, Shizuku rushed over and started looking for women's attire she could put on. She picked something up and unfolded it—a simple gray dress. It was ankle-length with a formfitting shape. She figured it was for a servant or the like.

“This will do.”

“Sounds good.”

Tarkis turned to face the wall as Shizuku hurriedly changed her clothes. She fastened all the buttons; there were nearly ten in total, going right down to the bottom of the garment. To finish, she pulled on an apron, then stuffed her old clothes into her bag and picked it up. Shizuku knew her bag would make her appear extremely suspicious, but there was no way she could leave it behind.

She didn't know if she'd be able to go back and fetch it.

Once she'd had a look at her new outfit, she said to Tarkis, "I'm done. I can go now."

He turned around. "Are you sure you'll be okay on your own?"

"I'll manage. You have your own stuff to do, after all."

The man raised an eyebrow as though there was something he wanted to say, but in the end, he just told her to be careful and left it at that.

Sword gripped tightly, Tarkis placed a hand on the door. He looked over his shoulder at Shizuku and gave her an affectionate smile.

"Let me ask my second question, client. What country do you come from?" he said.

"Japan," Shizuku replied. "It's an island nation in the east."

That wasn't a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth, either.

Her intention wasn't necessarily to deceive. It was more for self-preservation.

Shizuku nervously waited for his final inquiry.

His first two questions hadn't provided him all the information he was looking for. He was undoubtedly trying to work out how to use his last one.

Was he about to learn that she was from another world? What was she supposed to do then?

"I see. I've never heard of that country. In that case, my last question is..."

"Yeah?"

"Eh, I'll leave it for later. I'll ask you when all this is over."

"Huh?!" Shizuku exclaimed.

She'd been taken by surprise. The ordeal had just begun, and things were only going to get fiercer. Neither Shizuku nor Tarkis knew whether they'd come out of it in one piece, so why did Tarkis postpone his reward?

Shizuku was dumbstruck, having lost her composure.

Tarkis enjoyed a laugh. "There's no point in me knowing who you are if you're

just going to die. I'll ask my question once this is over. Try your best to stay alive, okay?"

His words felt like genuine encouragement. He was guaranteeing there would be a future.

Perhaps Tarkis was a good person after all, if overly curious. If his intentions weren't sincere, he wouldn't have remained with Shizuku for so long.

When Shizuku regathered herself, she gave him a grin.

"Got it. You'll take care, too," she said.

"I'll be just fine. Catch you later, Shizuku," he replied. He spoke with the casual manner of someone simply leaving the house for an errand.

He hurried out the door and quickly disappeared. Shizuku, now truly alone, glanced at down her outfit one last time. She took a deep breath in and steeled her resolve.

She had to go—the sooner, the better. The clock was ticking.

"Come on, Mea," she said to the small bird on her shoulder.

Then she opened the door.

As the sun began to rise, and the sky grew light, noise spread throughout the chaos.



As a lone girl moved into the castle, Idos, the royal chief mage, was watching over its wards.

He grimaced. The palace had repelled the first assault late at night, but a second group had attacked just before dawn. Unlike the first attempt, which had been a reckless charge through the walls using magic, this second one was cleverer, involving several organized squads.

Worse, there were skilled mages among this group's ranks. They'd breached the wards at the castle's perimeter and created a transit gate to the other side of the wall.

A decent portion of the attackers who'd stormed in had been fought off, but over half of them managed to sneak inside the castle. Small skirmishes were

erupting in unexpected locations. While Idos had ordered his men to dispose of the intruders, he could do little else.

“It can’t be true,” he assured himself.

For several hours, the words of a man captured during the first attack had been tormenting his mind. As soon as the black-robed man, who was locked in the castle dungeons, saw Idos come to question him, he’d shouted, “*As an acolyte of Shula, I issue you with a warning! The forbidden spell has been secretly altered!*”

Others had been watching, forcing Idos to punch the man to silence him. He was certain the man was a private soldier from the religious group Idos was affiliated with.

There’d been no word from the bishop. Was there really something wrong?

He was torn between desiring to know the truth and his commitment to completing the forbidden curse. He felt both irritated and unsettled.

There was a knock on the door, and a mage entered to give him a report.

“At present, there are no anomalies in the barrier. However, the battles at the back entrance are not going in our favor.”

“...This isn’t good. The sun is rising. People are going to start gathering.”

News about trouble in the castle city could quickly spread to other countries. Should Farsas learn of the situation, someone from the kingdom of magic might teleport to Candela to investigate. Even if it didn’t come to that, the incident was sure to provoke anxiety among the Candela’s people.

Idos ground his teeth, then came to a painful decision.

“It’s no use. Break the outermost castle wards. Let them come in and get our generals to engage them head-on.”

Under normal circumstances, Royal Chief Mage Idos lacked the authority to command the army, but there was a forbidden curse being created. As the project organizer, he’d been given that power.

The mage ran off to pass on his orders. Idos informed his other aides that he was going to attend to a private matter, then headed for the dungeon.

“...I should probably give him another chance to explain himself,” he muttered.

He’d kept anyone from interrogating the captured Shula follower. With no word from the bishop, the man was Idos’s only chance at more information.

Idos had indeed swapped out the forbidden curse for another right before its construction commenced, but he’d just been following the bishop’s orders. What did the man mean when he said it had been altered?

Idos stepped into the dungeon alone. He came to a halt before he had the chance to light his magic lantern.

A strong stench of blood hung about the place.

It hadn’t been there a few hours earlier. A dungeon was home to some putrid scents, stale blood among them, but nothing so repulsive and fresh as this.

The guards who were supposed to be stationed here were troublingly absent.

Idos quietly invoked a defense spell; however, a familiar voice interrupted him, calling from the darkness.

The hoarse words belonged to an old man whose tone seemed to echo from the depths of the earth.

It was soul-chilling. Idos found himself dropping to one knee. Bowing his head, he replied, “My esteemed bishop. What are you doing here?”

“Selue has betrayed us. He’s the one leading the attack.”

“Selue?”

“He must have harbored some traitorous ambition. But do not be discouraged. Soon, we will finally get what we’ve desired for so many years. Simply focus on your mission.”

“...As our god wishes,” said Idos.

With a satisfied chuckle, all trace of the bishop vanished. At the same time, the invisible pressure bearing down on Idos evaporated. He stood cautiously, scanning his surroundings.

“Selue was a traitor...?” he whispered, but there was nobody left to ease his

doubts.

Idos hesitantly lit his lamp and followed the smell of the blood.

There, in the farthest cell, lay the body of the prisoner, sliced to pieces.



The most significant diversion employed against the castle was the attack on the back gate. The aim was to keep the palace's primary forces occupied while the intruders used whatever opportunity they could to break in, and it resulted in a fierce battle at the gate.

On any typical battlefield, the Candelian soldiers would've had a clear advantage. However, they had been caught by surprise and were facing mercenaries who'd survived countless battles.

With the mercenaries deftly targeting the gaps in the soldiers' defenses using close-range arrows and magic, the Candelian troops were at their mercy. For them, it was an uphill battle.

"Close the castle gate!"

"A crucial mechanism has been destroyed! We can't open or close them!"

"What did you just say?!"

With the gate unable to close, the castle's magic wards were the last fortifications remaining. So when the mage, who'd planned to instruct his peers to strengthen the wards around the castle, was ordered to destroy them and lure the enemies in instead, he tutted furiously.

Idos's plan made sense, tactically speaking. It was getting brighter, and the skirmishes around the castle gate would only stir up even more commotion. Allowing the enemy inside was preferable.

Nearby residents were undoubtedly worried already. There had been explosions and other disconcerting noises the previous evening and in the early hours today. More fighting at the castle meant the news was all but guaranteed to reach other nations.

That said, if they were going to let the intruders in, they obviously needed to be very careful about it.

With both sides positioning themselves around the gate, the conflict was restricted to a small area, and Candela's forces could use the castle wards to their advantage. Once the fighting moved to the castle grounds, the rear garden, which wasn't particularly accommodating, would devolve into chaos.

The Candelian soldiers had the upper hand in terms of location and numbers, so it was possible that they'd be able to suppress the attack eventually, but that assumed adequate preparation. They needed to strategically position snipers within the castle and establish effective communication channels. At present, the castle's defense simply wasn't good enough.

With a bitter look on his face, the mage began to speak.

"We're destroying the barriers," he announced. "Tell the soldiers to step back for a moment."

Orders from above had to be obeyed. As such, he'd retrieved the fallen and told the soldiers to gradually retreat from the front line.

Next, he waited for his allies to receive the message, then lifted the outermost wards. Immediately, magic attacks that had previously been intercepted by the wards began to rain down on the castle. Small fireballs and orbs of light surged in, keeping the castle's mages busy as they tried to offset them.

The battle was steadily encroaching on the castle grounds. Everyone inside was surely wondering what would happen once all the attackers made it in. However, there was more to the situation than that.

"What's causing that commotion?"

"It seems like something's happening inside the castle."

People stood on the street trading questions and glances. It was early morning, and similar scenes were playing out around the city. A slow change was taking place.

A man addressed the confused crowd with a low voice.

"I hear they're conducting a suspicious magic experiment inside the castle. If no action is taken, it will harm the city."

“Huh?! What kind of weird joke is that?”

“I’m not joking. It’s what a Shula priest told me. He’s running around as we speak, trying to put a stop to it.”

Uproar swept through the throng. Instigators repeated similar claims in all corners of the city. As the sun rose, more and more people rushed to the castle to see what was happening for themselves, while others attempted to flee the city.

A huge commotion was unfolding outside the castle grounds, exactly as planned.



While panic spread through the streets, Shizuku walked down a corridor gripped in profound silence.

Her anxiety had left her throat dry, which she found unpleasant, but she persevered, continuing down the hall. She tried to think of an excuse to use if she ran into someone as she looked around in search of a staircase.

She’d heard that the forbidden curse was being formed on a lower level. Erik had to be down there somewhere.

That was little to go on, though. Aimlessly searching the huge castle left Shizuku uneasy. She strained her ears to hear the distant sound of combat.

If those who were attacking the castle lost, the country would be in grave danger, but if they closed in and started killing the mages who were working on the forbidden curse, then Erik would be in danger. Shizuku had to locate him as quickly as possible and explain the situation to get his help.

“This is a lot of responsibility... I’m so nervous,” she muttered. None but a small bird was around to hear it.

Rounding a corner, Shizuku almost bumped into a woman coming the other way. The stone-faced court lady was dressed identically to Shizuku. She glared venomously as she regained her balance.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing here?!” she snapped.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“All court ladies were ordered to stay with the mages to keep safe from the intruders! Didn’t you listen?!”

“I was sorting out the supply warehouse...,” Shizuku said, hastily fabricating an excuse. Then she saw an opportunity.

Just as the woman’s gaze settled on Shizuku’s bag, she spoke up.

“Um! A mage told me to bring him this bag!”

“Really? It’s rather peculiar looking.”

“It belongs to one of the mages who’s been temporarily employed by the castle—but I don’t know where to find him.”

“You really are slow, aren’t you?” the court lady said. “The mages who are working here on a temporary basis are using the five underground research rooms. Check them one by one.”

Shizuku repeated the words *underground research rooms* in her head. She felt a little closer to finding Erik, but that meant checking five locations. Her work wasn’t done yet. She prayed her luck would hold out.

“Thank you so much. Which is the closest one to get to from here?”

“Have you no sense of direction?” the court lady spat. “It’s the third one, obviously. Straight ahead, then take the first right.”

“Oh, of course. Sorry.”

“And make it quick.”

Shizuku set off in the indicated direction, sensing the woman’s furious gaze fixed upon her as she left. Once the woman had disappeared around the corner, she started running.

Before long, she arrived at a staircase that led to a basement level. A relieved smile found its way to her face, but she was careful to brace herself for what might come next as she descended the dingy staircase, taking care not to make noise.



Once Lydia had completed her short incantation, she turned around and loosed her magic arrows.

The projectiles pursued and struck two soldiers, knocking them to the ground amid bursts of sparks. A third soldier flinched, startled, and the woman used that moment to dive into the shadows of the building and vanish. Panicked, the soldier looked in the direction she'd gone, his sword ready, but there was no one there anymore.

From a second-floor corridor, Lydia watched the man scanning his surroundings and let out a sigh. She brushed her blond hair away from her face.

"This is so annoying," she said.

"You think so? I think it's rather interesting," someone answered.

The person had been trying to remain inconspicuous, yet they couldn't resist calling out to her. Lydia frowned as she faced the speaker, a boy.

"It might be fun for you," she said, "but personally, I find this kind of thing tiresome. Had Tarkis not begged me to come, I wouldn't have bothered."

"It's not very often that I get the opportunity to do whatever I like, and unique scraps like this one are especially rare. I can't help but enjoy myself."

The boy, who was in his late teens, shrugged and laughed. His smile made it clear he truly did find the fighting amusing.

The young mercenary enjoyed killing so much, it made him a difficult sort to manage. He pulled on gloves covered in blood, took up a spot beside Lydia, and looked down through the window. He hurled a dagger at the man searching for Lydia. There came a startled scream, then the man collapsed.

A smile spread across Kaito's face. He looked pleased with himself.

Lydia shot him a contemptuous look.

"You really are a terrible person," she said.

"You wouldn't want to leave him be and let him attack you later, though, would you?"

"If that were to happen, I'd deal with it. Anyway, just focus on your job. You freak me out."

Lydia left it at that and began to leave. Kaito waved her good-bye, then

whipped out another one of his daggers and focused his attention on the mages who'd come running down the corridor. When he saw the three of them begin to chant, he took a defensive magic implement out of his breast pocket. The bracelet, which had a sizable crystal embedded into it, emitted a faint bluish-white hue.

"Focus on my job, huh?" he muttered. "That means killing every mage I can find. Consider it done."

No matter where Kaito went, blood and screams followed in his wake. Slowly but surely, his trail of devastation wound through the castle's corridors, inching closer and closer to the fourth underground research room.



As Shizuku made her way down the dark staircase, she spotted a pair of soldiers standing ahead of her. The sight of them made her jump.

Both were armed. They stood facing each other on the narrow staircase. It looked as though they'd been positioned there to obstruct the path. They appeared to be discussing something, but Shizuku was too far to hear what.

For a moment, Shizuku was surprised, but she quickly straightened up and continued down toward them.

The soldiers took notice of her almost immediately.

Stay calm, Shizuku repeated to herself.

"What's wrong, miss?" one of them asked. "Is something the matter?"

"I've been ordered to stick with the mages since some intruders have snuck in..." she explained.

"So I've heard, but the mages down here are mostly outsiders. You can't trust them."

"But our castle mages are busy dealing with the attackers," Shizuku argued. "There's not enough of them to protect us."

The two soldiers exchanged glances, then frowned. They'd probably already heard that most of the castle's personnel had been tasked with fending off the intruders.

Shizuku pushed a little harder.

“The truth is, I tried to go back to working alone when I couldn’t find a mage, but that got me into trouble,” she lied. “So could you just let me in for the time being? That way, I can at least prove that I did what I was told. I don’t need to stay for long.”

Shizuku placed her hands together pleadingly. The two men smiled.

“Who are we to say no?” one of them replied. “You should be safe enough with us here.”

Shizuku smiled. “Thank you!”

“But don’t let your guard down.”

Shizuku found that comment a little weird. Did she really seem that careless? Regardless, she’d navigated this tricky situation like a pro. Relieved, she hurried down the remaining stairs. Upon reaching the wooden door at the bottom, she pushed it open.

A stone hall greeted her beyond. It had a peculiar atmosphere to it. Dim light illuminated the place, and a musty smell hung in the air.

Shizuku felt something surging toward her, causing her to stop dead. It wasn’t a scent or a difference in temperature. There was simply an indescribable something filling the place. She felt it against her skin, like the atmospheric shift detectable when entering a sauna.

The mages’ whispers seemed to slither across the floor and accumulate on its surface. It was hard for Shizuku to decipher what they were saying, but it sounded like a magical incantation. When she had a closer look, she realized there were ten mages gathered in a circle.

“Erik...?” she whispered, but her voice was too quiet.

Shizuku peered at the concentrating mages and approached them carefully. Orbs embedded into the floor in the center of the circle gave off a white glow. Their light seemed to seep into the surroundings.

Shizuku scrutinized each mage, but there was no sign of the one she was searching for.

A disappointed sigh blew between her lips. The mage nearest to her noticed this and turned around.

“What’s the matter?” he asked candidly.

Shizuku hesitated. The man was creating something that would destroy all of Candela.

Were she to tell him, would she stop the forbidden curse from being completed?

Shizuku’s eyes darted around nervously. So far, this man was the only one who’d spotted her.

“Ummm, the thing is—,” she began, but she was soon interrupted.

“Who are you?! What do you think you’re doing?!” someone asked furiously.

Shizuku jumped.

Before she knew it, a robed mage in his sixties had appeared at the entrance to the chamber. The glare he leveled at Shizuku was so sinister that anyone would’ve assumed he carried a deep grudge against her.

“A court lady? What are you doing here?” he demanded.

“Uhhh, well...,” Shizuku began. “I was ordered to take shelter with the mages...”

“Take shelter? There’s no point staying down here. Stay out of these mages’ way.”

“...I’m sorry.”

As piercing as his eyes were, there was detectable weariness in the man’s voice. Perhaps he hadn’t gotten much sleep. That thought made Shizuku feel a little sorry for him.

Still, if the mages completed their work, nobody in the castle would ever sleep again, and they wouldn’t be the only ones. Mild sleep deprivation was nothing compared with the disaster rapidly approaching.

As the older mage neared, Shizuku maintained eye contact so that she wouldn’t seem rude.

Selue, the one to enlist Tarkis's help, had suggested that they might be able to convince the mages to stop constructing the spell. Couldn't Shizuku ask this mage to tell the royal chief mage the truth?

Determined, Shizuku tried to say something.

"Uhhh, about this forbidden curse..." she began.

"Forbidden curse?!" someone shouted. It wasn't the older mage this time.

One of the mages working on the spell had spoken up. His voice carried throughout the room, drawing everyone's attention to Shizuku and the older mage. Some regarded the outburst with mild disbelief, while others looked repulsed.

