



III

Babel

Condemned by the Magic Kingdom

Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa



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Condemned by the
Magic Kingdom

Unable to imagine what the king would be like, Shizuku remained apprehensive.

Still, she'd put herself through so much hardship for the sole reason of getting hold of Farsas's secrets, to see whether they could help her find her way home.

She couldn't afford to stand around scared.

**"The king's...
a tough nut
to crack."**


Leuticia

Lars's younger sister. A top-class mage with remarkable abilities.

Lars

The king of Farsas. Bearer of Akashia, a royal sword capable of cutting through any kind of magic.





**"I'm sorry
for getting
in your way.
Don't tell
anyone that
I'm here, if
that's okay."**

Lyshien



**A mysterious young girl
with vast magical power who
Shizuku and Erik encounter
on their travels. Somebody
seems to be after her...**

Babel

II

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Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa


NEW YORK

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Babel II

Kuji Furumiya

Translation by Amelia Imogen Mason Cover art by Haruyuki Morisawa

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Babel

Condemned by
the Magic Kingdom



Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

1. Where the Moonlight Falls

2. The Silent Bride

3. The Anomaly and the Criminal

4. Hidden Hands



Main Characters

Shizuku Minase

A college student who was 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. Accompanies Shizuku on her journey.

Mea

A demon girl. She meets Shizuku in a castle at the bottom of a lake and is contracted to become her assistant demon.

Lyshien

A mysterious girl who possesses vast magical power. Shizuku and Erik come across her in a town they visit during their travels.

Daytas

A merchant living in the town of Laobbbe. He has agreed to enter into a strategic marriage in order to get a seat on the town council.

Nay

Daytas's bodyguard.

Lars

The 30th king of Farsas. Bearer of Akashia, the Magic-Severing Sword.

Leuticia

Lars's younger sister. An exceptional mage.

Harve



Erik's friend. A royal mage of the kingdom of Farsas.

Dylguey

A mage specializing in the history of Farsas.

Katiliana

Deceased. A member of the Farsasian royal family who taught Erik magic when he was fifteen.



The Lands of *Babel*

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



In the time of legends, Aetea, the sole god remaining on the continent, concealed his true identity and visited a settlement deep in the forest.

Everyone passed him by, unable to decipher his words,
until one young woman was earnest enough to speak to him.

Aetea would later take that woman to be his wife.

But why, one might ask, was she the only one to respond?

1. Where the Moonlight Falls



“I—I can see a town!”

“Well, this path was bound to lead us to a town eventually.”

“Yay! I see it, too!”

Having finally spotted some buildings beyond the vast expanse of greenery in front of her, Shizuku pumped her fists in the air. The young man next to her wearing traveling clothes seemed as unfazed as ever.

Shizuku and the small green bird on her shoulder squealed with delight.

Just four months earlier, Shizuku had been a student attending college in Japan. Then one hot summer day, her peaceful life had changed completely. She had been swallowed up by a mysterious black hole that opened in the middle of her path, and when she woke up, she found herself in another world.

In this world, magic was commonplace. Fortunately, she was able to communicate with people, but she was yet to find a way of returning home.

Apparently, this new world had never received any otherworldly visitors before, so Shizuku hid her true identity and set out toward the magic kingdom of Farsas, which seemed to be concealing information of some sort.

It was Shizuku’s companion, Erik, who’d perused the continent’s records, dug into Farsas’s history for her, and told her what he’d found. Being a mage who specialized in the study of writing systems, he’d taken an interest in the written languages of Shizuku’s world and had asked her to teach him about them as a reward for accompanying her on her travels. Shizuku had found him to be a good leader and a knowledgeable guide.

Erik had a subdued personality, and nothing ever fazed him, so his reactions

tended to be very reserved compared to Shizuku's. That didn't bother her at all, though, and their journey had gone reasonably smoothly.

Or at least it had—up until a certain point. They'd begun their journey with Farsas as their destination, but after getting caught up in a perilous incident involving a forbidden curse, the pair had been transported to an unknown location.

Shizuku's black hair had grown to just below her shoulders, and she brushed it back out of her face. In Japan, she'd been an average college student, but people in this world seemed to think she was younger than her years. Large eyes aside, she was an unremarkable-looking person, but to the residents of this world, that plainness made her look like a kid.

Shizuku ran her hand through her bangs.

"The thing that's surprised me here the most is the transportation magic. The fact that you can travel to a faraway place in an instant is amazing! I know it's high-level magic, but it's still crazy to think you can transport goods or go on vacation in the blink of an eye! I was really looking forward to using it, but then..."

"Aren't you glad you got to try it out at least?"

"My wish did come true, but not in the way I'd hoped..."

They had meant to use the transit ring that would take them to Farsas, but the pair had ended up on a mysterious beachfront instead. From there, they'd managed to locate a narrow path, which they'd continued to follow. If it had led into an endless expanse of woodland, Shizuku could have met with an early demise in this new world—but fortunately, a settlement had come into view.

Erik, who was walking beside her, didn't seem particularly happy to have arrived here, just indifferent. The twenty-two-year-old man had a pretty, boyish face, but it was his easygoing personality that had really made an impression on Shizuku. Even now, he was explaining something to her in his usual calm tone of voice.