Abrupt tension seized the room, prompting Shizuku to swallow nervously. The pressure stabbing into her back was enough to show her just how much of a taboo the term *forbidden curse* really was.

The older mage, however, looked more angry than surprised. He glowered at Shizuku, his gaze so fierce that it almost made her recoil.

While she struggled to keep confident, the old mage lifted his hand.

"You...wretch!" he exclaimed. "I won't be swayed by your baseless claims!"

"But that's what the people attacking the castle are saying!" Shizuku argued. "This forbidden curse is going to destroy the whole country... I need to tell the royal chief mage..."

"Me, you mean?" he said.

Shizuku felt a sense of despair hit her before she even processed what he was saying.

The man standing before her stood at the center of this entire plot.

If she could convince him, it might put an end to the danger. He was the person everyone had been looking for. Unfortunately, he didn't appear to be entirely in his right mind anymore.

Idos, the royal chief mage, kept his hand in the air as he scowled at Shizuku. He looked ready to strangle her.

“What was it that you wanted to say, young girl? Spit it out.”

Shizuku’s plan was falling apart.

She thought of the little sword in her bag, and Mea, who was hiding with it.

They were there to protect to Shizuku. However, they were not her only weapons.

“As the royal chief mage, you must put a stop to this spell’s construction. It won’t actually do what the Shula followers believe. It will engulf the city and harm its people. We can’t let it be completed.”

The other weapon was the truth.

Even if Shizuku couldn’t get through to the man, her words would probably mean something to the people around them. They clearly loathed forbidden curses.

As Shizuku sensed the agitation spreading among the mages behind her, the royal chief mage’s face contorted. They must have been casting him skeptical looks.

“How dare you come in here and spread nothing but lies!” he said.

“It’s the truth. I heard it from someone called Selue.”

“Quiet, child!”

Idos began to work a spell. Shizuku dashed forward. She’d been waiting for this. She hurled herself at Idos as hard as she could.

The royal chief mage, who hadn’t gotten the chance to complete his spell, fell back onto the stone tiles. Shizuku quickly dodged him and ran out the door. Then she sprinted up the stone staircase two steps at a time.

She didn’t get the impression that the man would ever listen to anyone.

Not only that, but Shizuku also sensed that there was something else that was scaring him.

Was it the forbidden curse, or was it the attack on the castle? Shizuku was in no place to decide.

Still, she’d planted the seeds. All she could do now was hope that something

grew from them.

The two soldiers who were guarding the stairs regarded Shizuku in utter amazement as she came rushing to them.

“Emergency! It’s the royal chief mage!” she yelled, pointing down the stairs.

“What?!”

The soldiers pushed Shizuku out of the way as they hurried down in a panic. Once Shizuku had leaped back into the castle corridor, she wasted no time picking a path and following it, although she was unsure where it would lead.



Those in charge at Candela Castle had hoped to handle the situation discretely, causing as little commotion as possible. However, that seemed impossible now. To say that they were annoyed would be an understatement. Quite understandably, they were humiliated.

A crowd had slowly gathered outside the castle gates, with people questioning the authenticity of the magical experiments being conducted within. Followers of the Shula faith fanned the flames. The mob that was building before the castle seemed to grow by the minute.

Naturally, some citizens attempted to flee the city, fearing the consequences of the magical experiments. Others, however, dismissed the claims as mere rumors.

However, when impassioned individuals began forcing their way in through the unsealed rear gate and demanding explanations, the castle city plunged into unprecedented pandemonium.

“I know this is a desperate situation, but I never planned to make an army of the citizens. This is an attack on the castle we’re talking about—I’d never be that reckless.”

Tarkis had seen the mob flooding into the palace from a small window in the room where he was hiding.

His plan, generally speaking, had been to create diversions and sneak inside before dawn. Then the Shula faithful would spread the truth among the populace.

If people fled the city after hearing the news, that was fine. Tarkis had no issue with that. That so many swarmed the castle was helpful, however, adding an extra layer of pressure.

He couldn't guess whether more citizens had run or joined the crowd. Both outcomes worked in his favor, though. From now on, everything hinged on the actions of the castle's troops.

"So do we capture the royal chief mage or stop the contracted mages?"

Several members of Tarkis's squad had already managed to infiltrate the castle.

After breaking in, it was up to each individual to decide the best course of action, but there was no guarantee any would succeed. Tarkis recalled the faces of his friends, each formidable in their own way.

Then his mind drifted toward the most defenseless and enigmatic of his associates—that young woman.

Although powerless, she had leaped into trouble to help a friend. Could that girl, who hesitated to carry a weapon, truly succeed on such a bloody and merciless battlefield?

"Is she an ordinary girl, or some kind of secret ace in the hole?" Tarkis whispered. "Just don't die on me, Shizuku."

He readied his blood-drenched sword, preparing to return to the fight.

It was day two—one hour after the sun had come up.



Shizuka ran down the long corridor as fast as she could.

She passed several soldiers on the way, who looked at her strangely, but none of them tried to stop her. Her court-lady uniform helped in that respect.

The castle was huge and complicated, but for Shizuku, it was still simpler than the spell design that Erik had made. Its layout felt more logical than that of the infamously confusing Shinjuku Station.

From what Shizuku had heard, there were five chambers underneath the castle. After visiting the second, she reasoned that perhaps the rooms were

arranged around a common center. According to Erik, magic arrays were almost always circular.

Shizuku considered the size of castle and the places she'd passed to make a guess at where the other chambers were. After roaming through the mazelike corridors, she spotted a downward staircase that resembled the one from earlier. Optimistic, she began racing down the stone steps.

"I hope...this is...the one..."

She was already out of breath, yet she was in strangely high spirits, so she didn't find it too uncomfortable.

She wondered if this is what people meant when they spoke of endorphins.

Her body ached, and she was certain that the muscle fatigue would hit her the next day, but that was a small price. Truthfully, she was prepared to endure any amount of soreness if it meant achieving her goal.

The staircase plunged into the darkness.

Unlike the second underground research room, there were no soldiers stationed here or torches illuminating the path. Shizuku found that suspicious but pressed on, feeling her way down.

It took her a long time to reach the door. She pushed it open gently.

The air wafting from the other side sparked an instinct to flee. Fresh blood filled her nostrils.

As the stench invaded her nasal passages, Shizuku covered her face with her hands. She felt sick.

I need to turn back, she thought on reflex. There was danger here—torment.

And yet she needed to search for Erik.

Shizuku looked over toward the staircase and inhaled deeply. She ventured inside while holding her breath.

Very quickly, Shizuku began to feel like the third person to die in a horror movie. The notion sent a shiver down her spine.

The passage shared the same structure as others she'd seen in the castle, but

the only source of light was one unreliable candlestick.

What greeted her ahead could only be described as tragic.

The awful smell of blood was thick and pungent here. As Shizuku's eyes adjusted to the gloomy surroundings, she noticed there were things lying across the floor. Upon identifying them, she was grateful for the dim light.

A dozen lifeless bodies decorated the ground.

It was too dark to see what had killed them. Shizuku cautiously examined the physiques of several of the men, trying not to get too close. She wanted to make sure none of them were Erik.

Tears stung her eyes. Shizuku didn't know whether they were from sorrow or anger, but she blinked them away.

I need to stay calm, she told herself.

Still, every time she acknowledged this horrible sight, she recalled the man who'd died in front of her.

Shizuku clenched her teeth. She needed to desensitize herself to sights like this, even if only temporarily. The callous notion made Shizuku hate herself, yet there was little choice.

Erik wasn't here. She needed to go.

After Shizuku checked the final body, she made to leave the way she'd come. Before she could, however, she sensed a shift in the shadows.

A bird chirped, and something moved through the air.

Before Shizuku had the chance to register what was happening, she dropped low and fell on her backside.

Something sped over her at alarming speed.

"Huh?"

The surprise didn't hit her until a moment later, as though her mind and body weren't synced.

Her body had already sensed something was amiss, but Shizuku didn't consciously recognize it until a second after.

Shizuku pushed hard on the ground to straighten up. While deliberating whether to stay put or stand and run, she heard someone whistle in admiration.

“Impressive. Here I thought you were a total novice. I didn’t expect you to dodge. You seem pretty lacking otherwise, though. It’s too bad. You’re gonna get killed.”

“Wh-who are you?”

“You saw me earlier,” the voice said. “Did you forget already?”

The boy addressed her quite informally, like he would a friend. He stepped into the candlelight confidently.

He possessed a small stature and slim build. His face, which was framed by short brown hair, was strangely pretty. It wasn’t that he had particularly charming features; those were rather average.

And yet he was beautiful.

He had an unbelievable freshness about him, with no excess. Devoid of bitterness and hesitation, he appeared to lack the kind of emotions that could make people look uglier than they were.

He only exuded amusement.

It wasn’t strong enough to be described as *joy*, but he wasn’t totally emotionless, either. His delight was casual.

Shizuku answered with a tense voice. “When did I see you earlier?” she asked.

“You went through the gate that Lydia opened, didn’t you?” he said. “You really do have your head in the clouds, huh?”

Now that he mentioned it, maybe this boy had been there. Shizuku had been too focused on herself to take notice. She thought to apologize, but she remembered this boy had attacked her.

“Why did you do that...?”

“I was curious about you, since you were following Tarkis everywhere. I thought I’d give you a light slash on the ear, but you evaded pretty well,” the boy replied. “Who are you? Are you really just a novice with good intuition?”

“Yep. I’m one of Tarkis’s clients, I guess...”

“Is that right? How boring.”

The boy seemed to have misunderstood something about her, but Shizuku wished he hadn’t tried to slice her ear for it. She was so relieved to be unharmed that it felt like she might collapse.

The boy walked past Shizuku, who was still on the ground. Shizuku figured he really had lost interest in her. As he slowly vanished into the darkness, Shizuku turned around, flustered.

“Wait!” she said.

“What?” he replied.

“Did you...? Wh-where are you going?”

Shizuku had wanted to ask him whether he was the one responsible for the death in this room. However, she knew that was a foolish question. Instead, she decided to inquire about something else.

When Selue had enlisted Tarkis’s help, he’d said that killing all the mages working on the forbidden curse was one way of preventing disaster. Had the boy caused this massacre, it was only because he’d been told to.

Understanding that was a poor comfort. Shizuku was dizzy. Her heart raced, and she felt nauseous. Passing out would’ve been preferable.

However, Shizuku was already deeply involved in the situation. She had made her choice. It was too late to feign ignorance and escape.

She asked the boy where he meant to go next. Perhaps she could steer him from finding Erik.

“I’m going to the next room,” he replied. “Apparently, this one’s the fourth chamber, so I need to find the third or second.”

“I’ve already been to the second,” Shizuku said. “Everyone was shocked to hear they were constructing a forbidden curse, so I think they’ve quit working on it.”

“Really? Well, I’d better kill them just to be on the safe side. It’s quicker.”

There was a crisp clarity to his words that mirrored his appearance.

Although amazed by his lack of hesitation, Shizuku frantically tried to reason with him.

“I don’t think you need to,” she argued. “I think you can get through to them by talking. The royal chief mage seemed a little weird, but...”

“What? So something’s wrong with the royal chief mage, too? Killing him can’t be that tedious. I’ll add him to the list.”

The boy turned from Shizuku and began to walk away.

“Wait!” Shizuku shouted.

Her voice echoed off the boy’s back and around the spacious hall. The two were the only living people here. The candle on the wall flickered like a faulty light bulb.

Eventually, the boy turned around and looked at Shizuku, his eyes clear like glass beads.



“What is it? Something you need to tell me?” he asked.

“Y-you don’t need to kill anybody...,” Shizuku insisted.

“Huh? Oh, I get it now. You’re one of *those* novices.”

Was he implying she was hypocritical, ignorant, or naive? Shizuku couldn’t say, but the boy’s disdain for her was palpable. Shizuku continued, despite her nervousness.

“You just need to talk to the people who are constructing the spell. Mages hate forbidden curses.”

“What? You expect me to trust that? What if the whole city falls to ruin? Surely, it’s better to kill a hundred people than tens of thousands?”

There was a notable lack of compassion in the boy’s words, but his assertion was correct. His tactic ensured success. However, Shizuku had witnessed how the mere mention of a forbidden curse disgusted mages. There had to be room for discussion.

“There’s no point speculating on whether it’s worth sacrificing a few to save many. Extreme arguments don’t apply in every situation. Right now, we have another option available. They don’t know they’re making a forbidden curse. We can just tell them the truth and capture whoever tricked them into creating it,” Shizuku stated.

But what if sacrificing the few really was their only option?

If so, Shizuku might have to condone this boy’s actions, even if it made her feel horribly guilty.

That could wait until it became necessary, though. The right option could change further down the line. For now, murdering the mages when they had no idea what they were doing was needlessly cruel.

Shizuku couldn’t pass judgment on whether the massacre here was necessary. What she could say for certain, however, was that letting people die in such an unceremonious way was sad, frightening, and horrifyingly cruel.

To Shizuku, all human lives, thoughts, and spirits were precious. She admitted that was idealistic, yet it was how she felt.

She stared at the boy, surprised she was able to keep so calm. Maybe knowing this was a life-and-death situation had steadied her nerves, just like in the desert. The cold gray stones beneath her were the furthest thing from the hot sand that she could imagine.

“I hate it when people preach to me about their idealistic notions—especially when the person who’s doing it has no strengths of their own,” the boy groused.

“Sorry. But—”

“Listen,” he cut in. “I know this is blunt, but I enjoy killing people.”

“...What?”

The boy narrowed his eyes at Shizuku. He scrutinized her, judging whether it’d be permissible to kill her. That sole thought directed him. No other feeling touched his expression. Despite insisting that he hated being preached to, he didn’t seem unhappy in the slightest.

His gaze was completely and utterly empty. Even the dead bodies had flickers of fear and shock in their eyes. This boy had nothing.

Although the two were looking at each other, Shizuku felt a sense of detachment between them. It was as if he wasn’t really seeing her, and she wasn’t really seeing him.

Shizuku’s face was the definition of confusion.

“...Why?” she managed.

Shrugging, the boy replied, “No real reason. It’s just fun when moving things don’t move anymore.”

“But once someone dies, that’s the end.”

“I know. But there are loads more people around.”

“No two humans are the same.”

Shizuku knew her arguing was futile. He wouldn’t understand.

Even if he listened, Shizuku’s feelings would never make sense to him. This was pointless.

The boy shrugged again, looking unperturbed.

“I get that. But they’re all kind of similar, aren’t they?”

The way he spoke made it seem like he could’ve been from another planet.

Shizuku felt hopeless. Nothing she said would convince him to see her side. This boy was too different. Talking to him accomplished as much as shouting into a void.

“They’re not,” Shizuku declared.

“Well, they’re all the same to me,” the boy insisted. “If you have a problem with what I do, stop me yourself. I can’t deal with annoying conversations like this. I’ll end up killing you.”

“I don’t want to die.”

“Oh. See ya later, then.” With that, the boy took his leave.

Shizuku got to her feet slowly, surrounded by dead bodies. An emptiness like she’d never experienced before weighed on her. She returned to the staircase, feeling like she was dragging her legs along the ground.

She was powerless. She couldn’t stop someone from murdering people—not easily anyway.

Still, she had a goal. Shizuku needed to find Erik before that boy killed all the mages.

While climbing the stairs one step at a time, biting her lip, Shizuku slowly put the events of this chamber behind her. They burdened her terribly, but her job wasn’t finished yet.

She needed to run. Anything less and she might not make it in time.

Upon reaching the final step, she looked back at the staircase that trailed into the dark depths.

This was Shizuku’s first encounter with the boy who pushed her toward the abyss of helplessness, Kaito Dicis.



The room was situated on the top floor of the castle, right in the center.

Someone had drawn a complex magic array on the floor, surrounded by twelve evenly spaced candles.

Each one had been lit with magic rather than standard flame. Every now and then, their faint purple glow responded to the light the magic circle gave off, burning brighter.

An elderly man in opulent attire was seated on the throne at one end of the chamber. King Aurow of Candela, with a great furrow in his brow, sniffed for what had to be the hundredth time before calling over a nearby minister.

“What’s happening? Is everything going according to plan?”

“Well... There have been some delays, but things seem to be progressing well. Unfortunately, however, the citizens have gathered at the castle gates, and a significant commotion has erupted. Continued silence might lead to rioting...”

“Hmph. Those fools can’t see the bigger picture. It’s obvious this is best for the country.”

Upon hearing the king speak about his people in such a dismissive way, the minister frowned, but the king didn’t notice.

Not everyone was in favor of creating the forbidden curse, but the only one to vocally dissent had been relieved of his position. After that, everyone had been left with no option but to remain silent.

“Please pardon my boldness, Your Majesty, but I believe that a few words from you would likely put an end to this turmoil.”

“We need to eliminate all the attackers first. Then I can placate the people.”

The minister didn’t bother arguing. It didn’t seem like the king was willing to accept any further advice. The minister wished to warn him that it might be too late, but suggesting any inadequacy of the castle’s defenses wouldn’t end well.

Plus, the intruders were already lurking in various parts of the palace, targeting mages and soldiers. If the king were to venture out, he could be assassinated.

The minister held back a weary sigh.

Once the forbidden curse was completed, an orb of light enveloped in flames

was supposed to come out of the magic array in the center of the room. When that happened, the castle's mages would confine that light inside a crystal, transforming it into a sorcerous cannon.

The part about the magic cannon had been fabricated by the Shula faith, but nobody in the room knew as much.

A thousand-year-old adage posited, "Those who indulge in a forbidden incantation will meet their end by its power." Once again, it was about to be proven correct.



After leaving the tragic scene of the fourth underground research room, Shizuku debated whether to search for the fifth or follow the boy toward the third.

Erik could've been in either. It was imperative that Shizuku keep him from any possible harm.

That didn't mean it was acceptable for anyone else to be murdered, but the direness of the predicament demanded that Shizuku prioritize, much as she disliked it.

As she started for the third research room, thinking she should check it out just to be sure, she was immediately forced to change direction.

Two mages appeared at the end of the corridor, gesturing toward her as they spoke.

"Argh..."

One of the mages began to chant, while the other ran for her. As soon as Shizuku saw him coming, she turned back and leaped around the nearest right-hand corner. Some sort of magic raced by.

"This is bad!"

Had the royal chief mage told his men what she looked like and sent them to find her?

As one of the mages rounded the corner, Shizuku disappeared around the next one. She refused to look behind her as she zigzagged through the castle's

passages, evading pursuit.

“O-ouch...”

As far as she could remember, the last time she’d sprinted like this in her old world was during a high school fitness test. After starting college, she’d only played ball games. Shizuku never overslept, so she rarely had to run anywhere.

Since coming to this world, however, she’d done nothing but run. She’d even noticed a gradual improvement in her stamina. As a liberal arts student, Shizuku was used to exercising her brain more than her body. Her life in this world was doing an excellent job at teaching her the meaning of the saying “Health is wealth.”

“I—I think I’m about to die...”

Dizzy from a lack of oxygen, Shizuku sank to the ground behind a pillar. Her throat hurt, her sides hurt, and her legs hurt. Her whole body burned. She’d been running as fast as she could and lost the mages for her effort, but now she was in the center of the castle, a long way from where she expected to find the research rooms.

As Shizuku tried to get her bearings, she worked on steadying her breathing. She couldn’t sit in the corridor forever. Eventually, it would start to look suspicious.

Shizuku found a small room nearby and slipped inside. It was wholly empty, even of furniture. Evidently, it wasn’t in regular use.

“Let me do a quick check,” she said to herself.

Shizuku took some paper and a mechanical pencil from her bag and drew out a map of the section of the castle she’d seen. After outlining her immediate surroundings and adding in the tower that had acted as her starting point, she sketched the second and fourth research labs. Then she marked her current location with an X. Just as she’d presumed, she was remarkably close to the castle’s center.

Under normal circumstances, the palace corridors probably had tighter security, but staff was clearly in short supply. She’d spotted and fled from a few soldiers, but they’d all been in a hurry to somewhere else.

“The center, huh...?”

The five research rooms were positioned around this section of the castle. That’s what Shizuku assumed anyway. The locations of the second and fourth rooms aligned with that hypothesis.

Her map placed her close to the middle of the entire castle.

The forbidden curse’s magic ring connected the five research labs, forming a gigantic circular pattern.

A “negative hole” would allegedly open in the eye of that array. In other words, it would be nearby.

“I wonder if there’s a way for me to plug up the hole,” Shizuku said to herself. “I assume it hasn’t formed yet.”

After striking a deal with Tarkis, Selue had explained that the forbidden curse would cause a so-called Hole of Negativity to open, which would destroy those near it. For Shizuku, who had a limited understanding of magic, it was hard to imagine what this actually meant.

Would it manifest as a literal hole? In Japanese folklore, there was a story about the creator deity Izanagi sealing off Yomotsu Hirasaka, the path to the underworld, with a large boulder. Perhaps this would be similar. Were Shizuku able, she would like to block the forbidden curse with a boulder, but such a feat was probably only doable for gods. First and foremost, Shizuku didn’t have the arm strength to move a large rock. Plus, she didn’t know where to find one.

Part of her felt like she needed take advantage of being near the center of the castle, but she didn’t have a good idea of what.

Abandoning that plan, Shizuku put her things away and decided to head in the direction of the first research room, which she believed to be the closest. However, when she stood and opened a nearby door, Mea, who’d been silent for a while, suddenly took flight.

The bird looked back at Shizuku and let out a small chirp. Then she started gliding through the air, heading down a passage to the right.

“Are you telling me which way to go?”

The small bird cried again to tell her master she was correct. It was the opposite direction of the first research room, but Shizuku trusted her assistant demon and chased after her. They turned several corners. Shizuku began to grow anxious.

Mea was leading her deeper into the heart of the palace.

They descended a set of stairs to a half-basement level, but they definitely weren't getting closer to any of the research chambers.

This semiunderground level appeared to be used for storage. Unlike the first level, where Shizuku had been earlier, there were no furnishings. The bare stone corridors bore a resemblance to the stone halls of the research chambers.

At long last, Mea came to a stop in front of a door, a completely ordinary one that was no different from the dozens of others. Shizuku pressed against it with a trembling hand.

They were surely at the center of the castle now.

There was a chance this was the room where the hole would form. Was Mea trying to tell Shizuku to close it?

Before opening the door, Shizuku checked around the corridor. Crates were piled up here and there. A few even looked light enough for Shizuku to move.

"Could I use one of those to cover up the hole?"

If the hole was bigger than the box and she ended up dropping it inside, where would it go? As Shizuku earnestly puzzled over the question, struggling to wrap her head around it, she finally opened the door.

She was immediately confronted with a wall of crates. They were stacked into high towers just past the door. Shizuku looked up, dumbfounded. This was probably yet another storage room, but why had someone piled the boxes in front of the doorway? No one could get through like this.

Shizuku grew frustrated, but she swiftly noticed a gap in the barricade that was wide enough for her to slip through. There was definitely something past the makeshift wall, so Shizuku turned sideways and tried to squeeze through.

Mea suddenly chirped in warning, which was quickly becoming a regular

occurrence today. A dagger stabbed from behind the crates, forcing Shizuku to stop.

“...”

The weapon had been thrust perpendicular to her, like a bar to block her path. The blade came about as high as her neck.

Shizuku's attacker was behind the boxes. Briefly, she debated drawing her own weapon on them.

While Shizuku deliberated over what to do, Mea flew over the dagger and drifted into the room. Panicked, Shizuku reached after her.

“Wait, Mea!”

“Huh?” came a startled voice.

The dagger pulled back. The assailant sounded familiar.

Shizuku knew him immediately. After spending so much time with him, it would've been impossible not to.

She impatiently pushed through the gap, and there, on the other side of the barricade, was Erik.

“Erik!”

“Huh? Why are you here?”

Surprise showed in his deep-blue eyes, although he didn't appear particularly anxious. He spoke with the same calm he always did.

Shizuku, meanwhile, was overcome with emotion. She'd missed him so much. They'd only spent a day apart, but the time had passed so slowly. He'd felt terribly distant. At long last, they were reunited.

All the worry that had built in Shizuku during their time apart dissipated. She found she was incapable of restraining herself anymore. Tears flowed down her face, and Shizuku tried frantically to wipe them away. Her attempt to speak proved fruitless. Every bit of her energy was focused on keeping in her loud sobs.

Erik looked down at her court-lady attire, eyes wide. Then he returned the

dagger to its sheath and forced a smile.

“I see. You really tried your best. Thank you.”

How did he understand so well when Shizuku hadn’t said a thing?

At the moment, Shizuku didn’t care about the answer. Those few words made her feel like everything had been worth it. She smiled, cheeks damp from crying.

Shizuku and Erik ate in the cramped storeroom, which was about seven square meters in size.

When Tarkis had woken Shizuku, he’d said, “*You might have a long day ahead of you, so you should eat while you can.*” While in the inn’s kitchen, Shizuku had prepared two simple boxed meals.

She’d put some tea inside her plastic bottle and brought along some rice balls, rolled omelet, and some dried meat. Although admittedly simple, it was plenty for a young woman who’d been running around for hours and a young man who hadn’t slept for a day.

Erik held a rice ball, which Shizuku had seasoned with salt, in his hand and gazed at it intently.

“What a strange shape,” he remarked.

“It’s normal in my country. I didn’t have any nori or salmon, though, so the only thing giving it flavor is the salt.”

“What’s ‘nori’?” Erik asked.

“Seaweed,” Shizuku explained. “Usually, it’s harvested, dried, and then made into thin sheets. It’s really tasty.”

“Whoa. I’ve never eaten seaweed.”

“You’re going to lose your hair, then.”

“Why?” Erik shot back immediately.

Erik wasn’t aware of the Japanese superstition that claimed that seaweed was the key to healthy hair, so it was only natural that he was confused. Shizuku was content to ignore the question, though. Instead of answering, she pointed at

the floor.

“What is that thing?” she asked. “A kind of magic circle?”

Erik nodded. “That’s right. I drew it.”

It had a complex design formed of three circles. Close inspection revealed that Erik had created it with something like white ink. Long sticks and strings had been placed around the array. They must have been used in the circle’s creation. Without any magic implements around, Erik must have had to go through a lot of trial and error to complete the pattern. The whole thing measured roughly one and a half meters in diameter.

While the two chewed on rice balls in the storeroom in the center of the castle, they exchanged stories on the situation.

When Erik heard that soldiers had come to the inn, he looked displeased.

“I didn’t expect them to go after you. I’m sorry.”

He had deduced the hired mages were working on a forbidden curse on his own. After informing one of the castle’s mages of the truth, he’d been forced to flee.

“Oh, I’m impressed you figured it out yourself...,” Shizuku said.

“The spell reminded me of the one in Clare’s tower. If it hadn’t been for that similarity, I never would’ve guessed.”

“I guess the Shula faith had something to do with Clare’s tower, then. It sounds like that spell was different from the forbidden curse, though.”

“Yeah. This one creates a Hole of Negativity and calls out to the other side.”

“A Hole of Negativity...” There was that phrase again. Shizuku frowned, unsure how to picture it. “Excuse me for asking such a basic question, but what is a Hole of Negativity?”

“Hmm... Before I tell you, how have you been feeling—physically and mentally?” Erik said.

Shizuku blinked. “Huh? The same as always...”

She was tired from running around, and things had been very tense, but apart

from those understandable qualities, she didn't feel abnormal.

Erik examined Shizuku's expression intently, trying to discern whether she was telling the truth. She met his gaze with confusion.

"I see. This is interesting. In some ways, though, it makes sense."

"*What* makes sense?" Shizuku pressed. "Does this have something to do with the Hole of Negativity?"

"Far from it. But first, let's start with your explanation." Erik pondered to himself for a moment. "In this world, humans are believed to consist of three parts—the body, the mind, and the soul. The body obviously constitutes the physical part of a human being, responsible for sensory perception, sustaining life, and reproduction. The mind is closely linked to the body, governing intellectual cognition, thoughts, emotions, and memory. The presence of the soul is the thing that separates living beings from inanimate objects. It resides within all living organisms, embodying the essence of life. When they die, it disperses and returns to nature."

"I see," Shizuku said.

"Are you following?" Erik asked.

"So far, yeah."

Shizuku enjoyed these kinds of topics well enough. She attended elective lectures that covered similar subjects as part of her liberal arts program.

While Erik spoke, she took out some paper and made notes about what he was telling her. She poked the spot where she'd written the word *soul* with the end of her pen.

In this world, it was accepted that nothing remained of a person once they had passed away. That belief stemmed from the idea that the soul dissipated once someone died. The mind perished along with the body, while their soul disappeared. Such was the reality of human death here.

Shizuku's mind began to drift toward the corpses she'd seen earlier, but she frantically pushed the thought out of her mind.

"After a living thing dies, its soul disperses. So how do you think souls form

inside living beings in the first place?” Erik said.

“Oh. Huh? Uhhh... Do they come into existence at the same time as their bodies?”

“That’s partially correct. There are actually a lot of things about souls that we still don’t know. According to magical research, souls ‘comprise everything, connect to everything, and are shaped by the physical body.’ In other words, the body uses natural forces that are found throughout nature, and then...”

Erik picked up Shizuku’s plastic bottle with the tea inside. Brown liquid swirled behind the transparent plastic.

“...it traps those forces inside it, isolates them, and turns them into a single soul.”

“Are you saying that the liquid is the soul and the bottle is the body?”

“Yeah. So when the body dies, the soul leaks out.”

Erik gently shook the bottle and raised it to his mouth after removing the cap. The bottle, which Shizuku had brought from her world, had initially held water, but since it was useful, she’d kept it with her instead of throwing it away. Naturally, Shizuku had no cups with her, so she and Erik had been taking turns drinking from the bottle. This didn’t bother Erik at all, so Shizuku elected to say nothing.

“The problem is the way souls comprise everything and connect to everything. Unlike this tea, which is trapped inside the bottle, souls—despite residing within the body—are linked to all kinds of different things. The reason humans share the same fundamental emotions and basic thought processes and speak the same language is thought to be because our souls are all connected to the same things. That’s also the reason why mages are able to perceive rules of magic that are only supposed to exist on another plane of existence,” Erik explained.

“Ugh,” Shizuku groaned. “This is getting complicated now.”

“I know,” Erik said. “Think of souls as outward-looking windows inside every human that connect them to things beyond themselves.”

“Got it.”

“These windows are tied to myriad different places, from the virtuous heavens to the deepest depths. The Sea of Negativity is what we call the latter.”

“Negativity?”

“Indeed.”

This wasn't a Hole of Negativity, but a sea. According to Erik, it wasn't a real place as such, but that didn't help Shizuku understand it any better. For some reason or other, she found herself scrawling the word *ocean* on the piece of paper she'd been using to take notes, then drew a picture of a dolphin.

“The Sea of Negativity, or Sea of Chaos, is a theoretical ocean that stretches beneath the world. If the realms of virtue and knowledge and the planes that magic spells and high-ranking demons exist on were to be ranked above our world, then the Sea of Negativity would be ranked beneath it. It's a place teeming with resignation, sorrow, and resentment—a reservoir brimming with Negativity not yet molded into human emotions.”

“Eugh.”

The description painted it as a sinister place, not at all appropriate for the dolphin Shizuku had sketched. She considered drawing over it in black but immediately abandoned that idea. She pushed the graphite back into her mechanical pencil, then posed a question.

“So if someone were to be envious or bear a grudge, would that be because their soul was connected to that sea?”

“Some claim as much,” Erik answered. “I don't think that's all there is to it, though.”

“I see.”

The idea that souls were linked to the good above and the bad down below wasn't that far-fetched. If a person's connection to the bad was achieved through the soul, then there were presumably religions that taught how to escape the influence of that sinister realm.

“This is all religious speculation, right? The Shula faith teaches stuff like that,

doesn't it?"

"If only it were just that." Erik sighed. "The truth is, a hole leading into that Sea of Negativity was opened once before, a long time ago."

"Huh?"

Shizuku looked at Erik, her dark eyes wide. Erik, meanwhile, had finished his rice ball. "Thanks for the food," he whispered, smiling awkwardly at his companion's reaction.

"It was about eight hundred years ago. A hole formed within a cave in the middle of the continent."

"A—a Hole of Negativity?!"

"No. It was just a hole."

Shizuku hung her head, feeling curiously disappointed. She felt like this was a very roundabout explanation. However, if Erik had skipped ahead, she likely wouldn't have been able to keep up.

Erik pointed at the magic array he'd drawn. He gazed at it as though there were a deep crater in its center.

"It was just an ordinary hole, but perhaps its position made it easy for miasma to build within. Dead bodies had been cast into the pit during a war, which I assume worsened things. After more dead were dropped in, a rift in the world formed, and the hole became a passage to the Sea of Negativity."

Erik snapped his long fingers. The small sound made Shizuku shudder.

"Legend has it that the first man who noticed the hole was dragged into the Sea of Negativity. The second man lost his sanity. And then before anybody could do anything, uncontained Negativity seeped from the aperture. The third man called it a god."

Shizuku felt like she'd heard this story somewhere before.

She held her head. It was hurting a little. Shizuku hadn't heard the story from a Shula follower. She'd heard it somewhere else—somewhere deeper.

Every time she tried to remember, her head throbbed, and her memories

grew hazy. Feeling as though merely seeking the memory would lead her to lose herself, Shizuku gave up.

“The Negativity that emerged was referred to as Simila. The third man worshipped Simila and founded a religion around it, building a small village around the hole. That and the Shula faith...are probably one and the same. Over the next century, that village gradually grew, gaining more followers. In those days, Simila was referred to as an evil deity, and apparently, the village was labeled as a cult.”

“A-an evil deity? What happened after that?”

“Well, there was destruction.”

“The entire world was destroyed?!” Shizuku exclaimed hysterically, her voice echoing around the small storeroom.

Once it had gone quiet again, Erik answered with a flat tone, “Calm down for a moment. If the whole world had been destroyed, then how could we be here?”

“...Good point.”

The crazy story had given Shizuku a wild idea. She hung her head bashfully.

Erik, meanwhile, appeared largely unperturbed by her theory and continued in his typical way.

“The village was wiped out, along with the evil deity. They were blown away by a huge magical attack. A forbidden spell was responsible for the blast, although it was an accident.”

“Hmm. That’s kind of like *Invasion of Astro-Monster*.” Shizuku recalled the old Godzilla movie.

“What’s that?” Erik inquired.

Shizuku sighed. “Please don’t make me explain.”

Erik, who wouldn’t have known anything about giant monsters, gave Shizuku a questioning look, but he seemed to realize that the conversation would derail if he pressed the matter. He carried on speaking as though he’d never asked.

“Since Simila’s destruction, there have been several attempts where fanatics attempted to use forbidden curses to open a hole again, but according to our records, all those incidents were unsuccessful,” Erik said. “But failures or not, each try left hundreds dead or insane. It doesn’t bear imagining what kind of tragedy would unfold should any of those fanatics succeed.”

Erik rarely lost his temper, but Shizuku recognized a bitterness in his tone that she’d never heard before. It frightened her.

What was lurking deep beneath the world, down below the stone floor where the two sat? Shizuku felt as though she was sitting on a thin plank of wood floating on a murky sea. A shiver ran down her spine.

“So...what are we going to do?” Shizuku asked.

She knew full well that they were in a dangerous situation, and so did Erik. Had he set about drawing a magic array in this room because he had something up his sleeve?

Erik pensively pressed his fingers against his temples, then abruptly pointed toward the ceiling.

“The center of the forbidden curse has been set up directly above us. On the second or third floor, I’d assume. Did you come here searching for the heart of the castle?”

“Uhhh, no. Mea brought me here.”

“Oh. I guess she sensed my magical power once you got close enough.”

The little bird tweeted to let him know he was correct. Erik gave her a small nod, then rested his chin on his knees.

“I’ve been here trying to buy time. When I realized this was a forbidden curse, I slightly rearranged my part of the spell. Through it, this array is now connected to the forbidden curse. Although I can’t interfere in any significant manner, I can stall the magic and reduce its effects.”

Shizuku’s eyes widened as she listened.

Ever since Erik had fixed that magic implement and passed the castle’s application process, she’d begun to suspect that he was actually rather skilled in

his craft. He'd uncovered the forbidden spell on his own and worked on countermeasures. Not even the castle's mages had done as much.

Shizuku couldn't help but express her admiration. "That's amazing... I didn't know you could do such a thing."