"Generally speaking, it's not advisable to enter a transit ring or gate unless its functionality is guaranteed. Otherwise, you never know where it might send

you. There have even been cases of people being teleported up into the sky.”

“Those are some scary portals... So they’re like unexpected traps in video games?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but it sounds like you get the general idea.”

Shizuku repositioned her bag as she and Erik enjoyed this casual back-and-forth. The small bird on her shoulder smiled.

“We can take a break in a minute, Mea.”

The small green bird chirped back at her. Mea’s true form was that of a young demon girl, and she had agreed to become Shizuku’s assistant.

As the town grew closer, Shizuku couldn’t help but feel relieved.

“For the time being, I just want to find an inn and wash my clothes... They have blood all over them,” she said.

“You need to sleep properly. I know you took a nap earlier, but your neck was hanging down at an awkward angle.”

“You make me sound like a zombie. But you’re right, my neck *is* sore.”

The townscape that had come into view looked extremely normal. There was sure to be an inn.

Just as Shizuku was thinking this, two men came running out of one of the town’s streets. The men, who were armed with swords, noticed Shizuku and started running straight toward her. Judging by their clothes and the vibe they gave off, they were probably mercenaries.

Alarmed, Shizuku froze.

“Agh. What’s going on?” she asked.

“It looks like they’re after you,” Erik replied.

He reached for the bag that was hanging from his waist—but before he had the chance to take anything out, the men came to a stop. They stood a few paces away from the two travelers, staring at Shizuku’s face as they whispered to one another.

“Is that her? She has black hair.”

“It can’t be. The girl we’re looking for is supposed to be *strikingly* pretty.”

“...Did they just insult me?”

“I don’t think so. They’re not saying you’re not pretty—it’s just that you don’t stand out,” Erik assured her.

“You’re probably right...but still!”

While Shizuku and Erik bickered, the two mercenaries promptly began to make their way back to the town. They hadn’t said anything to Shizuku—they had just given their appraisal of her looks and left. The absurdity of the situation made her scowl.

“I have no idea what just happened... But I’m also too tired to care...”

“It’s that sort of attitude that makes you a great traveler,” Erik commented.

In a roundabout way, he was praising Shizuku for her bluntness, and she stifled a yawn.

The pair forgot about the suspicious men and made their way into the small town.

When they asked the innkeeper as to their whereabouts, he explained that they were currently on the west coast of the continent, on the other side of Farsas.

As Shizuku was enjoying an after-dinner cup of tea in a restaurant, she looked at their position on the map and let out a sigh.

“We’ve traveled so far. We crossed most of the continent.”

“If we’d been sent any farther west, we would have landed in the ocean. I’m just glad we ended up on the shore.”

“Don’t even go there!”

They were about two small countries north of where they had been in Candela. Naturally, that meant that Farsas was now to their east rather than to their west, so the pair’s new plan was to travel east toward Farsas.

“Oh... So now it’s like we’re in *Journey to the East*.”

“What’s that?”

“A story about a mountain hermit, I think. I don’t really know the details.”

Erik, who had his elbow on the table and was resting his chin in his hand, gazed at the map. Shizuku, meanwhile, was staring fixedly at him. Now that she took a proper look at him, he really was handsome; she’d just grown so accustomed to seeing him lately. She examined his face, curious to see if the taxing ordeal he’d been through had affected him.

The chaos in Candela hadn’t been Shizuku’s fault, but it *was* her journey that Erik was accompanying her on. Her head was heavy and started to droop—and before she knew it, her cheek was flat against the table.

“I’m sorry about all of this. We’ve ended up so far away...”

“Where did this come from all of a sudden? Where we ended up was out of our control; it’s nothing for you to worry about. Besides, we’re even closer to Farsas now.”

“We might be closer than when we were in Candela, but Farsas is a big country.”

Farsas sprawled west from the center of the continent, occupying a huge expanse of land. Now that Erik and Shizuku had been teleported west, they were closer to Farsas’s northwestern border, but the fact remained that the castle was still a considerable distance away. Farsas’s castle city was in the eastern part of the country, so it would take six weeks to travel there from the northwest border on horseback.

Shizuku’s comment, however, brought a faint smile to Erik’s face.

“Once we enter the country, there will be loads of transit rings to help us get around. It’ll be easy.”

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

Shizuku had used a transit ring to get here, but she still had a hard time imagining herself using one. She traced the map with her finger...and then she remembered something.

“Now that I think about it, somebody teleported *into* Candela Castle just as

we were being sent away. I wonder if she was all right.”

Shizuku was certain that she’d seen a black-haired woman appear just as she and Erik were making their escape. Would she have been safe with the miasma stirring inside the castle? Shizuku didn’t think she’d ever find out, but to her surprise, Erik casually replied to her question.

“She was probably fine. She’s the younger sister of the king of Farsas, after all.”

“Huh?!”

“She has a spirit to help her out. Sure, it was a forbidden curse, but that thing had been severed from its central ring. She easily would have defeated it.”