"This is the extent of my abilities, though. Fortunately, this palace is teeming with magical power, which affords me some flexibility, but it doesn't mean that I can stop the forbidden curse entirely. There has to be a core that's bringing it together somewhere, but this circle can't reach it, even if I knew where it was. All I can do is stall things."

"In that case, then everyone above will..."

Shizuku didn't know what to say. Thoughts of the bloodshed in the fourth research room and the boy responsible came surging back.

If he cleared out the other research rooms, the threat of the forbidden curse would be over, and all for the price of a few dozen lives.

Shizuku felt a bit smothered. Her vision seemed to narrow as she struggled to breathe. There was something in her throat threatening to come out.

She clasped her hand against her mouth to stop it. Her mind and body seemed ready to contort out of shape.

Realizing how strangely Shizuku was acting, Erik reached for her. She waved in front of herself to dismiss his worry.

"Are you okay? You don't look too good," Erik said.

Shizuku shut her eyes tightly. "I'm fine."

She took a deep, slow inhale.

Once the air reached the depths of her lungs, she paused, then released it all evenly.

Erik was with her. She wasn't alone. She could relax. If her mind and body were intertwined, then she could control them both. It was only when one managed to do so that they truly became their own master.

Shizuku finished her gentle exhale and raised her head. Her attempt to

suppress the vileness had returned her to something close to normal.

She calmly told Erik about the mercenaries inside the castle, and that one of them was going around killing wizards.

Erik frowned while listening carefully to Shizuku's news. As far as his expressions went, this one looked fairly severe. His voice seemed sharp when he replied:

"I see. That's not good. No wonder progress on the forbidden spell has accelerated."

"Accelerated?" Shizuku echoed. "It didn't stop?"

"It's coming together more quickly," Erik confirmed. "Fifty people were gathered to construct the forbidden curse. That's no small number of mages. The basic spell has already been completed. Do you remember why that hole opened up eight hundred years ago?"

"Oh, right..."

Some kind of dark miasma had gathered there. After dead bodies were discarded in the hole, a rift in the fabric of the world had formed. The deaths of the mages who'd worked on the curse might cause a similar event.

Shizuku felt like the blood was draining from her head. Her lips quivered. A few seconds later, she was on her feet.

"I-I've got to tell him!" she cried.

"Wait. I understand why you want to try, but it doesn't sound like you'll be able to get through to that murderer. He might just kill you outright."

"But!"

"I know how you feel, but this is a very dire situation. We can't risk any missteps."

Erik's words were assertive and firm. He picked up a map of the castle that was lying on the floor and gestured for Shizuku to come closer. Once she did, he pointed to a spot on the map.

"I can't leave this area, but my work alone here won't cut it. We need to do

something that will turn this whole situation around. I feel bad for asking you, but...”

Shizuku glimpsed something flicker in his deep-blue eyes. She peered at him, briefly distracted.

“...you’re the best person for the job,” Erik continued. “Go to Farsas and tell the king’s younger sister what’s happening.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku felt like the world had just tilted off-center a little.

Surely, that couldn’t have been the case. With her head cocked slightly to one side, Shizuku struggled to process what she’d heard to little success.

Erik pointed to a place on the northwest side of the castle. The hall there contained several transit rings. One of them had to lead to Farsas.

“A transit ring’s destination is typically written on the floor before it. Don’t rush, and take care that no one spots you. Hopefully, this chaos has pulled any guards away from the transit rings. Take Mea with you just in case, though. Tell someone in Farsas that you want to speak to the king’s younger sister about a forbidden curse—that should be enough.”

“W-wait! Will things be all right afterward?!”

“Most likely. The king’s younger sister is a part of the royal family and a mage who commands high-ranking demons—mystical spirits. At present, she’s one of the best spellcasters on the continent. She’s the only person I know of who could potentially counter the forbidden curse. If you manage to reach Farsas successfully, you can remain there. The king’s younger sister should be able to work out the rest.”

“But that means...”

Shizuku trailed off, unsure whether she ought to say more.

Erik’s unusually forceful proposal might have been seen as an attempt to drive her away from the chaos of the castle. Maybe he wasn’t sure whether the forbidden curse *could* be stopped, and that was why he was trying to send her out of the country and to their intended destination, Farsas, before the worst

happened.

Naturally, seeking help from the kingdom of magic was best, considering how dire the situation was—but if that was all there was to it, why would Erik tell her to go “carefully” and assure her there was no need to panic?

Shizuku struggled to grasp his true intentions and was left unsure what to say. When she looked at Erik—who seemed tired, presumably due to his lack of sleep—her chest felt tight.

“I’m scared of leaving you here,” she said. “If I’m going to go, then you should come with me.”

“If I leave this spot, the forbidden curse’s progress will quicken. I can’t let that happen.”

If her only wish was to flee danger, she would have left the city as soon as she found out about the forbidden curse, but Shizuku hadn’t chosen that option. Instead, she’d made her way here and even opted to arm herself.

Shizuku had done it all because she was worried about Erik. She wanted to repay him for the countless times he’d helped her. Abandoning her goal now was intolerable.

She stared at Erik, the look in her eyes almost accusatory. She didn’t know the best course of action, but at that moment, he seemed more important than the best interests of the country.

The silence didn’t last for long, just two or three seconds.

Erik didn’t avert his gaze. Instead, he stared directly at Shizuku, then declared, “You have potential.”

“Potential?”

Did he expect something of her in the future, like a parent would for their child? If so, he was on extremely shaky ground.

Everyone clung to some kind of hope. The mere mention of “potential” was enough to create endless expectations. Prioritizing one person over another for something so abstract was unrealistic. It sounded as though Erik had a plan, but if it was based on something so vague as “potential,” Shizuku would have to

find a different way, one they could walk together.

However, Erik was talking about a more specific kind of potential—a sort only Shizuku possessed.

“Recall my explanation of the Sea of Negativity,” he began. “Your soul is connected to it, just like everybody else’s. That Sea of Negativity is the reason that so many people lost their sanity following past forbidden-curse incidents. As the boundary to the Sea of Negativity weakens, the emanating miasma affects the minds of those nearby. The initial changes will likely commence in less than an hour. Perhaps even sooner for some people. You, however, carry some potential.”

Erik pointed at the magic array he’d drawn.

“This room is slowly connecting to the forbidden curse, so some miasma has entered it, yet it hasn’t impacted you at all, right? Usually, people with no magical powers are the most susceptible. They have trouble breathing or become restless.”

“Oh...”

Shizuku remembered Erik asking her how she was feeling earlier. There was still no sign that her condition was changing. That meant the miasma from the Sea of Negativity wasn’t affecting her.

“I can think of one possible explanation,” Erik said. “You’re from another world, so your soul...”

“Isn’t...connected...to the Sea of Negativity?”

Why had Shizuku come into this world only to lose her way, rush around in search of a solution, and then end up back at square one again?

She’d hoped to push ahead little by little, but it didn’t really matter how hard she struggled. Honestly, she didn’t know whether her goal even existed.

And yet if she let this exhaust or stop her, there was no guarantee that anybody would come save her. Nothing was going to fall into her lap if she didn’t reach for it.

Shizuku cast her mind back to her family, who now felt unbearably distant.

She reflected on who she'd been since entering this new world.

On countless occasions, Shizuku had thought of herself as the only outsider around. At times, that had made her feel lonely.

But now...she was grateful to be different. Erik's words weren't empty praise. She really did have some potential.

"I'm still a human, though. I get jealous and bear grudges. That might mean that I'm still connected to it."

"There's a chance, sure, but there's no magic in your world, is there? You might not have the same hierarchy of realms as we have here."

"Well, people don't tend to view stuff to do with souls and darkness as especially practical in my world."

"Exactly. This is only an assumption, since I know very little about where you come from, but I want to take the risk," Erik said. "Can you do this, Shizuku?"

"Yes."

She was still the same person who'd attempted to convince the boy from earlier that killing people wasn't the answer.

Shizuku needed to prove she was right. She'd never make her point if she sat around pontificating on her ideals.

She took the map from Erik. He'd written the letters for *Farsas* in the corner for her. She'd need to remember the word when it came time to pick out the right transit ring. Shizuku looked at it carefully to etch the characters into her mind. Then she picked up her bag, which had come to feel like part of her own body, and slung it over her shoulder. She placed her half-full water bottle next to Erik.

She'd known from the start that he wasn't the kind of person who'd flee a forbidden curse to wreak havoc.

And so she decided to take the same stance. If possible, she would've preferred to work together, but she needed to focus on a realistic goal. If Erik believed this was a good move, then she had to trust him.

"I'm going to run straight there. I promise I'll be back soon!" Shizuku declared

so firmly that Erik's eyes widened in astonishment.

Shizuku waited for the few seconds it took for his surprised expression to morph into one of resigned acceptance, refusing to look away. What would she say if he told her not to come back?

It didn't take long for him to regain his usual calm expression. He smiled at her, albeit a little awkwardly.

"Your safety comes first. If you do return, then make sure you have someone accompany you."

"Of course. And if I die, I'll come back as a ghost and haunt you!"

"I am a little intrigued by this whole 'ghost' thing. What do they look like?"

"Creepy! They have no legs and are half-transparent!"

If Shizuku were to die, that was it, even if things operated differently for her because of her unique circumstances. She couldn't test out what might happen simply because Erik was curious, nor did she have any desire to do so.

"Wait there and stay alive, please. Also, try not to go insane."

"I'm more resistant than ordinary people because I'm a mage. Still, don't get your hopes up."

"Don't say that just as I'm leaving! You'll jinx it!"

Shizuku called to Mea, who'd found a spot on one of the crates, then faced Erik a final time.

"All right. I'm going," she said.

"Take care," Erik replied.

Their reunion lasted only half an hour. Next time they saw each other, would it all be over? Briefly, Shizuku considered an unpleasant future.

How many times had she parted ways with people since arriving in this world? She wasn't sure, but she felt positive that she'd see Erik again. They'd be able to travel again, too. She had the ability to make that happen.

Shizuku waved at him, then squeezed back through the gap in the crates and opened the door.

“Wait. If you *do* meet the king’s younger sister, you probably shouldn’t mention my name,” Erik called from the other side of the barricade.

“Oh, okay,” Shizuku replied. She found that odd, but there was no time to delay.

She took off running.



Once the door had shut, Erik let out a deep sigh. With the water bottle in one hand, he began to chant.

When Shizuku had unexpectedly appeared before him, he’d been so surprised that it had left him at a loss for words. He knew she wasn’t the kind of person to sit around doing nothing, but he’d never predicted that she’d sneak into the castle disguised as a court lady.

Initially, he’d been upset about dragging her into this peril, but he quickly realized it presented them with a good opportunity. Had she remained at the inn, Erik wouldn’t have been able to contact her or ensure she escaped. Mea would’ve sensed the forbidden curse, but that was a poor guarantee Shizuku would survive.

Her coming to the palace changed things. Now Shizuku would escape to a foreign country through a transit ring. Erik had told her to go to Farsas in part because they truly needed help. However, he’d also understood she wouldn’t leave him unless given a reason.

“She’ll probably get mad at me when she catches on. Or maybe she already has...,” he muttered.

Even if she did manage to get in contact with the king’s younger sister upon reaching Farsas, she probably wouldn’t be able to return. Farsas would detain her so they had someone familiar with the situation around. And that was fine.

Erik stood at the epicenter of the forbidden curse. He was about to take on an abnormally large burden. Even if Shizuku made it to Farsas before the hole opened, he wasn’t confident that he’d be able to retain his sanity.

“Her old world, huh... I hope she gets home in one piece.”

Erik would probably never get to speak to her again. There were still so many

things he wanted to ask her about different writing systems, but it couldn't be helped. He'd had a fun and interesting time with her. So much so that it had washed away all the gloom that had built inside him over the previous few years.

Erik closed his eyes as he drew the magical power toward him, continuing to recite his incantation.

He only saw her when he shut his eyes. She smiled as she began to cry.



"I guess it was true after all," muttered a mage.

The soldier who was walking beside him looked up. He wasn't particularly interested but asked the question anyway.

"What was?"

"That the curse is a hole that leads into the Sea of Negativity."

"Is that what that outsider who ran off claimed?" asked the soldier. "I thought the royal chief mage already squashed those rumors."

"He did, but there's something off about him. Perhaps I'm imagining it, but I think miasma has started to form inside the castle."

"Miasma?"

The young mage placed a finger on his chin. They'd just witnessed the result of the massacre in the fourth research room. It left the mage certain the chamber was shrouded in miasma. He'd initially assumed that the gruesomeness of the events had caused the miasma to build, but he sensed it all over the castle. The predictions of that mage named Erik seemed to be correct.

The men had been tasked with quelling the chaos outside the castle and hunting down the assassin skulking around the halls, but the mage wasn't sure whether either would solve much. They were already reaching the point of no return.

The two men turned a corner in silence, and as they did, the soldier tripped on something and almost fell over.

“Argh! What was that?!”

As he straightened himself up again, he looked at the ground. Another mage was lying on the floor, bleeding. Had that assassin got to him? He wasn’t severely injured, but he was crying out in pain.

“Hey, are you all right?!”

Shaken by the sight of his injured colleague, the young mage hastily tried to heal him. Before he could, the soldier kicked the injured mage.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?!” the young mage exclaimed.

“He’s in my way. As far as I’m concerned, weaklings should hurry up and die,” the soldier spat.

Then he stepped over the collapsed man and hurried on. The young mage watched him leave, dumbfounded.

“What’s going on...?” he whispered.

It was like the soldier had turned into an entirely different person. The mage swallowed nervously.

The afternoon had only just begun, so it was bright inside the castle—but to the mage, it felt like his surroundings had just been plunged into darkness.



The northwestern hall where the transit rings could be found proved to be a considerable distance from the center of the castle.

Apparently, Erik had spent three hours roaming through the palace evading his pursuers before reaching the heart of the place. Shizuku had confidence in her sense of direction, though. She was the perfect person for this task.

Erik had told her to take the long way around, so after retracing her steps back to the ground floor and proceeding down a hallway, she turned several corners, always moving northwest.

Farsas had been her goal from the beginning. It was her one hope of getting home. The prospect of reaching her destination so soon provided little joy, however. Shizuku focused on reaching the hall quickly, no matter what. Her mind raced ahead so fast that her body couldn’t keep up.

Occasionally, Shizuku detected someone else approaching and hid behind a pillar. When she ran into a soldier using the same door she was, she even asked Mea to knock him out.

The more she scurried around trying to avoid people, the more time she'd waste. She needed to reach the transit ring quickly.

Shizuku's objective was her sole thought as moved from corridor to corridor. Slowly, the air began to change. An invisible yet palpable miasma was becoming steadily denser.

When Shizuku heard voices coming from around the corner, she came to a stop.

"The wards are in place. No assassin will be able to get through. That said, it's unlikely that anyone inside will be able to get out, either."

"I'm sorry for troubling you with this."

Shizuku could hear an elderly man talking to a relatively younger, yet still aged, companion. She hugged the wall and worked desperately to control her breathing so they wouldn't hear her panting.

"Do we need to send in our castle mages to compensate for those who have died?" one of them asked.

"That won't be necessary, sir," the other one replied. "Death itself will handle it."

"I see..."

The younger man's tone sounded familiar. It was the somewhat composed yet twisted voice of the royal chief mage. That he spoke in such a respectful way implied the other person was his superior. Shizuku was tempted to poke her head around the corner and spy on what was going on, but she couldn't risk being spotted. Instead, she worked out her present location from her memory of the map.

She was heading northwest, and the chamber with the transit rings was only a short distance ahead. Judging by her location and the conversation she was overhearing, one of the research rooms was likely nearby, too.

“We should leave the assassin to do as he likes. Bloodshed will hasten the forbidden curse’s completion. Such chaos should be welcomed. Ensure the array at its core is safe, and all will be fine.”

“The core is located in the central part of the castle, with the king. Security is most stringent there,” the royal chief mage explained.

“I see. So the circle is what’s truly being protected, rather than the king. How amusingly ironic.”

One man let out a crackly laugh, and the other followed suit. The peculiarity of it all sent shivers down Shizuku’s spine, making her cower. The malevolence emanating from them was so horrifying that it felt like they were the root of all evil.

Footsteps echoed toward Shizuku. She’d been so absorbed in their conversation that she’d forgotten to hide herself. Panicked, Shizuku straightened up against the wall before dashing away.

“Who’s that?!” one of the men yelled from right behind her.

Briefly, Shizuku considered how amusing it would be if the two old men shouted something cliché like *Hold it right there!*

However, all levity drained from the situation when the men began reciting incantations. Shizuku paled with terror.

“Die!” one of the men yelled.

“Mea, defend me!” Shizuku commanded.

She only had a moment to wonder why nothing was happening before her body was suddenly propelled forward. She tumbled sideways and slammed against the floor. The impact sent her mind reeling for an instant, but tingling pain pulled her back.

“M-Mea!”

The bird had been thrown against the ground. Had she failed to deflect the magic? Shizuku sat up even as her body ached, hurriedly picking up her assistant demon.

Shizuku was lucky. She’d fallen on her back. Her legs could still move. She

could still run.

Once she stood and felt pressure on the balls of her feet, Shizuku resumed her escape without bothering to look back.

One of the mages was working a second incantation, although she didn't know which.

Shizuku pulled off her ring and tossed it behind her. She was fond of Erik's gift, but this was her only option.

The ring shattered with a clinking sound as it met the approaching flames. The spell commanding the fire dispersed.

"Curses... Hold it right there, girl!"

At long last, Shizuku got to hear that classic line, and she followed what everyone else did in such chase scenes. She ignored the command and disappeared around the nearest corner.

"Are you okay, Mea?" she whispered to the small bird in her hand.

Mea chirped in answer, albeit feebly.

Shizuku held her assistant demon safe against her chest.

Her pursuers were yet to round the corner. She had time. Shizuku ran for the next turn and was swiftly forced to stop. She'd followed a path to a dead end. There was nothing there but a door to her right.

"..."

Footsteps grew louder from around the corner, but Shizuku only heard one set. The absence of the other person suggested they might have gone elsewhere. Shizuku lunged for the door and found it was firmly locked. Her hands trembled anxiously.

"Where did you go? There's nowhere left to hide in this castle."

It was the royal chief mage. He was right on her tail.

Shizuku looked at her assistant demon in her hand, then at her bag.

"...I have no choice."

She couldn't waste any time judging the situation. She put her bag on the floor and placed Mea on top of it. Then she took hold of the sword.

Her jaw clenched tightly. An imaginary pain flashed through her mind.

She had to believe in herself. It was no big deal.

Shizuku pulled on the hilt. Then the weapon came free of its sheath while Shizuku breathed a sigh. Its silver, single-edged blade was terrifyingly sharp.

Shizuku nodded at Mea, who looked on with evident worry.

"Okay, let's go."

Shizuku ran for the sound of the footsteps. A rare bit of single clarity dismissed all needless thought from her mind. She focused only on her body.



Idos, the royal chief mage, moved down the passage, his face contorted in fury.

The girl he was pursuing was the same one he'd let escape from one of the research chambers. He didn't expect her to still be wandering around the castle. Anger boiled in him. He tutted.

The bishop had already teleported away to check on the forbidden curse's core. Idos had chosen to remain, in part because he was afraid. Miasma pervaded the castle, and the bishop seemed to enjoy it.

However, Idos couldn't let his true feelings show in front of the bishop or his underlings. As such, he'd turned his fear into anger. This time, he would kill that girl.

"Where did you go? There's nowhere left to hide in this castle."

The girl didn't respond. There was no sign of her in the long corridor that stretched out before Idos. She must have turned the next corner, the one that led to a dead end.

Idos moved in while constructing a spell with his hands.

He wouldn't kill her in one blow. A light shock would render her immobile, then he could torment her. With his right hand held out in front of him, he followed the bend in the passage.

A piece of white fabric greeted him immediately. It was one of the aprons that the court ladies wore over their clothes. Idos flinched as he nearly walked into it. Rather than retreat, he gestured with his outstretched hand, sending streaks of electricity arcing into the surroundings.

“Ahh!”

The girl cried with pain, but she said no more than that. A kick slammed hard into Idos’s right knee. He collapsed with a short yelp.

He hadn’t expected such retaliation. It left him too stunned to execute another spell right away. By the time he pulled the apron from his face, the girl stood over him with a sword pointed at him.

The nameless girl stared at him with dark eyes.

“Try any magic, and I’ll stab you.”

“You...”

“No talking until I’ve asked you something, either.”

The tip hovered nearer. Her hand shook slightly, but Idos harbored no delusion she’d pull the weapon away.

As far as Idos could see, his spell had singed the girl in places, including her left flank. Bits of her clothing had been burned away, exposing ivory skin. Her flesh was peeling, and blood ran from small wounds. The girl showed little concern for her injuries, though. Her gaze remained fixed upon the royal chief mage.

“Let me explain it to you one more time. That forbidden curse is going to create a hole leading to the Sea of Negativity. Once it’s complete, everyone in the castle will lose their minds and die. That is the absolute truth. Will you continue, even knowing the consequences? Okay, now you can answer.”

Pressured by the girl menacing him with a blade, Idos spoke reluctantly.

“The forbidden curse will control the minds of the whole city. It’s not going to open a Hole of Negativity.”

“That’s a lie. Don’t be fooled.”

This was swiftly becoming a repeat of their earlier conversation. Even then, Idos had suspected that the girl's claim was genuine. Something was unquestionably amiss. Idos was skilled enough to have become the royal chief mage. He'd sensed something enveloping the castle that was not mind-control magic.

The realization frightened him, though, and he hadn't been able to tell anyone about it. Had he spoke up, the bishop would've murdered him. There was no going back now.

"People's deaths are accelerating the forbidden curse. We don't have much time left. Are you aware of that?"

"No," Idos replied. "But I know there's miasma drifting through the air."

"You mentioned the core of the circle earlier. If we were to destroy it, would it end the forbidden curse?"

Shizuku kept her sword pointed at Idos.

She'd spent a lot of time with a mage, but Erik rarely used spells. Shizuku hadn't seen many of them in action.

In those few instances that she had, it always involved chanting. That a skilled mage could manage a spell without any recitation came as an unpleasant surprise.

"Argh!"

Struck by an intense pain in her side, Shizuku dropped her dagger. Looking down, she realized a stake made of ice had pierced her flank. It ate into her body like it had a will of its own. Shizuku pulled it out in a panic. The moment she did so, however, crimson liquid flooded from the wound. The sheer amount of blood made her feel dizzy.

"Nghh... Argh..."

Tears formed in her eyes. How deep was the injury? Shizuku tried to apply pressure to it with all her strength.

To make matters worse, she heard the man bellowing down at her.

"It can't be stopped, girl," said the man, who now towered over her. "You're

going to help create the forbidden curse.”

Shizuku’s eyes remained firmly shut, even as the man touched her head. She struggled to open them and felt herself slipping out of consciousness. Escape felt impossible now.

Oh, I guess this is where I die, she found herself thinking.

Even so, she forced herself to form words with her quivering lips.

“Tell me... If we destroy...the circle, then...”

She did not plead with or curse her killer. When Idos heard what she said, something like pain entered his eyes. He did his best to push away the bewildering feeling, glaring at the girl. He kept his hand upon her head as he answered:

“If the array at the core is destroyed, all the magical energy within the castle will start to dissipate. The forbidden curse will fall apart, and its remains will scatter. But that matters little for you. You’re going to die right here.”

“You...should...destroy it,” Shizuku gasped out.

“I...”

Idos didn’t want to die. That’s what kept him from turning against the bishop.

Why wasn’t this girl pleading for her life when she was on the brink of death? Was there something valued more than herself?

Was she stupid, reckless, or something else entirely?

Finally, the girl collapsed. Her small body slipped away from his hand and tumbled to the floor.

“Idiot,” he grumbled.

There was no anger in his voice anymore, but there was no fear, either. After a short pause, he began to chant with an expressionless face.

No matter how noble or sincere a person, they always died in the end.

There was no escaping that. It’s why the Shula faith taught people to embrace despair. The teachings were meant to steer people from becoming idle and instead indulge in the transient comfort of their fleeting lives.

Idos would die one day, too. It was just a matter of when. Everybody died. That was all there was to it. That was all there was...

He glanced at the palm of his hand, where the spell was forming, then at the collapsed girl.

He let out a sigh, then dismissed his magic.



Shizuku awoke on a bed. Her eyes cracked slightly and saw a familiar ceiling.

White wallpaper. The same big flower pattern she'd known for over a decade. She sat up, feeling dazed, and held her head in her hands.

Even through the curtains, she could tell that it was already fairly bright outside. She stretched her arms.

Her pajama-clad legs slid off the bed, and her feet tucked themselves into slippers. She'd done this a million times before. She found herself trying to locate the injury on her side, but there was nothing there.

"...Was it all a dream?"

The words fell from her lips and onto the polka-dot carpet.

She was in her room—in the same house she'd lived in for eighteen years.

Once she stepped out of her bedroom, she walked down the stairs, yawning. Noises traveled from the kitchen, attracting her in that direction. Upon opening the door, she saw a tall woman standing in front of the sink with her back turned.

"Finally up, Shizuku?"

"Oh, Umi."

"Being on a break doesn't mean you can sleep in forever. Everyone's already left."

"Oh."

"Well, since I'm here, I'll make you some brunch."

"Thanks," Shizuku replied.

She was still half-asleep. Her mind was foggy, and her head wasn't functioning

properly.

She pulled the bottle of barley tea on the table toward her and poured some into her glass. The cool and refreshing taste was weirdly nostalgic.

“Hey, Umi,” she said.

“What is it?” Shizuku’s older sister replied.

“Do you know Erik?”

“...”

“I need to get back to Erik. Do you know him, Umi?”

Her sister didn’t answer. She moved the frying pan over the stove in silence.

Shizuku flicked a droplet of water off her glass with her finger.

“Thank you, Umi, but I have to go. I need to persist for a little a longer.”

Shizuku’s sister didn’t reply. This wasn’t really her, after all. Shizuku realized that now. Umi was a terrible cook who’d never offer to make anything for anyone.

Still, Shizuku spoke to her like she was her real sister. Concerned that her disappearance had caused her family worry, she whispered, “I’m sorry, Umi. I’m going now.”

Shizuku headed for the door. A voice that sounded like her sister’s called out to her from behind.

“Shizuku. All the answers are already inside you.”

Shizuku’s hand touched the knob, then pushed the door open.

Dazzling light enveloped her. She shut her eyes against the radiance.



The first thing she saw was a woman peering into her face. She had blond hair and green eyes. As attractive as her features were, they had an impressive sternness that gave her the countenance of a strict clergywoman. Shizuku was sure she’d seen her somewhere before, but she couldn’t remember her name.

Shizuku rubbed her eyes. The woman smiled.

“Oh, you’ve woken up,” she said. “Seems you’re alive, then.”

“Just about...,” Shizuku replied.

“Did you hear that, Tarkis? I said she’s alive!”

“That’s good.”

The sound of the man’s voice made Shizuku sit up in alarm. She was even more familiar with his than the woman’s.

A quick look was all she needed to find Tarkis in a corner of the room. He was exercising with his hands behind his head. The odd sight left Shizuku’s mind nearly blank.

“Why are you doing squats?” she asked him.

“The air’s turning foul in here. Moving keeps me from getting all worked up.”

“You must really be a musclehead if you think you can resist the effects of the miasma by working out,” Shizuku remarked.

“I’m really suffering over here,” Tarkis protested. “Just let me do my thing?”

The word *miasma* was powerful enough to bring Shizuku back to the present. She looked down at her body. Her gray dress was charred and torn all over. The fabric covering her torso was soaked in blood, creating a stain distinct from the scorch marks.

And yet there was no wound. Shizuku stroked her exposed skin.

“I’m okay...”

“I healed you,” the woman said nonchalantly. “You were bleeding really heavily. I wasn’t sure if sealing the wound would stop the blood loss from killing you.”

That was when Shizuku finally remembered the woman’s name.

“Thank you so much, Lydia.”

“It’s no trouble,” Lydia replied. “Now Tarkis owes me even more.”

“Yep,” Tarkis confirmed readily. “You’ll pay me back when you make it big, won’t you, Shizuku?”

“Sorry, but I don’t expect that’ll happen,” Shizuku shot back.

Tarkis roared with laughter, even as he continued to exercise. Feeling a bit bewildered by her current predicament, Shizuku sorted through her jumbled memories.

“Did you two rescue me when the royal chief mage was about to kill me?”

“He’s the one who did that to you?” Lydia said. “An assistant demon guided us to you. By that point, you were already on the verge of death. There was nobody else around.”

“Oh. He must have left without checking whether I was alive. Seems kind of careless,” Shizuku commented.

“You realize that’s the whole reason you’re still here, right?” Tarkis said. “Watch what you say.”

Ignoring Tarkis’s chiding, Shizuku picked up Mea. The little bird looked worried.

Shizuku wasn’t hurt. She felt the same discomfort that Tarkis mentioned, however. Was she really immune to the effects of the Sea of Negativity, as Erik had suggested?

She looked around, her eyes settling on the room’s only window. The scene beyond shocked her.

It was pitch-black outside the castle.

Not even moonlight shone from the sky. Had night fallen while she was unconscious? That was a lot of lost time she wouldn’t get back. The thought of it made her pale.

“Oh, no need to worry, Shizuku. Not that much time has passed. It’s a bit past three in the afternoon,” Tarkis explained.

“Huh? But it’s dark outside...”

“Miasma’s covered the entire castle. Pretty crazy stuff.”

That’s why it looked like a solar eclipse?

Shizuku’s body still felt a little weird, something she chalked up to her

mended injuries. Ignoring this as best she could, she approached the window.

It was so dark outside that she could barely see a thing. This wasn't the same gloom that came from natural nighttime. The castle had been blanketed in a thick, black cloth.

Lydia heaved a great sigh.

"This forbidden curse is no laughing matter," she said. "Tarkis brings me nothing but trouble. I considered teleporting away, but the coordinates for the outside world no longer seem to work. I'm completely trapped. Cough up what you owe me now before you die, Tarkis."

"And how do you expect me to do that?" he answered. "I haven't brought anything with me."

"You could belly dance for money," Lydia suggested. "It'd cheer me up a little, at least."

"That's not the way I want to die..."

Despite the desperate situation, the two didn't seem anxious at all, firing quips back and forth. For all their calm, Shizuku didn't miss the one alarming bit of information. She turned around.

"You can't teleport?"

"Nope," Lydia confirmed. "They've used magic to block off the castle. No one can get in or out."

"I wonder what happened to the people who were around the castle gates," Tarkis mused. "I hope they're okay."

"Does that mean transit rings won't work, either?!" cried Shizuku, almost shrieking.

Tarkis and Lydia exchanged glances. Tarkis finally stopped squatting and casually held up his hands.

"It doesn't sound like it. I heard that the castle mages were freaking out."

"I can't believe it...", Shizuku whispered.

There'd be no going to Farsas for help now. She'd failed the task Erik had

entrusted her with.

Shizuku began to lose her balance. Her surroundings seemed to plunge into darkness just like the sky. Her determination to reach the transit ring had kept her going even in the face of terrible danger. Now all of it crumbled away.

She sank to the ground while clinging to the window frame.

“What’s wrong, Shizuku?”

“...I planned to go to Farsas,” she admitted. “I was going to ask them for help.”

“Oh, we’ve already contacted Farsas. I imagine someone will be here soon,” Tarkis stated.

It had been nonstop surprises since Shizuku had awoken. She looked around, trying to make sense of what she’d heard.

Tarkis resumed his squats.

“It’s no use,” he said. “I’m still getting wound up.”

As he did his workout, Tarkis explained that contacting Farsas had been part of the plan from the outset. News about the forbidden curse had been spread throughout the city at dawn, and if the ordeal wasn’t resolved by the afternoon, several mages on standby were to reach out to Farsas.

The kingdom of magic still had to verify the claim, so there would be a delay before it took action. Nonetheless, they expected it’d intervene before the end of the third day.

“It’s a shame, really. If we’d managed to sort this out by ourselves, it would have made us instant celebrities,” Tarkis groused.

“We never would’ve managed that! You should have contacted Farsas at the start!” countered Lydia.

“Letting them handle everything would’ve been so boring,” Tarkis insisted. “It’d besmirch my pride as a mercenary.”

Shizuku wondered what kind of relationship these two actually had. As Tarkis was squatting, Lydia hurled a nearby cardboard box at him, which he

effortlessly dodged.

She felt like they'd carry on bickering forever if she left them to it, so Shizuku pulled herself together and forced her way into their conversation.

"So, uhhh, are people from Farsas really coming?"

"Probably," Tarkis said.

"I'm sure they will," Lydia added. "When that country hears about a forbidden curse, it gets pretty scary."

If Lydia was right, perhaps there was still a chance. As Shizuku began to relax into relief, Lydia made plain an unpleasant truth with a serious expression.

"But we don't know if we'll still be alive by the time they get here."

"Huh?"

According to Lydia, the forbidden curse had caused significant changes to the castle in the two hours that Shizuku had been unconscious.

A thick membrane had cut the palace off from the outside world. Within, the central area's third floor was similarly sealed from all access by miasma. Anyone who approached from the second floor or below abruptly went berserk and began attacking those around them. Many had already perished...including the king.

Those who'd managed to avoid such a fate had fled to the outer periphery of the castle, but they couldn't get past the castle walls. All the survivors, including Tarkis and Lydia, had rushed around in panic, trying desperately to avoid killing their allies by mistake. To make matters worse, the forbidden curse was gradually spreading from the center of the castle, taking over more and more of the structure.

The spell still wasn't complete, but the crisis was undeniably here.

When Shizuku told the pair what she knew of the forbidden curse, they started arguing, much to her surprise.

"Ugh. Why didn't you tell me that death hastens the forbidden curse, Tarkis? We never should have reached out to that Kaito kid!"

“My client told me that killing the mages would stop the curse...,” Tarkis insisted. “And *you* should have warned *me*! You’re the mage!”

“How?! No ordinary mage knows anything of forbidden curses! All documents on them are locked away in castles.”

Tarkis seemed to be no match for Lydia, who never held back when criticizing him. Their conversation had a certain energy to it, but Shizuku knew they couldn’t waste their time bickering.

She clenched and relaxed her hands to make sure she could move without issue, then stood.

“Um, thank you for saving me,” she interjected.

“Don’t worry about it. We might die soon anyway,” Lydia responded.

“I don’t want to belly dance,” Tarkis protested.

“Whether Tarkis belly dances or not, I’m leaving.” Shizuku picked up her bag. Tarkis and Lydia must have found it with her and brought it along. Standing before the only door out of the room, she turned and bowed to Tarkis and Lydia. Both of them looked puzzled.

“Wait here for a little while. I’ll figure something out.”

“Wai...wait a minute. Where are you going?” Lydia tried to stop her from leaving.

Shizuku smiled. It was a fairly anxious expression, but simple apprehension wouldn’t stop her.

She pointed straight ahead. There was no ring on her finger anymore.

“To the center of the castle, to the core of the magic circle,” the girl from another world announced as she opened the door.

This was her unassuming declaration of war on the repugnant spell slowly destroying the castle.



“It appears that chaos has broken out in Candela’s castle city.”

“Chaos?” a woman repeated irritably.

She frowned at the man who'd sent for her out of the blue. Her face was lovely enough to elicit sighs from all who glimpsed it, but it was a rigid, harsh beauty.

The magistrate who shared the room with the woman and man began to look tense.

"What is this chaos about?" the woman asked.

"Good question. I don't really know for certain."

Facing her older brother, the woman asked, "Why would you summon me, then?"

"I called for you precisely *because* things are uncertain," he asserted in answer. "We've heard that Candela has attempted to create a forbidden curse."

These last two words changed the mood of the room entirely. An anxious gleam emerged in the woman's blue eyes.

"Are you certain it's a forbidden curse?" she said.

"The members of the public causing the commotion claim it with confidence. A few mages who were present in Candela's castle city have informed us about a peculiar energy surrounding the palace. It's a rather convincing account."

The man seemed fond of roundabout answers, although perhaps that was simply how he spoke of magic with his younger sister, who held the authority when it came to such matters.