“Uh, what? We had a near miss with someone from Farsas?”

“A near miss?”

“We missed each other.”

“Oh, yes. It was close. Still, if we’d have spoken to her, she would have treated us with suspicion. It’s good that things worked out the way they did.”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

Erik might have entered the correct way, but Shizuku and her teammates had snuck past Candela Castle’s wards and broken in. If she’d been caught, it would have been a disaster in more ways than one.

Shizuku groaned with fear, bringing an awkward smile to Erik’s face.

“Tomorrow, we’ll follow the main road and head for the border of Farsas.”

“Yeah. I’m already tired. I should get an early night.”

Shizuku’s exhaustion was still weighing her down. She stood up, ready to return to her room.

“Come to think of it, did you recognize the king’s sister?” she asked.

Erik had only briefly glanced at the black-haired woman out of the corner of his eye, but he’d still known who she was. Had Erik seen her face the last time he was in Farsas?

It was a casual question, but it took a few seconds for Erik to respond. Just as Shizuku was beginning to grow suspicious, Erik nodded.

“People call her the continent’s most beautiful woman. They say once you see her face, you’ll never forget it.”

“Whoa. I wish I’d gotten a proper look at her.”

In a way, this explained why Erik had been so quick to recognize her—but something didn’t feel quite right. Shizuku blamed her lingering doubts on her tiredness.

The pair settled their bill and went outside.

It was already dark out, and there were no streetlights in the small town. Shizuku started walking ahead, leading Erik down the narrow alleyway.

“I think the inn was this way.”

“It’s funny how good your sense of direction is. You really do make a great traveler.”

“I don’t think I would have pursued a career as a ‘traveler’ in my old world—this special skill of mine has only become apparent since coming here.”

As Shizuku was speaking, she sensed something and stopped. There was nothing at the end of the alley. All that lay ahead was the pitch-black darkness of the night.

Erik followed Shizuku’s line of sight.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. It’s just...”

It wasn’t as if there was anything strange about it—so why was she getting this weird feeling that she just couldn’t shake?

Shizuku felt scared and restless, almost as if she’d just stepped into a bad dream. In an attempt to shake off her unease, she started walking again—but after just a few steps, she tripped over something in her path.

“Hey!”

“Gyah!”

Two yelps echoed through the air at the same time. Shizuku had almost fallen face-first onto the ground, but Erik had caught her just in the nick of time. Holding her small frame from behind, he pulled her back.

“That was close. What happened?”

“I—I got caught on something... Did you just hear a cat?”

“That was a human voice. Look,” said Erik.

Shizuku glanced down at her feet.

True enough, a pretty young girl with long black hair was sitting on the ground clutching her knees to her chest.

“A—a ghost?!” Shizuku cried out in surprise. After all, there hadn’t been anyone there a moment earlier.

Yet now, a young girl, maybe one or two years younger than Shizuku, was sitting right there with her arms wrapped around her legs. Although Shizuku was shaken up by her sudden appearance, Erik sounded so calm that he might as well have been reading out of a school textbook.

“Ghosts don’t exist; I’m sure I’ve told you that before. This girl is a living person.”

“B-but she wasn’t there a moment ago!”

“That’s because of her cloak. It uses invisibility magic.”

“No way...”

Now that Erik had mentioned it, the girl *was* wearing a cloak. She must have had her hood down when Shizuku tripped.

The girl stared at Shizuku and Erik, a hint of apprehension in her dark eyes, and a subtle yet peculiar feeling surged through Shizuku’s body. But then, like the fleeting memory of a dream, it quickly disappeared.

Without realizing what she was doing, Shizuku shook her head, then took another look at the girl.

“...You’re so pretty.”

Her face was so small that it was hard to believe she was human like them.

The girl's hair and eyes were both black—far blacker than Shizuku's were. The bridge of her nose was high, and her skin was so pale that it almost looked translucent. Her small lips, which were a rosy shade of pink, were the only thing that made her look human. If it weren't for them, Shizuku could have mistaken her for some sort of elaborate doll.

Shizuku couldn't help but gaze at her, entranced, and the girl cocked her head to one side.

"...Are you a normal person?" the girl asked.

"W-well, sort of..."

Shizuku was from another world, so it wasn't as if she was *completely* ordinary—but that probably wasn't what the girl was getting at.

As Shizuku was searching for an answer, Erik cut in.

"Aren't you the girl they were looking for this afternoon?"

"What? ...Oh."

When they first arrived in the town, Shizuku and Erik had crossed paths with a pair of mercenaries who were searching for a young girl with black hair. They'd ruled Shizuku out, saying that the one they were looking for was supposed to be "strikingly pretty." At the time, Shizuku had been dismayed by the men's reactions, but now...

"They were right. You'd recognize her immediately..."

It made sense now; the girl they were looking for really *was* beautiful. Shizuku was actually impressed that people could recognize her based on her beauty alone, and she gave a firm nod.

"She really is a sight for sore eyes," said Shizuku.

"That's all you have to say?"

"No! I just assume that's why they're hunting her down."

Shizuku's comment left the young girl looking stupefied, and she repeated her previous question.

"Are you a normal person?"

“I’m just an ordinary passerby.”

This let the girl know that Shizuku wasn’t pursuing her or doing anything of the sort, and her answer made the girl relax slightly. She placed her hand on her hood.

“I’m sorry for getting in your way. Don’t tell anyone that I’m here, if that’s okay.”

As the girl was speaking, she started to pull down her invisibility hood again, but Shizuku automatically stopped her.

“No, no, no. Wait a minute. Someone’s hunting you down, aren’t they? Is that why you’re hiding here?”

After a pause, the girl nodded.

It was a narrow alleyway, and it seemed quiet, but it still wasn’t the kind of place a lone woman should be huddling down in at night, regardless of whether she was using invisibility magic or not.

Shizuku turned back toward her companion.

“Erik, uhh...”

“I know what you’re going to say, but I don’t recommend it.”

“So what else is new? Okay, fine. I understand the risks.”

“Then go ahead.”

“That was fast.”

Shizuku was grateful that Erik had understood right away, but she did feel a little guilty. Having received her companion’s approval, she nodded to the bird on her shoulder, then crouched down in front of the young girl. The pair exchanged glances.

“Forgive me for prying, but are you expecting someone to come and help you out?” Shizuku asked.

“Someone will show up eventually...I think...”

It didn’t sound like anyone was coming for her anytime soon, so Shizuku offered the girl her hand.



“In that case, why don’t you come to our inn? You might catch a cold if you stay out here all night.”

The girl stared at Shizuku’s hand in front of her. Then she looked up.

“Are you sure? I won’t be a nuisance?”

“Once we’re there, we can talk and decide what to do next. It’s better than staying here by yourself.”

Abandoning someone who was in trouble was not an option—not for Shizuku at least. She wanted to hear the girl’s story, but first they needed to go somewhere safe.

The young girl gently took Shizuku’s hand. There were silver rings on each of her fingers, and she smiled sweetly.

“Thank you. I’m Lyshien. I come from a country far to the east.”

Her hand was soft and warm, and she spoke with a clear, beautiful voice.

Lyshien wore her invisibility cloak on the way to the inn, so she wasn’t seen by anybody. When they got to the room, she was able to warm up her freezing body in the bath, and once she was finished, Lyshien sat down on the bed next to Shizuku.

“Thank you so much. You’ve been a great help.”

Lyshien bowed her head deeply. Having borrowed and changed into Shizuku’s pajamas, she was so pretty that she almost sparkled. With all the jewelry hanging from her ears and adorning her neck, the girl exuded exoticism. That said, everything Shizuku had encountered since coming to this new world had been exotic to her.

Just as Shizuku was admiring how dainty Lyshien was, Erik asked a question from where he sat in a chair.

“So can I ask you who you are and why people are coming after you?”

“I’m, uh, from a country in the east.”

“Which country?”

“Anneli.”

Shizuku caught a flicker of sadness in the girl's eyes, and Erik frowned. Lyshien continued speaking, albeit softly.

"I don't really know why people are coming after me, nor who's behind it. The truth is, nobody was supposed to come after me."

"They weren't supposed to? Why not?"

"The person who let me out and imprisoned me...gave me permission to leave."

That was a strange turn of phrase. How could someone let you out and imprison you at the same time? If you were imprisoned, that usually meant you were stuck inside. Erik seemed to find this odd as well, because a frown creased his handsome face.

Shizuku visualized the map of the continent.

"Anneli is next to Tarys, where we started our journey. It's a long way east of here."

Furthermore, Shizuku was sure that Anneli had been captured by another nation a short while ago. Shizuku was about to bring this up, but Erik raised his hand to stop her and posed a new question.

"Were you officially told that you had permission to leave?"

"No. Other people probably think I'm dead... Maybe somebody realized that I'm not, and that's why they're coming after me."

It seemed like she was putting thought into every answer she gave, but her faltering responses made her sound far younger than she looked.

Erik asked her another question.

"Does the person who's been chasing you want to use you for something?"

"I don't know. I don't think I'd be of any use anymore."

"You wouldn't? Why not?"

"My younger brother chose not to fight."

This was another strange answer. Why was she mentioning her brother all of a sudden? Shizuku found this bizarre, but she stayed quiet and let Erik do the

talking. He continued questioning Lyshien, unruffled.

“Does the person who’s coming to get you work for you?”

“No... He’s the person who took me away.”

“So you left Rozsark with him?”

“Yes... Huh? How do you...?”

“I see. I think I know who you are.”

Shizuku looked at Erik, her mouth agape. How could those confusing questions have led him to any kind of realization?

“What did you figure out? I couldn’t follow your conversation at all... Even that last question was kind of weird...”

If Shizuku’s memory served her right, then Rozsark was the country that had conquered Anneli. She couldn’t understand why this other country had suddenly been brought up—but Erik just gave her an awkward smile.

“It’s not that I’ve figured anything out—it’s just a hunch. Now, we just need to check whether or not I’m right.”

Erik turned back to the black-haired girl.

“Are you the princess who was locked away in Anneli?” he asked, staring her squarely in the face.