The man wasn't a mage, but his younger sister was. Although he was the most powerful man in his nation, he still ruled the so-called kingdom of magic. And his sister was the greatest mage alive.

"Are you asking me to check what's going on?" she asked.

"I won't deny that I'd appreciate it."

"You sound so disingenuous," the woman said. "It just makes me even angrier."

"Don't get mad. It gives you wrinkles," the man teased.

"That's the only thing you've said with any sincerity. It makes me want to

ignore you completely.”

“You can’t turn a blind eye to this. Send out that spirit of yours, at the very least. I want to know what’s going on.”

At last, the man made a genuine entreaty for help, and his straight-faced younger sister obliged. She extended her pale right hand and called her assistant demon—her mystical spirit—by name.

“Silfa,” she said. “Come.”

“Yes, ma’am?”

A young girl appeared from thin air. She had pure-white hair and silver eyes, colors that were incredibly unusual for humans. The high-ranking demon gracefully knelt before her master.

“I am here to help you with anything you may need, Leuticia,” she said.

“Confirm what’s happening in Candela’s castle city,” Leuticia said. “Then return and report to me.”

“Understood.”

With that, the spirit vanished without so much as a chant.

The woman turned to her older brother and gave him a look that said *Was that good enough for you?*

The young king of Farsas responded with a satisfied nod.



If the core at the center of the castle was destroyed, the forbidden curse would end.

Shizuku could barely remember where she’d heard that, but the words were etched in her mind with profound certainty.

When she regained consciousness, it hadn’t immediately occurred to her to go to the castle’s center. After swapping information with Tarkis and Lydia, however, she figured that she was in a position to help.

Farsas had already been contacted. Any remaining way to assist was here in the palace. Shizuku considered returning to the subbasement and getting Erik

so he wouldn't be stuck directly below the forbidden curse. Unfortunately, the cons outweighed the pros. Moving him would allow the magic's progress to accelerate, and even if he left the most dangerous section of the castle, there was no escaping it entirely. Eventually, the worst would come to pass. Unless Shizuku managed to end the curse.

Allegedly, everyone in the central section of the castle had turned on one another, leaving no survivors. Shizuku was immune to the effects of the miasma. That seemed to suggest she could go where no others could and destroy the core of the spell.

Her mind was decided the moment she made that realization.

The decision was easy. Shizuku felt obliged to try.

Time was undoubtedly running short, but she could make it if she hurried.

Shizuku only needed to destroy it. Then she could resume her travels with him.

"Hey, I told you to wait!"

The girl turned a corner and disappeared, leaving Lydia dumbfounded.

She looked over her shoulder to find her friend still doing squats. After stomping to him, she delivered a kick in the leg.

"Ouch," went Tarkis, pausing his workout and standing up straight.

"Go and bring her back, you bonehead!" Lydia demanded.

"Bonehead?" Tarkis repeated. "She chose to leave. It's fine."

"How could you possibly think this is okay?! What could a girl like her even accomplish?!"

"I'd like to know that, too," Tarkis replied.

The response wasn't meant as mockery. He was truly curious.

Lydia frowned. "You saw it, didn't you? That book she had."

"..."

When they'd found her, she'd been lying in a dead-end passage, covered in

blood.

While Lydia had cast healing magic, Tarkis went to fetch Shizuku's bag. It sat on the ground only a short distance from the collapsed girl. When he picked up a small book that had fallen from it, he noticed something astonishing.

The densely packed intricate text inside the small volume was unlike any script used on the continent. It couldn't have been a writing system from the continent to the east, either, for its people shared ancestors with this land and therefore the same language.

Shizuku had claimed that she was from an island nation to the east, but it seemed like she wasn't from this continent or the other that was known. She hailed from an unknown place that seemingly had no communication with any who used the language Tarkis understood. Was she from another land in this world? Or perhaps...

Where had she come from, and why was she traveling to Farsas? Tarkis sensed that those questions were directly related to her identity.

"If what you're saying is true, then she must be built a little differently from the rest of us," Lydia remarked.

Tarkis sniffed. "Maybe she has more blood than we do."

"Surviving is one thing, but no normal person would be able to spring back into action so quickly after bleeding out like that."

Lydia had treated Shizuku's wounds, but she acknowledged she might have reached the girl too late. The thought had made her bite her lip in frustration. Magic could seal wounds but not replenish lost blood. Yet Shizuku recovered anyway.

Lydia found it odd but didn't ponder it much. She didn't sense any magical energy from Shizuku, and she didn't judge her to be a seasoned fighter. It was difficult to imagine her taking on the forbidden curse everyone else feared to approach.

Lydia clicked her tongue and glowered at Tarkis, who'd resumed his workout.

"You'd better apologize to that kid's family if she dies because of your

misunderstanding,” she said.

“I know she looks young, but she claims she’s eighteen. She’s responsible for herself. When the time comes, I’ll apologize...with a belly dance,” Tarkis replied.

“That’s no way to show remorse! You’re the worst!”

“I’d rather do that than offer an ordinary apology.”

“I doubt she’d prefer it!”

Lydia, a woman who’d received four offers to work in royal courts and decisively rejected them all, looked terribly irritated but said no more on the subject.

It was the second day since construction on the curse had begun. The miasma flooding the castle threatened to paralyze everyone within, save a single girl.



When Shizuku noticed the piles of bodies ahead, she was so taken aback that she stopped in her tracks.

Pools of blood and discarded longswords surrounded the corpses. Had these people killed one another in a swordfight? The scene was too gruesome for an ordinary person like Shizuku to stomach.

She sensed herself beginning to drift into a daze, but she shook it off and reminded herself to remain calm. Undoubtedly, she’d come across more dead bodies as she neared the center of the castle. She wasn’t an ordinary college student anymore. Ordinary college students didn’t journey through magical worlds. It didn’t matter if the situation made her want to cry and vomit; cowering was out of the question. She had to accept that this was reality.

Shizuku closed her eyes and pictured herself striding forward.

While clenching her hands, she lifted her head and gazed at the path before her.

“Wait here, Mea,” she said.

Shizuku left her heavy bag behind a nearby pillar and placed Mea on top of it. She herself might have been abnormally immune to the effects of the miasma, but that didn’t mean that her assistant demon was.

Mea gazed up at her master worriedly.

“I’ll be back soon—please be patient,” Shizuku assured her.

The bird made a noise and accepted the order.

Empty-handed for the first time since coming to the castle, Shizuku stepped over two dead bodies on the ground.

“...I’m going to borrow this.”

Showing no hesitation, Shizuku picked up a bloody sword. Then she approached a dead soldier whose eyes were still open. She extended her stiff hand and closed his eyes for him.

Shortly after arriving in the castle city, she’d discussed the concept of life after death with Erik.

While Shizuku had lamented the cruelty of death in this world, Erik had told her something in his usual unfazed tone.

“Even if there were a place where people went after they died, there’s no way for us to confirm its existence. Every fantasy about crossing over to some afterlife exists for the living and the living alone. So if you want to believe that there’s a chance of salvation after you’ve died, then there’s no reason why you shouldn’t.”

At the time, she hadn’t been able to make sense of it. She could never convince herself to believe a lie just because it gave her some peace of mind.

However, now that she’d seen death up close a number of times, she finally understood.

It was okay to be sad. It was okay to pray. It was fine to fantasize that the dead would be saved and to hope for peace after death. Perhaps it was a necessary part of moving forward, even if you felt powerless and grieved in the face of it.

The sword was too long and unwieldy for someone of Shizuku’s stature, but she ran with it anyway.

Shizuku carefully treaded over and around the cadavers, surrounded by an atmosphere tainted with blood and miasma. At the end of the uncomfortably

silent journey, she came face-to-face with despair.

The room was in the central part of the castle on the third floor.

Its interior was dark. Candles burned in a few corners, but they offered precious little light.

The stench of blood was so strong that it made Shizuku gag. The place felt grislier than a haunted house.

Shizuku took one step forward, covering her mouth with her hands. Although she had become somewhat accustomed to the smell, there were times when her nausea took over. She had no choice but to hold back the tears and swallow down her stomach acid.

She wished for a distraction for herself or the strength to maintain focus. If she let herself stop now, she'd never make it.

The rug beneath her feet was so bloody that she couldn't tell what color it had been originally. Slowly, she pressed deeper into the room. Only the outlines of the dead were visible on the floor, but she did her best to avoid them as she walked.

Beyond the darkness, Shizuku saw a flicker of light. This one was a different color than the candlelight.

The first thought that popped into Shizuku's head was *They're red will-o'-the-wisps*. A small collection of little flames rested on the floor, giving their surroundings an ominous red hue.

As Shizuku drew near, she realized that they were arranged in a circle.

"Is this...the core?"

Now that Shizuku stood before the little flames, she peered down at the magic circle on the ground.

It was around two meters in diameter. The lines that formed it emitted a red glow not unlike the shivering flames positioned at crucial points on the array. The intricate creation felt intimidating, enough so that Shizuku hesitated to step within its confines.

"How do I get rid of it?"

She tried cutting through one of the little flames with the tip of her sword as a test, yet it had no effect. There seemed to be no choice but to destroy the lines scrawled across the stone floor. Shizuku looked around, wondering whether there was a pickax or something similar she might use. Suddenly, her gaze found a man who was lying on the ground nearby.

He was wrapped in a mage's robe and rested face down with his hand reaching for the magic circle. Shizuku sensed that she'd seen him before and wandered to him. It almost felt like he was drawing her in. She studied the dead man's face. In the gloom, it seemed nearly fused with the floor.

"That mage is a traitor. He turned against me," announced an unexpected voice on the other side of the magic ring.

"...!"

Shizuku sprang to her feet, checking she still had the sword.

Who could have possibly survived? She hadn't sensed anyone approaching her.

She strained her eyes, and a vague figure took shape. He was seated on the king's throne at the end of the chamber.

The man appeared to be wearing a mage's robe, too, but Shizuku couldn't make out his face. Still, his voice sounded familiar.

"It's human nature to betray people, so I can't condemn him for it," the voice continued. "But he died. He tried to break the ring, but the power that poured out was too much for him to endure. His vessel expired."

"He tried to break the ring?" said Shizuku.

The man had met an anguished end, judging by his expression.

The dead mage who'd lost his life trying to destroy the forbidden curse was the same person who'd seriously wounded Shizuku two hours earlier—the royal chief mage of Candela. She didn't even know his name, yet she couldn't help but wonder what kind of torment he'd suffered for trying to destroy the forbidden cruse. It was beyond imagining.

It sounded like Shizuku would suffer the same fate if she attempted the same.

Perhaps the risk only applied to people of this world, though? There was no knowing.

That wasn't the only danger, either. Shizuku doubted this old man on the throne would let her do as she pleased.

He was the one Shizuku had overheard the royal chief mage speaking to so respectfully. That meant...

"...Are you the bishop of the Shula faith?"

...he had to be the leader behind all this tragedy.

The man responded to Shizuku's question with a profoundly relaxed voice, cutting a stark contrast to the terrifying surroundings.

"People used to call me that, yes—back when I had free will."

This is crazy.

The man was either in a trance or he was possessed. Regardless, she sensed that this was an exceedingly dire turn of events. The only positive aspect to the situation was that the bishop exhibited no obvious hostility.

Shizuku slowly began to move her sword forward, trying to make sure the bishop wouldn't notice. Considering the blade was long enough to touch the floor, it was no easy feat. As she carefully pushed it toward the core, she thought to speak with the bishop to distract him.

"So who are you now?" she questioned.

"I have no name. I am always present, everywhere," he replied.

"Are you Shula?"

"I have been called that in the past."

"What about Simila?"

"Another name given to me."

"But what are you?"

The man was silent. Shizuku thought he looked like a machine someone was switching on and off.

It didn't seem like he possessed any initiative of his own. When he was asked a question, he answered. If ascribed an identity, he would comply, but he wouldn't assume any on his own. Such was his mutable nature.

The man didn't answer. It was as though his batteries had run dry. Shizuku wondered if he'd stopped working for good.

However, "it" began to whisper.

"I am despair."

The voice traveled up from the depths of a distant land.

Strong, irrefutable responsibility kept Shizuku rooted where she stood. If not for that, she would've promptly fled. She desperately wished to more than anything.

She couldn't, though, and so instead, she summoned all her willpower.

The man—or rather, "it"—exuded an ominous presence. Shizuku's instincts told her that it wasn't wise for humans to confront such a being in this manner.

A chill spread throughout her body as she thought on what to do.

Feeling that engaging in conversation with the entity was the only way to protect herself from impending destruction, she searched for questions. The tension rapidly turned oppressive.

"Are you the Negativity?" she asked.

"I am the Negativity, which makes people human."

"You must live in the Sea of Negativity, then."

"Resentment, resignation, sorrow. I am all those things and yet something even more fundamental, too. I am regarded as the embodiment of despair."

"Is that what humans define you as?"

"Humans are the only ones who acknowledge me at all."

"Are you superior or inferior?"

"Both. Those who acknowledge me are superior, yet I, as a being, exist on the lowest stratum there is."

“Then what do you want?”

What if he wants to destroy the whole world? Shizuku asked herself, but she took a step forward before he had the chance to answer.

The edge of the steel sword scraped against the floor, producing an unpleasant sound. Shizuku was only a finger’s length from the outermost edge of the circle.

She was seized by the possibility that the array might electrocute her at a touch. It was an unsettling notion.

As she braced herself mentally and physically, the thing that was despair answered, speaking as one did when they read from a book.

“I do not wish for anything,” he said.

“Then why are you here?”

“I was invited.”

Shizuku wanted to tell him that it was a mistake and that he ought to go home, but she bit her lip. Perhaps he would obey, but it was best to wait until she was certain he’d comply. She knew that gods’ actions often transcended human comprehension.

For now, I need to find out what he’s up to and buy myself some time. Then Shizuku remembered that she lacked the luxury of time.

She examined the flames, still flickering in the darkness.

“Is the hole open yet?” she questioned.

“Not yet, but it’s very close. The fact that I can exist within a person is a good sign.”

It was only the afternoon of the second day. They hadn’t reached the decisive moment yet. The answer offered Shizuku some relief, but that was all. She needed to stop it. She moved the sword forward slightly.

Above all, she needed to remain calm.

Fear threatened to stir her mind into a whirlpool, but she forced it to calm. This swiftly became an endless cycle.

Red light from the flames glinted on the double-edged blade. A suffocating sensation gripped Shizuku, making her head feel tight. Her vision seemed to be darkening at the edges. The situation was as though she'd been abandoned in a deserted place in the middle of the night.

That was merely a vision, however. She could alter it as she liked.

Shizuku inhaled deeply.

I'll be fine, she told herself. I should be able to do this.

She closed her eyes and exhaled. Her breath fused with the world around her. Her grip on the sword tightened.

Shizuku needed only to maintain her composure. When she next opened her eyes, her mind was in prime condition.

"As an entity, you're closely linked to human souls. Right now, however, you're *too* close. It's too much for the human spirit to bear," Shizuku said.

"There's no helping that. That's just the way humans are. They've always been connected to me."

Why did people get angry, resentful, or sad? Perhaps the Sea of Negativity had the answer. The human soul was always connected to the Negativity.

Shizuku suspected there was more to it, though.

She was from a different world, yet she also knew anger and sorrow. They were natural parts of being human. Decrying those elements wouldn't change that.

Surely, the Sea of Negativity wasn't the only thing that made humans what they were.

People often restrained the negative forces that sometimes threatened to erupt within them.

"Humans are rational beings," Shizuku stated.

"That's right. They are connected to the Positivity, too. Humans are connected to everything."

"If that's true, then it's up to everyone to decide what they follow. No one

should infringe upon that. I want us to live freely.”

“What do you intend to do about it?”

“There’s no way I’ll surrender my fellow humans to you.”

That was Shizuku’s conclusion. She believed free will was sacred.

She readied the longsword with both hands. Her black eyes reflected the blade’s polished, mirrorlike surface.

There was no hesitation. Death didn’t frighten her. Shizuku’s mind was resolute.

She focused upon the thickest part of the magic circle, its outer perimeter. Curiously, she felt like there was something sitting at the top of her sword.

“An amusing declaration for a lost thorn who wandered into this world by mistake.”

Shizuku couldn’t hear anything. She wasn’t going to stop.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!” she cried.

Shizuku’s willpower and the root of the forbidden curse collided.

The girl thrust the longsword into one of the red lines with all her might.

The intangible power shattered.

A torrent of force surged like water from a broken dam, effortlessly launching Shizuku into the air. It sent her flying through the room, just as Mea had done to her not long ago. As soon as she landed on the ground, Shizuku raised her arms to defend herself. A tingling pain surged through her left side.

“Nghh... That...doesn’t hurt at all!”

Shizuku gritted her teeth and looked up. She wanted endure the pain until it subsided, but the situation didn’t allow for that. She needed to see what had become of the magic array.

Her vision turned hazy, but she focused her gaze as best she could. The red flames still flickered, but they didn’t emit the wavering light they had before. They danced in a strong wind, threatening to go out at any moment. Shizuku’s eyes widened in amazement.

“A t-tornado?”

A small whirlwind had formed atop the magic ring. Shizuku wasn't sure what was happening, but some sort of wind vigorously fanned the small flames as it pulled everything into its vortex.

Shizuku rushed to her feet. The tornado was yet to affect her, but she couldn't bear the idea of being dragged in. She looked over her shoulder to confirm the way out of the chamber.

Was it better to flee? Shizuku couldn't decide.

She focused intently on the tornado, hoping to assess the situation.

All the air inside the room was drawn in. The heaviness that had pervaded the room rapidly dissipated, and the residue in the air similarly faded.

Shizuku felt the changes on her skin. She swallowed nervously as she held down her hair.

The robed man Shizuku had been conversing with stood, taking a place behind the tornado. The weak flames illuminated his face.

Shizuku filled with horror at the sight of his visage.

His dark eyes were devoid of human willpower. Fixated on the tornado, they resembled two hollow oceans of darkness.

Shizuku knew better than to look into them. She held back the instinctive urge to scream, although only barely.

The man's vacant gaze fell upon Shizuku.

“What do you want, outsider?”

“I—I...”

Shizuku stumbled over her words, overwhelmed. The “thing” was still here. This wasn't over. He could only be speaking to her. Shizuku trembled as she began to reply:

“...I...want...”