“Huh?!” Shizuku squealed, glancing at Erik and the girl in turn.

Lyshien looked back at Erik, wide-eyed. She replied to the mage, sounding genuinely astonished.

“How did you know?”

“No ordinary person would be able to get their hands on the kind of jewelry you’re wearing, so I suspected you might have been from a noble or royal family. It seemed likely that you were from Anneli, too. It’s only logical that someone like you would have fled the country after the castle was captured.”

“Well, I suppose that is true...”

The silver hoops that hung from Lyshien’s pale earlobes and the rings on each

of her fingers all looked expensive. More than anything else, though, her invisibility cloak must have been incredibly valuable.

Erik gently scratched his temple.

“Anneli may have been conquered, but the livelihood of its citizens, nobles and commoners alike, seems to be guaranteed for the time being. There’s no real need for anyone to flee...with one exception.”

“What exception?”

“There was a rumor going around when the castle fell and travel restrictions were put in place. Didn’t you hear? People claimed that a princess who was imprisoned in Anneli had been taken away by the king of Rozsark when the country was captured.”

“...Oh yeah! I think I did hear about that! But there was talk of a prince escaping, too.”

“That’s right. That prince has already been found—he must be Lyshien’s younger brother. When Lyshien said that she had been ‘let out and imprisoned,’ she must have meant that the king of Rozsark freed her from her confinement, then held her as a hostage. The idea that she was the princess seemed far-fetched at first, but the more questions I asked, the more it all added up.”

“Whoa...”

Erik had been delightfully quick on the uptake. As Shizuku voiced her admiration, Lyshien herself shrank back.

“I have been advised not to talk about myself too much...,” she said.

“That’s understandable—but since we’ve provided you with shelter, I want to have a clear understanding of your situation. Rest assured, I don’t intend to exploit the information or leak it to a third party,” said Erik, speaking in a businesslike manner.

Lyshien nodded. Shizuku, who was sitting by her side, gazed fixedly at her.

“A real-life princess... That’s incredible... It’s like you’re from a fairy tale...”

“Didn’t you have royalty where you’re from?” Erik asked.

“Yes, but it’s rare to come across a member of the royal family in person. It’s a lot to take in.”

“But they always pretended I didn’t exist,” said Lyshien.

“They did?”

Lyshien’s words made Shizuku cock her head in confusion, and Erik explained on her behalf.

“For many years, it was thought that the royal family of Anneli had only a single son—but when Rozsark captured the castle, rumors began to spread that he had an older sister who’d been imprisoned in an outlying building on the castle grounds. There was no proof, though, so nobody could be sure whether it was true.”

“It is the truth,” confirmed Lyshien. “Oltovine took me away as a hostage.”

“Oltovine is the king of Rozsark, right? He’s still young, so he must have thought that marrying the princess of Anneli would make it easier to govern the country once he’d invaded. In the end, however, there was no need for such tactics—Rozsark were able to take over without much resistance, and the prince of Anneli and the king of Rozsark were able to reach an agreement. That must be what Lyshien was alluding to when she said her younger brother chose not to fight.”

“How do you know all this, Erik?”

“I heard all sorts of information when we were in Candela. It’s good to stay informed when you’re traveling.”

Shizuku was grateful that her guide Erik kept abreast of all that was happening, but at the moment, the focus was on Lyshien. Shizuku processed everything she’d been told.

“In other words, Lyshien is the princess of a country in ruins. Since the conquering nation and her younger brother came to an agreement, she was able to fake her own death and leave. Yet someone’s still hunting her down.”

“That’s...correct,” said Lyshien.

“If we want to find out why someone is trying to capture her, we’ll have to

ask them directly. Anneli and Rozsark may have reached a compromise, but there might be someone seeking to interfere, thinking that capturing the princess could give them an advantage. In reality, it would be difficult to pull that off unless you were as powerful as one of the Great Nations, but not everybody realizes that.”

“Right. After all, people have all sorts of different opinions when it comes to politics...”

“It’s fairly common for royalty to be plagued by such problems. Sometimes, individuals find themselves in situations they can’t control, and escaping isn’t easy. It’s not uncommon for young royalty to be overwhelmed by the pressure.”

Shizuku glanced at Erik, surprised. His tone of voice was different than usual—there was a sadness to it.

A gloomy haze appeared in his deep-blue eyes, but he wasn’t looking at anything in particular. Something difficult for anybody else to understand lurked deep within his gaze, but as Shizuku was hesitating over how to react, Erik nodded in his usual manner.

“Ideally, we should find Lyshien a proper place to stay—a place where she will be protected. I don’t particularly recommend it, but Farsas might be an option.”

Hearing this, Lyshien leaped to her feet and vigorously shook her head.

“Farsas is not an option. I’m not supposed to go there.”

“Hm? Why not?”

Farsas was where Shizuku and her companions were heading next. What was wrong with it? Erik had once declared that there was no country he wanted to avoid more, so was it actually incredibly dangerous?

“I’m not sure, but the person who released me told me not to go there.”

“I see. I can understand why, I suppose. Where is that person now?”

“In a different town, I think. He told me to stay hidden while he threw my pursuers off the scent—however, I got the coordinates wrong when I was teleporting and ended up here.”

“You’re in the same boat as us, then...”

Was there something in the area that was causing teleportation mishaps? This shared experience made Shizuku feel closer to Lyshien, but Erik ignored her and kept on talking.

“Right now, it’s vital that the pair of you are reunited. Can you contact him?”

“No. I think I should be able to find him in the town of Kochea, though. A dressmaker there is, uhh, doing some work for me...”

“Kochea, huh? That’s east of here, near the border of Farsas, isn’t it?”

“What kind of work?” asked Shizuku.

“They’re making me a b-bridal gown...”

The girl flushed red. This was the most human expression Shizuku had seen from Lyshien so far—and the cutest, too. Shizuku found herself mesmerized by her...and she felt a warmth in her chest.

While Shizuku felt all warm and fuzzy inside, Erik just carried on speaking in his usual manner.

“He must be the man you’re marrying, then. That’s a good point—if you’re unsure of his whereabouts and have no means of contacting him, he might assume you’ll meet him at the dressmaker’s. It’s worth a shot.”

“Then...”

“Yeah. Kochea is on our way anyway, so we’ll take you with us tomorrow.”

“Thank you so much!” Shizuku cried out, throwing her arms in the air in gratitude.

“I appreciate your help,” Lyshien said, calmly bowing her head.

Once they’d decided on their plan for the following day, Erik returned to his own room, and Shizuku and Lyshien lay down in bed together, side by side. They probably should have paid for an extra person at the inn, but there were mercenaries in the town who were actively pursuing Lyshien, so they needed to make sure that her presence remained unnoticed.

“Do you think you can sleep? I know we don’t have much space,” said

Shizuku.

“It’s fine. Thank you.”

Lyshien gave Shizuku a small nod. Up close, her eyelashes looked unbelievably long. Shizuku found herself entranced by the girl’s beauty.

There was a question she wanted to ask Lyshien, but she wasn’t sure whether she should. In the end, though, her curiosity won out.

“Are you marrying the person who rescued you?”

“Yes... Although it was Oltovine who set me free, *he* was the one who took me to Rozsark and taught me how to read...”

“He taught you to read?”

“I’d been locked up since birth, so I hadn’t spoken to anyone for...uhh, sixteen years. It seems like everyone was forbidden from speaking to me, so even those who fed and dressed me never said a word.”

“Wh-what...?”

Shizuku didn’t know what to say. Lyshien was braver than she’d imagined, having gone through the same sort of solitary confinement that criminals had to endure. She wanted to know what had led to a princess ending up in such a horrific situation, but she felt like that wasn’t something she could bring up as a matter of curiosity. Lyshien’s faltering manner of speech made sense now, though.

Yet Lyshien smiled as if her past didn’t bother her at all.

“The truth is, I felt like I needed to dedicate my life to the people of Anneli—but *he* assured me that everything was under control, and he suggested I try living for myself instead. He makes me work hard, teaching me how to read, as well as a lot of other things.”

“Lyshien...”

She grinned, looking proud of herself.

Sixteen years of Lyshien’s life had been stolen from her, and she was just beginning a new life. She’d spent years simply existing, unable even to read,

and though she'd still intended to dedicate herself to serving her people in spite of all she'd been through, she'd been given the opportunity to start afresh.

Lyshien was the same age as Shizuku's younger sister, Mio. Just looking at Lyshien made Shizuku feel emotional, but she tried not to show it.

Shizuku gave Lyshien's hand a tight squeeze.

"I'll stay by your side until you find him again!"

"Thank you...very much."

Lyshien looked shy and happy at the same time. Shizuku found the smile on the younger girl's face strangely reassuring and drifted off to sleep.

That night, she didn't have any dreams.



The cuisine there was unlike anything Shizuku had tried in any of the towns they'd passed through so far, likely because it was so close to the sea.

"That smells great. I don't think I've had fresh fish in a long time."

The paper-wrapped parcel that Shizuku was holding had lightly fried whitefish fillets inside. Since they had Lyshien to think of, they'd decided to get takeout rather than eat at a restaurant, so Shizuku had gone into town early in the morning to buy them breakfast. She'd visited a number of different food stalls and bought bread and a few other side dishes for their meal.

As Shizuku hummed a tune to herself, Mea warbled along from her perch on Shizuku's shoulder. Mea would have liked to turn back into a girl and go shopping with her, but she was a demon with hair that was a vivid shade of green. She'd stand out even more than Lyshien in her own way.

As the pair were walking down the road, Shizuku suddenly sensed someone watching her and turned around. She met the gaze of a young man standing on the opposite side of the street.

"Who's that?"

She didn't recognize him. He looked around the same age as Erik, but had ashy-colored hair and wore a dark-blue outfit. His gaze bored into Shizuku, almost as if there was a bounty on her head.

“Did he follow me here from Candela...?”

Had they issued an arrest warrant following the chaos she’d caused in the castle? Even if they had, it seemed unlikely that any pursuer would manage to find her so quickly, considering how far away from Candela she was.

The young man couldn’t have known what Shizuku was thinking, but he quickly lost interest and turned back the other way. As he did so, however, a child ran right into him.