“I want to go back to my old world.”

That's what she wanted to say. It was the reason she'd set out on this journey.

She had no other desires. That was the most important thing—her one wish.

At least, it was supposed to be.

Shizuku stopped herself. Why had he asked her that question?

He recognized that she was from another world. What would he do when he heard her answer?

Shizuku gasped slightly. What if this being was powerful enough to send her home?

If so, she hoped to delay her return a little longer, just until she knew Erik was safe.

Surely, that would only take a short while. She only needed to thank him. That'd be enough.

Shizuku longed for that brief bit of time so dearly.

"Aren't you going to answer me, you abnormal thorn?"

"W-wait."

"You aren't even supposed to be here. You're not supposed to possess any willpower. It's your human desires...that will lead to your demise."

"Huh?"

Those words were too ominous to ignore. Shizuku's eyes widened.

The next thing she knew, the man had collapsed to the floor without warning. Something was being drawn out of his mouth and his hollow eye sockets, funneling into the tornado. The wind intensified.

The corpse of the royal chief mage was pulled into the vortex like a limp doll. He was quickly joined by several other bodies that'd been scattered around the room and had emerged from their dark resting places. All were pulled to the circle's center.

"Wh-what?!"

Undoubtedly, this was no ordinary tornado. A soldier in armor wouldn't have been dragged in so easily if it were. Plus, Shizuku remained firmly planted on the ground, despite being closest to the rampaging whirlwind. The chairs next to her didn't budge, either.

It only sucked in the dead bodies.

As soon as Shizuku came to that realization, she shuddered fearfully.

Whatever was happening couldn't have been good.

Shizuku began to retreat toward the door, refusing to take her eyes off the tornado.

The miasma was clearing and, with it, the foul heaviness that had enveloped the room.

Yet that came as a poor comfort, for the tornado appeared to be collecting all the wickedness in the castle, turning an inky black as though to prove it.

"This...isn't good."

Shizuku dropped her sword. Mea wasn't around. Shizuku wasn't even strong enough to defend herself anymore.

Shizuku was just a few steps away from the door when the wind came to an abrupt stop.

"...This can't be happening."

She went stiff, unable to believe her eyes.

The tornado had swallowed more than a dozen people, and all of them had vanished.

In their place stood a colossal jet-black snake. Its red eyes were fixed on Shizuku.

The giant serpent stood over nine meters tall, its body a deep shadowy shade.

Had Shizuku seen it behind a thick glass wall at the zoo, she would've been frightened, but certainly not horrified as she was now.



Nothing in the bloodstained room would shield her from the monstrous creature. Fifteen meters separated them, nothing more. It stared at Shizuku with its blood-colored eyes.

Its intimidating glare bade her be still like prey beneath the gaze of a predator. Instead, Shizuku turned on her heel. She pushed the door open and dashed away down the corridor. Already, her heart was racing violently, threatening to fly out of her mouth.

“I’m in so much trouble! What *is* that thing?!”

Even with a sword, she didn’t like her chances against that creature. Shizuku had always disliked snakes. She risked a glance over her shoulder as she ran.

“Gahhh!”

The snake had started to move away from the magic circle, perhaps in an effort to pursue Shizuku. It entered the corridor and proceeded down the hall.

Curiously, the giant serpent, the likes of which Shizuku had only seen in movies, didn’t move at an alarming pace. It seemed to maintain the same speed as Shizuku. She feared it might swallow her if it ever caught up, an idea that urged her to run faster. She sprinted down the hallway, pushing her body to what felt like its limit.

“I...I hate snakes.”

Naturally, Shizuku didn’t like dying in any manner, but being eaten by a snake ranked among her top three worst methods to meet her end.

Shizuku teetered on the edge of panic as she navigated the blood-soaked corridors. The sound of the snake slithering behind her sent a persistent chill through her. It was clear that the serpent had its sights set on Shizuku.

Still, she charged onward, passing several lifeless bodies on the way. After she’d traveled nearly twenty-one meters, a foreboding sensation compelled her to look back again.

“Ahhhhh! This is the worst!”

The snake had grown after engulfing the dead bodies littering the floor. It appeared to be moving quicker, too. At this rate, it would catch Shizuku sooner

or later.

She felt bad that bodies were being consumed, but her own survival had to take priority.

A small figure stood waiting farther down the passage. Shizuku recognized her and raised a hand.

“Mea! We have to get away! Run!”

That was enough information to tell Mea, who’d become a girl again, what was going on. She grabbed Shizuku’s bag, waited for her master to reach her, then joined her running. Shizuku didn’t have time to give her a detailed explanation, and besides, it was pretty clear that there was a massive snake coming after them—the threat was obvious.

The pair turned a corner and rushed down the stairs in a frenzy, then followed a first-floor passageway.

Unfortunately, the snake, a manifestation of the toxic miasma within the castle, seemed able to track Shizuku even when she was out of sight, and it maintained pursuit.

“That thing just won’t give up...”

Sunlight poured in through the window at the end of the corridor.

It was great that the miasma covering the castle had cleared, but Shizuku wasn’t in a position to celebrate that. She couldn’t afford to be distracted. Her focus had to remain on getting to the northwest section of the palace.

There weren’t any dead bodies along the route now, and the snake had stopped growing. Although it chased at a reasonable distance, the longer Shizuku and Mea ran in a straight line, the narrower their lead became. Every time the serpent got too close, Shizuku shrieked and turned a corner, doing her best to put more distance between herself and the monster.

Shizuku didn’t know if running would ever solve this, but she did know something else that might. Magic’s limits were a mystery to her, but she knew it was the only means of defeating this creature. And Lydia was the only skilled mage she knew how to find.

Shizuku hated the idea of forcing the woman who'd saved her life to battle a monster for her, but she didn't know many other people. Plus, Tarkis would be there. Maybe they could figure out a solution together.

She was heading to the room where she'd left the pair not long ago. On the way, a door in front of her suddenly flew open, and a soldier came out to glance around.

"Watch out!" Shizuku shouted.

The soldier looked in the direction of the outburst and froze upon catching sight of the snake. He promptly retreated back into the room and shut the door. It was a perfectly reasonable reaction.

After being totally ignored, Shizuku ran by, so relieved that she felt ready to cry. The snake passed right by the room where the soldier hid, not showing any interest.

"M-Mea. If I get eaten, you're welcome to flee!" Shizuku said.

"I shall serve my master until the very end," Mea replied.

Shizuku was glad to hear it. If possible, she hoped to keep Mea and herself alive.

As Shizuku raced around a familiar corner, she pushed her aching lungs to force out another shout.

"Tarkis!" she yelled. "Tarkis! Help me!"

"Oh, you're back, Shizuku," he replied in a carefree tone as he opened the door. However, when he saw Shizuku running for him and the giant snake coming after her, he understandably went silent.

It didn't take long for him to ground himself again, though. Rather than retreating inside the room, he drew his sword.

"Lydia, come on! We have an enemy we need to defeat!"

"An enemy?" Lydia replied.

"A snake! Hurry up!"

"A snake?"

Lydia came out into the corridor, head cocked in confusion. When she caught sight of the massive serpent, she went rigid, and the color drained from her pretty face.

“I-is this a mass of a miasma?!” she exclaimed.

“It doesn’t matter—just put up a protective barrier! Shizuku’s gonna get eaten!”

Lydia raised an eyebrow at this suggestion, but she didn’t object. She intoned a chant. The moment Shizuku reached Tarkis, an invisible barrier formed directly in front of the snake. Mea turned around to fortify it.

This first act of defiance made the snake stop in its tracks. It stuck out its red tongue and glowered at Shizuku.

Shizuku cowered slightly from primal fear beneath the serpent’s gaze, yet it seemed only as potent as it might have before. Feeling like her heart was about to burst, Shizuku placed her hands on her knees and tried desperately to steady her breathing.

“What is that thing, Shizuku?” asked Tarkis.

“It’s made of miasma...and dead bodies,” Shizuku explained. “And Negativity. Probably.”

“It must be an embodiment of the forbidden curse. It looks like those Shula statues, doesn’t it?”

“Can you defeat it?”

“I dunno. What do you think, Lydia?”

“We need to separate the core from the miasma. I’m just not confident I can...”

Shizuku was the one who’d announced that she was going to do something about the forbidden curse before leaving Tarkis and Lydia, and yet she’d literally brought the problem back with her. She felt terrible. She tried to regulate her heavy breathing as best as she could, then straightened up and looked at the snake.

Its eyes never strayed from her. She was the only person the mass of miasma

ever looked at, the only one it deemed worthy of pursuit.

She took a few steps in each direction to make sure that was true. As expected, the snake's head followed her. It even pushed against the barrier to get nearer. Shizuku's face twisted into an expression of distress. When Tarkis recognized what was happening, he approached the barrier.

His sword, which was made of ordinary steel, would have no effect on the concentration of Negativity that was the snake. Shizuku took her bag from Mea and looked down the hallway behind her.

Farsas had been contacted shortly after midday. Surely, it had launched an investigation by now.

The miasma that was cutting the castle off from the outside world had lifted. People were free to enter. Hopefully, someone from Farsas would arrive soon.

Shizuku looked up at the snake and started to back away. "Lydia. Can you destroy the barrier once I'm farther away?" she asked.

"Huh? Why?!"

"It seems focused on me, so maybe I can lead it somewhere far away. It could buy us some time until help from Farsas arrives."

"Sure, but what if you get eaten?!"

"I've managed to get this far," Shizuku replied. "I can keep going for a little longer. Hopefully."

"Hold on a minute, Shizuku! You can't! There's no way you'll win!"

Tarkis turned to stop her, but Shizuku had already started running. Mea followed after her master.

When it realized that its target was escaping, the giant snake started pushing the barrier farther and farther forward.

Lydia's spell contorted against the force of the serpent's shove, slowly collapsing inward. As the monster pressed against it, she felt its weight against her own body. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead as she released a pained gasp.

“Wait... Argh!”

“Please just drop the spell!” Shizuku exclaimed.

“Do it, Lydia!” shouted Tarkis.

While the pair implored her, Lydia collapsed, having reached her limit.

Unfettered at last, the serpent resumed its idle chase for Shizuku.

Just as its undulating body was about to send Lydia flying, Tarkis pulled her to safety. He gently set the unconscious woman aside and lunged for the serpent’s tail, attempting to strike it as it slithered past.

It felt like he was slicing through mud. There was a squelching sound that resembled the noise of digging through entrails with one’s bare hands. Tarkis’s sword sank deep into the snake’s body, ultimately touching the floor with almost no resistance.

The attack didn’t stop the snake. It didn’t even look at him. It merely carried on toward the fleeing girl.

The part of the snake’s body that Tarkis had apparently severed rejoined the rest of its body. Tarkis swallowed hard at the sight.

“Shizuku!”

She was already out of sight. There was no sign of her assistant demon, either. However, the snake seemed to be able to detect their presence—it didn’t even pause to consider as it moved down the hallway.

The monster was so grotesque that it would evoke despair in anyone who saw it, yet once Tarkis took Lydia back to a room where she’d be safe, he gave chase.

Lydia had afforded Shizuku some time to catch her breath and distance herself from the serpent, albeit only a little. That was the best she could’ve asked for. She ran ahead as hard as she could.

She was wearing the same sneakers she’d arrived in this world with. It was a stroke of good fortune she’d been wearing them that day. Had she come with sandals, she would’ve stumbled and been swallowed by the snake already.

With every step, she kicked off the ground forcefully.

She didn't know why the snake only pursued her. Maybe it was because she'd failed to answer that one question.

Shizuku slowed to take a corner but kept her momentum going as best she was able. Red light poured in through the windows in this new passage. The sun was beginning to set.

Every now and then, Shizuku caught a glimpse of a soldier who'd come to check out what was happening.

"Run!" she'd yell as she sprinted past.

Initially, the soldiers would frown at the suspicious pair, but upon noticing the humongous serpent, they always fled.

Shizuku just needed to keep running around the castle until the representatives from Farsas turned up.

It sounded like a simple task, but her legs and knees were already trembling. She'd spent the entire day running, after all.

Shizuku glanced at her assistant demon, who was running beside her.

"Mea," she said.

"What is it, my master?"

"Do...you think...we...can get away?"

"Trust in yourself."

"Okay."

Shizuku had no choice but to believe. Her legs were so overworked that they didn't even feel like hers anymore, but she forced them to keep going as she turned yet another corner.

The next thing she knew, she collided with a court lady who'd been immediately around the bend. They both collapsed in a theatrical manner. Shizuku tumbled to the ground with such force that it felt like the entire world was tipped on its head.

"Master!"

“...I’m fine.”

She pushed herself back up, and when she lifted her head, she saw two glowing red eyes.

The snake reared its head, fixing its gaze on its prey.

“Gyahhhh!” the court lady screamed. Shizuku shoved her to one side of the passage without thinking and hurled herself in the opposite direction.

Although an instinctual action, it proved the right one.

In a display of frightening agility, the snake’s head lunged for where Shizuku had been a moment ago. Gleaming white fangs pierced the floor.

Had the monster caught her, it wouldn’t have been pretty.

Shizuku managed to stand, but the serpent had reared back up just as quickly, its dark-red tongue flicking from its mouth.

If she tried to run, it would catch her with its fangs the moment she moved, and a similar fate awaited if she remained staring at the monster.

She was out of options. Shizuku stood frozen for a few seconds. It felt like forever.

Shizuku couldn’t think of anything or anyone.

Is this defeat? That was the only thought that crossed her mind.

“Master!”

It was Mea.

The angry yell that followed set time in motion again.

The snake let out an agonized cry, writhing in discomfort.

“Don’t just stand there, Shizuku!” someone shouted. Their voice sounded unusually severe.

The words brought Shizuku back to her senses. She saw a man behind the great snake.

Tarkis wore a stern look. Shizuku had no idea how he’d managed to catch up to her, but he had. The dagger that he’d thrust into the snake’s body looked

different from the sword he typically carried. Black smoke was smoldering from where he'd plunged the dagger in.

As the snake turned back to him, its eyes filled with malice, Tarkis pulled his weapon free and leaped backward. He assumed a defensive posture with a fearless smile.

"This should do the job," he said. "This dagger was forged by a spirit sorcerer."

The serpent lifted its head to strike at the mercenary. Either this was the first time it had been hurt, or it didn't like his hostile attitude.

"Tarkis!" Shizuku called.

"Run!" he barked. "I'm gonna buy you some time!"

As urgent as this command was, Shizuku couldn't bring herself to move right away. She felt unsure whether it was really okay for her to leave him there as her scapegoat.

Tarkis, however, was insistent.

"Go! If you run away, this thing will have to ignore me!"

"Sorry!" Shizuku replied. "I owe you one for this!"

Shizuku turned to resume her sprint, her assistant demon keeping close.

Tarkis forced a smile as he watched the girl disappear into the distance, but he sprang to action without delay.

He leaped to the right, moving alongside the serpent's body.

It wasn't human or a demonic spirit. Its presence made him nervous. He focused himself against the sensation as he tried to read the creature's demeanor. It left him warier than when he'd sneaked into the castle. The monster's eyes betrayed nothing, even as they peered at Tarkis.

Quite suddenly, its long body began to coil up.

Tarkis's well-honed agility carried him through the air as he evaded the snake's attempt to thrash him with its body. This repeated several times.

It didn't go on for very long, but every moment was one Shizuku could use.

She was already at the end of the passage by the time Tarkis had a moment to check. He smiled, but the expression was short-lived.

The great serpent's figure abruptly began to waver. Its outer skin faded, and black miasma spewed into the air. The shed substance coalesced into a second creature resembling a panther.

"No way..."

The panther sprinted after Shizuku, not even sparing a glance at Tarkis. The mercenary instinctively tried to stop it, but the serpent blocked his path, tripping him. Tarkis clicked his tongue as he was forced to evade death from the giant monster's fangs.

This was a critical moment. His own life was at stake. One wrong decision would mean his doom. What has he meant to do?

Tarkis sighed. And then...he abandoned the idea of catching up to the panther.

Panic would accomplish nothing. For now, he needed only to focus on the enemy before him.

Despite the terrible danger, he found himself growing excited. Tarkis held the dagger at the ready.

He regarded the serpent, a manifestation of a forbidden curse, with an arrogant look.

"Come on, then."

The snake swayed as it prepared to lunge. The atmosphere grew tense.

A castle had been caught in a disaster, and now the irrevocable consequences would follow.



Shizuku had once heard that "in times of suffering, you should distract yourself by imagining what it'd be like when it's over." Thus, when sitting at her desk day and night studying for her college entrance exams, she'd thought about what kind of things she'd get up to once she was admitted.

Now, however, she was a world away, wrapped up in a problem she didn't

wholly understand while being chased by a mysterious monster. It was the most painful situation she'd ever been in, and she had no idea what to envision for comfort. The fantasies of fun summer vacations that she used to imagine were all gone. She couldn't bear to think of her family and friends. They felt too distant from this harsh reality. Her lungs and heart were on the verge of giving up.

Eventually, her mind settled on a scene of her drinking tea at an inn somewhere, reading books and conversing with Erik.

What will we talk about if I survive this?

Shizuku certainly didn't know, but she clung to the idea as she raced around a corner. Sensing a dark shadow out of the corner of her eye, she looked back.

"Wh-what's that?!"

A jet-black panther hurtled toward her.

Mea narrowed her green eyes. "It's the forbidden curse," she said. "It's changed form to catch up to you."

"This thing never stops! At least it's not a snake, though!"

The panther, which was considerably smaller than the serpent, raced for its quarry with incredible speed. Despite being unarmed, Shizuku recklessly turned toward her enemy and raised her bag above her head.

The panther leaped off the ground, jaws ready to close around Shizuku's neck.

"Mea! Stop that thing!"

The assistant demon complied with her master's orders and unleashed her power, restraining the creature in an instant. Immediately after, Shizuku hurled her bag down onto the panther's head.

The impact caused its head to disperse like mist. The panther fell to the ground.

It made no noise, nor did it bleed, perhaps because it wasn't a real animal. The miasma that had scattered into the air slowly reassumed its shape. When Shizuku noticed what was happening, she kicked the panther in its torso.

“Stop!”

Her foot traveled straight through the panther’s abdomen, but it accomplished little.

The panther was already recovering from the second attack, so Shizuku turned and ran.