“Wah!” the young boy cried, tumbling to the ground.

Startled, Shizuku continued to watch them, intrigued to see how the man would respond. He scowled and tutted, then reached out toward the dumbfounded boy and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck.

“Wait...”

Shizuku wanted to call out and stop him—but before she had the chance to rush over, the young man had hoisted the boy to his feet, tapped him lightly on the cheek, and left. The man’s calm reaction left Shizuku feeling relieved.

“...He was a decent person after all, Mea.”

Maybe he was one of those people who, rather unfortunately, made a deceptively stern impression. Shizuku kept finding herself looking over her shoulder at the crowd of people behind her as she made her way back to the inn.

When she returned to the room, she found Erik and Lyshien waiting for her.

“Welcome back. Did you find anything you liked?”

“They had fresh fish! It looks so good!”

“I like fish,” remarked Lyshien.

Shizuku laid their breakfast out on the table; it was still plenty warm enough. As the three of them were eating, they discussed their next move.

“Let’s depart before noon... Did you spot anyone suspicious in town, Shizuku?” Erik asked, spreading a vegetable paste on his bread.

“Not particularly. There was this one guy, but I think he was just one of those

unfortunate people who gives the wrong impression.”

“What does that even mean? I really hope Lyshien’s pursuers have given up on finding her here. Lyshien, are they coming after you because they know your true identity?”

“I...think so. Probably. The people who have been hired to look for me might not know...but the one who hired them knows I’m the princess of Anneli... They said I might be useful, which is why they want to hear what I have to say.”

“You might be useful... They want to hear what you have to say...?”

As Erik was thinking to himself, Shizuku cut a large rolled omelet into six pieces. She piled some of the pieces onto Lyshien’s plate, then served some to Mea, still disguised as a small bird. Lyshien’s eyes were sparkling with excitement. The plump, fluffy omelet had a pie-like base, and it had a slightly sweet, gentle flavor similar to a pancake.

As Shizuku and the others enjoyed the rolled omelet they were sharing, Erik tore off a piece of bread.

“We might want to try looking at things from a different angle,” he said.

“A different angle?”

“Yeah. If this person’s saying that Lyshien ‘might be useful,’ then they probably realize that her capture won’t carry much weight, politically speaking. The part about them wanting to ‘hear what she has to say’ is odd, too. If they wanted to use her for their own personal gain, they’d usually be saying that *they* wanted to speak to *her*.”

“Oh... That’s true.”

“So if we can get a better idea of what they want, we might be able to negotiate with them. Are you in possession of any sort of valuable information, Lyshien?”

“Valuable information...?”

Lyshien’s shapely eyebrows furrowed slightly. At that moment, Shizuku realized something and gently interjected.

“Erik, it sounds like people were ordered not to speak to Lyshien while she

was locked away. So if she did know anything, then—”

“It must have been something that happened *after* she was taken to Rozsark.”

“But everything I learned in Rozsark is common knowledge... Oh.”

Lyshien clapped her hand to her mouth.

“Do you know what this valuable information might be?” Shizuku asked in the middle of breaking up some fish into smaller pieces for Mea.

“There was something that Oltovine told me. He said it was a secret.”

“The king of Rozsark has a secret, huh? Interesting. I assume it’s a sensitive topic?”

“Oltovine told me he wants to keep it a secret. I don’t see why he needs to, though.”

“Oh, right.”

No matter what kind of secret it was, the king had ordered her to stay quiet about it, so it wasn’t as if Lyshien could reveal what she knew. This meant that negotiating with her pursuer could prove difficult.

Erik accepted some cheese from Shizuku.

“You could offer them some false information, but we should probably discuss this with your husband first.”

“Y-yes,” Lyshien replied.

She’d turned bright red. Erik’s use of the word “husband” must have embarrassed her, and Shizuku couldn’t help but find this reaction sweet.

Shizuku put some fish on her bread and bit into it. The whitefish had absorbed the flavors of the oil it had been fried in, giving it a delicious aroma. She was so happy to taste seafood after such a long time.

“Still, our plan of going to the dressmaker and trying to meet up with Lyshien’s husband remains the same. How are we going to avoid getting spotted on our journey, though? Will we need to avoid the main road?” asked Shizuku.

“No. I’m not familiar with the area, so that would be risky. We’ll just go down

the main road like ordinary travelers. Luckily, Lyshien is more than prepared.”

“Huh?”

Lyshien had been drinking her tea, lost in thought, and she twitched like a startled cat at the mention of her name.

Erik glanced at one of her possessions hanging from the wall—

Her invisibility cloak.



The two horses trotted along side by side. With Shizuku guiding one and Erik guiding the other, they had begun to make their way east. Shizuku looked up from her saddle and gazed at the evening sky above her.

“It looks like it’s going to rain. Are you okay over there, Lyshien?”

“I am...fine. It has been a long time since I last traveled by horse, so I’m enjoying it.”

“Oh, right. You used teleportation to travel around, didn’t you?”