“I—I need a vacuum cleaner... An industrial-sized one...”

Although she was grateful it wasn’t a snake anymore, this new form was much quicker. Worse yet, ordinary blows clearly wouldn’t work.

In the blink of an eye, the panther was whole and resumed the chase. Since it resembled a mass of smoke, she thought a vacuum cleaner might suck it up, but such devices didn’t exist in this world.

“I guess I have no other choice!”

Shizuku stopped and turned around. The panther was already preparing to pounce.

As Shizuku reflexively shielded her head and her chest with her bag, the shadowy creature lunged for her legs. She couldn’t get away.

“Arghhh!” She hadn’t expected the panther to attack her calf. It took her a moment to decide what to do. As the panther sank its teeth into her flesh, Shizuku shrieked, “Mea! Get it away from me!”

Her assistant demon’s attack lopped off the panther’s head, which disappeared all too easily, but Shizuku’s injury remained. Blood poured from the round holes the animal’s teeth left in her skin. Shizuku lifted her long skirt to take a look.

“That hurts...”

“I’ll get rid of the pain,” Mea told her.

The demon sounded calm, but there was a tinge of frustration in her voice. She seemed annoyed that she’d let her master get injured. Worse, she was incapable of true healing magic.

Once Mea had numbed the pain, Shizuku took off again. The shock from the

bite refused to be ignored, however. Breathing rapidly became difficult.

How long would Shizuku have to keep this up?

Was there really an end to this? Was rescue coming?

The forbidden curse had said that Shizuku wasn't supposed to be there. Was that why it was so hell-bent on pursuing her and nobody else?

Was it trying to eliminate her because she hailed from another world? Was her free will redundant here?

Shizuku didn't know what manner of country Farsas was or if any representatives were coming. She couldn't even guess. Sensation had left her leg.

Despair ran from her wound. It had apprehended her thoughts, leaving her unable to go on.

She forced her sluggish legs to move, yet she found she didn't remember how to run anymore.

Shizuku was being chased.

She came to that realization just as she approached a corner. It wasn't that she'd heard or sensed anything—she'd merely recognized a pattern.

She tried to stop but swiftly understood that her body wasn't obeying.

Fear overtook her. She didn't want to turn around, to let it attack her. The thought spun wildly in her mind.

Her hesitation only stalled her for a few seconds, yet she screamed:

"Come on, move!"

She put all her strength into her aching legs. As she launched herself forward, she looked over her shoulder and pulled the sword from her bag.

The panther had caught up and looked ready to lunge for her again. Its sleek, dark body leaped into the air.

"Master!"

Mea conjured a barrier, but as a manifestation of the forbidden curse, the

panther cut straight through the shield with no trouble.

As the animal's menacing white claws bore down upon Shizuku, she made an attempt to strike first with the little sword. However, the panther twisted through the air and effortlessly evaded, landing back on the floor soundlessly.

Shizuku cast her bag aside and gripped the hilt of her weapon with both hands.

"I might have come from another world, but..."

Glaring straight into the panther's red eyes, Shizuku started to yell:

"...I'm not going to die! I'm staying right here!"

The panther pawed the floor, but Shizuku charged forward before it had the chance to act.

A surge of power from Mea forced the panther's head up, and while its chest was exposed, Shizuku plunged her blade into its heart.

The creature's body swallowed the weapon. Then its form burst into black mist.

"...!"

Shizuku looked around as miasma drifted through the air. Had she managed to pierce its core?

A cold chill coursed down her spine as though in answer.

"Master!"

A second later, the panther returned, and right at Shizuku's feet, no less.

Red eyes glared at her.

Oh, I guess this is where it ends for me, she thought.

And that's when someone took her by the hand.

Shizuku found herself being dragged away. The panther jumped for her, its fangs cutting through the air.

Shizuku heard someone chanting—a young man with a low, comforting voice.

A magic circle had appeared on the floor. A red circle. The panther was being

drawn into it.

Once within the circle's perimeter, the monster stopped moving. It seemed tied to the array on the ground.

After confirming that the panther couldn't escape, the young man led the girl down the hall and away. His deep-blue eyes looked out a nearby window.

"This will be over soon. A spirit has arrived."

"Erik." That was all Shizuku could manage. No other words took shape. She would've collapsed had Erik not been there for her to lean on.

Shizuku had dreamed of returning to normalcy for so long. Now some semblance of it had finally found her.

Tension drained from Shizuku, and she felt the overwhelming urge to sit on the floor. Erik kept her upright, though, practically holding her.

He pointed toward the end of the hall.

"Come on. It's not much longer now."

Shizuku turned around in a fluster. The panther writhed within the circle in an attempt to break free. It watched Shizuku all the while. She shuddered beneath its gaze.



“Erik...how...did you...get here?” Her voice was no more than a breath.

“I ran.”

“I...know...that much.”

Shizuku was panting too heavily to speak properly. She wished he was a little more considerate.

He must have picked up on her silent frustration because he quickly gave a proper answer.

“The presence of the forbidden curse suddenly vanished, so I came to investigate and found you being eaten by a panther.”

“I hadn’t...been...eaten yet.”

Shizuku wanted to object more to Erik’s version of events, but she found herself too overcome with relief. Erik was here, and he’d assured her that this terrible ordeal would be over soon. The two of them were unquestionably racing toward some kind of conclusion.

It was close now. Shizuku was sure that things would work out in their favor. If their shared journey had taught her anything, it was to always believe.

Erik turned around, still leading Shizuku by the hand.

“Oh, looks like it’s already managed to escape,” he remarked.

“Whaaat?!” Shizuku cried.

“Don’t worry. We’ve arrived.”

Erik came to an abrupt halt in front of a door and threw it open. He urged Shizuku in first.

The room was unduly spacious, and several magic arrays were etched into the floor. Shizuku needed only a moment to consult her mental map to realize which room this was.

“The transit-ring chamber...”

“That’s right. We can escape the castle.”

“But if I leave...”

“It’ll be fine. There are people on their way who will figure out what to do.”

Erik joined Shizuku inside and hurriedly checked each of the arrays to find the right one.

Shizuku headed over to one of the transit rings, wanting to help out. A moment later, however, she looked toward the door—and froze.

The miasma didn’t assume the form of a panther anymore. It drifted through the air, making its way toward Shizuku.

She wanted to scream, but she held it in.

“Master!” Mea pulled on Shizuku’s clothes.

Panicked, Shizuku took her assistant demon by the hand and dashed to Erik, who’d gone to the back of the room.

When he saw the miasma, he quickly began to invoke a spell.

What was happening?

Shizuku’s mind almost went blank. She hadn’t foreseen this development. What was she supposed to do? She looked around for some clue.

Suddenly, one of the transit rings came to luminous life.

The space above it warped as the blue-white light shone. Shizuku looked to Erik, who’d stopped his chanting to watch.

Shizuku held her breath, clueless as to what this meant. Erik pulled her toward him and shoved her behind his back. In the brief amount of time that she’d been distracted, the miasma had charged for her.

Shizuku lost her balance and tumbled onto the transit ring immediately beside her.

The last thing she saw as blue-white light suddenly engulfed her was a beautiful woman with long black hair. She’d emerged from the neighboring transit ring.



Shizuku stood firmly rooted in place. The word that best described the incredible sight before her was *splash*.

The young woman, still dressed like a court lady, looked down at the foaming waves crashing against the rocks. Mea stood silently nearby.

Behind them, the rocky shoreline sloped gently upward, leading to a wooded area. The dense foliage painted a complementary palette with the bright sky. There looked to be a small gap between the trees, suggesting a path there.

The ocean stretched as far as Shizuku could see. The horizon waited far in the distance.

Shizuku was barely able to take it all in. At last, she turned to the young man beside her.

“This is just like the Sea of Japan! I feel like I should belt out some *enka* songs!”

“What are those?” asked Erik.

“...”

They’d escaped the forbidden curse. All three of them were safe.

However, the transit ring they’d used had sent them to an unknown shore far from the landlocked nation of Candela.

“I think the spell formations that power those transit rings might have been altered by the forbidden curse’s presence,” Erik theorized. “No castle transit ring would take you to a place like this.”

“Where are we?” Shizuku asked.

“Who knows? It looks like there’s a path up there, so we can search for a town later and ask some questions.”

Shizuku sat Mea, who’d turned back into a bird, on her shoulder and started climbing the rocky slope, albeit with difficulty.

Once she and Erik made it to the top, they entered the forest and sat beneath one of its many trees. Erik used Mea’s magical powers to heal Shizuku’s wounds, then let out a big yawn.

“I’m sorry, I think I need to get some sleep. You can wake me if there’s a problem.”

“Okay. Get some rest,” Shizuku replied.

Erik began snoring so quickly that she questioned whether he heard her. He’d probably barely slept in two days. Shizuku felt for him. The exhaustion was plain on his face.

Shizuku felt terribly worn out, too. She examined her legs. They had no visible wounds, but blood still decorated her skin in places.

“I guess I didn’t imagine it after all.”

Were Tarkis and Lydia safe? What had become of the embodiment of the forbidden curse?

Now that Shizuku had teleported away, she’d likely never know. Her only option was to hope things worked out.

She leaned against the tree trunk, utterly drained. In no time at all, she succumbed to sleep.



“I’m back,” the woman announced to her older brother.

“How was it?” he asked.

“So-so.” She made no effort to hide her annoyance as she tied up her black hair. “I had to deal with the aftermath of a forbidden curse.”

Candela Castle had fallen prey to a forbidden curse, resulting in the death of the king and most of his high-ranking officials and generals. The woman went on to explain how she’d eliminated the two beasts that had formed from the forbidden curse.

“The people who’d broken into the castle to stop the forbidden curse had already fled by the time I ended things. There are plenty of casualties, and I haven’t found any survivors who could provide a useful account of events. Some people in the city died, too. Crowds are surging into the castle with no one to drive them away.”

“Sounds terrible.”

“Don’t act like this is none of your business. What do you intend to do?”

The king responded to his younger sister’s pointed question with little more

than a hostile smile. “What *can* I do?” he asked. “Ultimately, this is another country’s business.”

“The nation of Candela is going to collapse.”

“You reap what you sow. When a king is foolish, his people suffer. It’ll be a good lesson for them.”

“I similarly suffer because of a brother who hates getting his hands dirty.”

The king went quiet at the biting rebuttal. For all the supposed strength he projected, he was weak when it came to his sister. After a brief pause, the king scrawled something onto a piece of paper and handed it to his sibling.

“Take this and implement emergency governance in Candela. And try to keep the chaos to a minimum.”

“Should we really make the matter of a forbidden curse public?”

“Farsas lacks a reason to seize control unless we do. Choose a witness from the surviving people of Candela. Also, request cooperation from a neutral third-party nation so people don’t see this as an invasion.”

The woman had already looked at the piece of paper that her brother gave her, yet hearing him express his plans aloud brought a skeptical look to her face.

“A third party? Is there a nation qualified to help us? We’re dealing with a forbidden curse, you know.”

“There should be. Depending on how things proceed, we might need someone to govern Candela for us temporarily, so we need to pick a capable ruler. Didn’t Rozsark just conquer Anneli to the south? Its king is one of my...”

“Treat this seriously!”

“Sorry.” The king stuck out his tongue with a nonchalant face.

The expression made his sister exasperated, but she left to return political order to Candela without further complaint.

Once he was on his own, the man relaxed his shoulders, which had gone stiff from all the paperwork.

“Those guys who broke into the castle and wreaked havoc sound like an interesting bunch,” he mused to himself. “I’d love to meet them.”

He grinned.



The sky was blue. A girl with long black hair stopped in the middle of the road, gazing intently at the lazily drifting clouds above. The man walking beside her turned, having noticed she was lagging behind.

“What’s wrong, Lyshien?”

“How come the sky is blue, even at this time of day?”

“Because we’re at the western edge of the continent. The sun sets much later than in Anneli, where you were before.”

The man beckoned the girl over. She looked to be sixteen or seventeen. Her petite frame made her seem fragile, and she was abnormally beautiful. Her eyes, dark and profound like the night, twinkled as she surveyed the scenery of the small town, and her long eyelashes fluttered.

“Can’t we go back to Anneli or Rozsark?”

“Not for the time being. There are rumors circulating about a princess imprisoned in Anneli and later taken to Rozsark.”

“Have they also heard that the princess, who was supposed to have been a hostage, escaped Rozsark and is standing right here?”

The question sounded entirely innocent. The man smiled at Lyshien like he would with a curious child.

“They think you’re dead, but you don’t need to worry. It won’t stay that way forever.”

The present king of Rozsark knew where the princess was, but he also understood that she was a prize he’d merely happened on. Thus, she was beyond his control. He’d made no attempt to prevent Lyshien from escaping.

“It’s Farsas that we really need to avoid.”

“Farsas? How come?”

“Well, it’s complicated.”

Lyshien cocked her head to one side, intrigued. This catlike gesture brought a smile to the man’s face.

“Just try not to wander off. That’s the important thing. You’ll get lost.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m with you, Oscar.”

She took the man’s sleeve. He grinned at her. His dusk-colored eyes held tremendous love.



Farsas announced that the calamity that had befallen Candela Castle had been caused by a forbidden curse, stirring up commotion among Candela’s neighboring countries. Chaos gripped the palace for three days, at which time, Farsas finally seized control. This period, later dubbed the Three Days of Silence, left a lingering mark on the continent’s history.

No records were made about the girl who’d found herself in the center of the crisis. Nobody who knew her name remained to speak of her. Only a few of the people who’d seen her had survived.

That girl who’d come from another world and been dubbed an “abnormal thorn” by the fountainhead of the forbidden curse was resting peacefully in a faraway land.

It would be some time before she made her mark on yet another tumultuous chapter in history, but it was coming all the same.

END OF BABEL ACT ONE

Afterword



Hello, Kuji Furumiya here. Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *Babel*, Vol. 1. I think some of you may have been surprised when you saw the title of the series, since it's a reboot of a story with the same name that I published two volumes of with Dengeki Bunko back in 2016.

This story originated as a fantasy novel that was serialized online, but when it was adapted for that initial paperback edition, I condensed it to about half its original length and restructured the story.

This time, though, it's being released in the modern literature category. Instead of trimming down the online original, I expanded on the story for its publication. Although there's still some overlap, this version diverges significantly from the earlier paperback and web editions. I hope you don't mind joining me on this journey again.

My gratitude goes out to anyone who found out about this series because of *Unnamed Memory*. This story takes place around three hundred years after that tale, which centered on a king and a witch. A great deal of time has passed since the Age of Witches, but Oscar, *Unnamed Memory*'s main character, survives as something of a legend. People on the continent still talk about that famous king from Farsas who lived centuries ago. From time to time, you might come across pieces of information you recognize, and toward the end, some moments might make you go, *Huh? How come?* These things should add an extra layer of enjoyment to your reading experience, so have fun.

The story revolves around a college student from Japan who ends up on a continent where magic exists. Her journey leads her to discover the truth about this strange other world.

I wonder if any readers have picked up on anything bizarre about this world. There were clues even back during the days of *Unnamed Memory*.

I hope this series will give you some answers.

Please allow me a moment to express my thanks to a few people.

Thank you to my editors, who've been with me since *Unnamed Memory*. When someone came to me and suggested that we publish *Babel*, I went, "Huh, seriously?" which was a pretty goofy way to respond. I really appreciated it, though. The full story of *Babel* needed to be told, and my two editors have given me the opportunity to share it once again.

While I was working on a pair of novels, one of them said to me, "There's two of us, so we can share the workload. Too bad there's only one writer! Ha-ha-ha!" True enough. The simultaneous release was quite a challenge, but I'll keep doing the best that I can.

Words can't express my gratitude for Morisawa, who's done illustrations for me since I was with Dengeki Bunko. I'm sincerely thankful that he was so eager to join this reboot. Your illustrations just get better and better! They're so beautiful and sweet! Thank you so much!

Lastly, I want to thank my readers for their continued support. To everyone who's supported me since my Dengeki Bunko and web novel days, and to those who've recently discovered my work, I invite you to join me in this tale of language and cross-world travel. I think we might be able to learn a few things from stories like this one.

See you in the next volume!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra Story: The End of the Everyday



“The worst thing about suddenly ending up in a different world is how unexpected it is,” Shizuku said between sips of tea. She and Erik were at the inn.

“*That’s* the biggest problem? I thought it would’ve been preferable not to end up in a different world at all.”

“Well, yes, but if I had to go to another one and there was nothing I could do about it, then I’d appreciate some warning.”

“I see...”

“There’s a big difference between being told ‘You’re going to go to another world right this instant!’ and ‘You’re going to go to another world in one week, so get ready.’ You’d be so much more prepared in the latter scenario!”

“I think it’s pointless to theorize about this.”

“If I’d had warning, I could’ve left my dorm room a little tidier and told my college and family that I’d be away for a while...”

“At this point, you’ve functionally moved out.”

“I guess so...”

Shizuku had been forcibly brought here in almost an instant. She would’ve liked the opportunity to refuse, but forgoing that, a warning ahead of time should’ve been a fair compromise.

“After eighteen years of life, I finally know what it’s like to go missing...”

“That’s not something most people experience. At least you’re still alive.”

“Absolutely.”

Shizuku couldn't help but wonder if she'd died when switching worlds and if her current self was just a replica of who she'd once been, but delving too deeply into that theory wasn't good for her mental well-being.

Shizuku took a sip of tea. It was starting to go cold.

“I still have some *mentaiko* in my room, as well as fresh eggs and milk... I hope someone finds them before the worst happens...”

“I know what the last two things are. What's a '*mentaiko*'?”

“Fish eggs. I love them.”

“Oh. You're breeding fish. I don't blame you for worrying about them.”

“They're for eating.”

Erik gave Shizuku a wide-eyed look, momentarily astonished. However, he quickly returned to his book as though nothing was wrong.

Shizuku rested her head in her hands and looked up at the ceiling.

“Every so often, I just want to cram my mouth full of fish eggs. Like a brown bear.”

“Hopefully, we can find some in the next town.”

Shizuku's arrival from another world had been the impetus for their journey. Despite its serious origin, the travel itself was full of lighthearted moments. Occasionally, Shizuku daydreamed of the refrigerator she'd left behind and let out a sigh.

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