Lyshien had ended up in the town after putting the wrong coordinates into the transit ring. As with Shizuku and her companions, it was lucky that she hadn’t ended up on the other side of the continent entirely. That said, she might have still been sitting in a back alley clutching her knees if nobody else had found her—an idea that pained Shizuku just to think about. She was so glad things hadn’t ended up that way.

About two hours after they’d departed, Shizuku spotted the town they were heading for in the distance and breathed a sigh of relief.

“It looks like we’re going to get there without any issues. Lyshien’s pursuers must have given up.”

“I’m not so sure. It depends on how important she is to them,” responded Erik. “Lyshien?”

“Yes?”

The girl had her hood up, and she tilted her head to one side.

“Wouldn’t you be able to contact your husband if you took that jewelry off?”

asked Erik, his eyes glued to the road ahead.

“Huh? Oh, maybe... But I’ve been told not to remove it.”

“There must be exceptions to that rule, but fine. You can stick to that advice until we have no other choice.”

Erik glanced behind him, prompting Shizuku to do the same. What she saw alarmed her.

Two horsemen were hurtling toward them at a fast clip. Shizuku recognized the men’s faces—they were the mercenaries who’d evaluated her appearance just before she reached the first town.

The small bird on Shizuku’s shoulder chirped, and Shizuku called out to the man on the horse beside her.

“Th-they’re here.”

“Stay calm,” replied Erik.

“Hey! You on the horses over there! Stop!” a man bellowed.

Shizuku reluctantly loosened her horse’s reins. Erik did so, too, and as she sensed them coming closer, Shizuku cowered nervously. One of the men immediately reached out and pulled back the young girl’s hood.

“...!”

She shuddered as the mercenaries gave her a scrutinizing look.

“Huh? It’s you again,” one of them said.

They were looking at Shizuku. With the hood of her completely ordinary cloak pulled down, she glanced back at the mercenaries in mute surprise. The men snorted with laughter, then moved on without saying a word. Their horses sped past Shizuku and her companions, vanishing into the town ahead.

Shizuku relaxed her shoulders, relieved.

“We got away with it...”

“Yeah. That cloak’s invisibility magic is really strong. You can’t see through it unless you’re a mage,” Erik explained, looking over his shoulder.

Sitting behind him, Lyshien adjusted her hood to speak to them.

“Did that go okay?”

“It went fine. Still, it’s best that you keep your hood up.”

Lyshien had been on Erik’s horse the entire time, with Shizuku acting as a decoy to divert attention away from them and give Lyshien a little more freedom.

“Now, we just need to safely reunite you with your husband,” said Erik.

“Those men will be in the same town as us, won’t they? I don’t like the sound of that,” complained Shizuku.

“We should be able to buy ourselves some time. At any rate, we should find ourselves an inn before it gets completely dark,” Erik replied.

His horse was trotting along at a leisurely pace. It seemed like he was trying to match Shizuku’s pace.

Once they’d arrived in the town of Kochea, they headed to the dressmaker where Lyshien’s bridal gown was being made. The young girl fidgeted restlessly the entire way, but when they got there...

“Oh,” said Shizuku. “It looks like it’s closed for the day.”

The shop was shut and the curtains drawn, presumably because it was past sunset. Lyshien stood before the door, her shoulders visibly slumped—the very picture of disappointment. Shizuku couldn’t bear to see her like that.

“D-don’t worry. We’ll come back when they’re open tomorrow and ask them to pass on the message.”

“...Okay.”

“For now, let’s find somewhere to stay,” said Erik. “No matter how this works out, we need to make preparations to cross the border. And as long as we’re in this town, there’s a chance we’ll cross paths with him.”

Shizuku and Lyshien followed Erik’s lead and left the dressmaker’s shop. Lyshien, who had her hood back up, was invisible to Shizuku, so she’d started holding her hand while they were walking.

Just off the town's main road was a street lined with inns. Shizuku smiled as she took in the pleasant aromas wafting from the surrounding eateries.

"I wonder if there's anywhere that offers takeout. I doubt I'll get the chance to enjoy seafood again once we're farther inland."

"Oh, I'd like to see what they have, too," said Lyshien.

"We can look at the food once we've decided on an inn," reasoned Erik. "...Wait."

Erik slowed down. Right ahead of them were the mercenaries they'd come across on the highway. This time, however, they were joined by another man, who was wearing loose-fitting clothing, secured by a belt.

Keeping his eyes on them, Erik lowered his voice.

"This is bad. That third guy is a mage."

"What?"

While it was unlikely that he'd heard what Erik had said, the man in question suddenly glanced in their direction. His gaze was focused, as though he had found precisely what he was looking for, and the color drained from Shizuku's face.

"Shizuku, take Lyshien and get away from here right now. Try to act as natural as possible," Erik said, his expression unchanged.

"Huh? But what about you?"

"He might have seen through Lyshien's invisibility cloak. I'll buy you some time, and we'll regroup later."

As Erik was saying this, the mage muttered something to the two mercenaries, and Shizuku saw the three of them begin to make their way over. She wasted no time in deciding what to do.

"Got it. We'll meet back up after."

"Yeah. Take care. Look after them, won't you, Mea?"

The little bird—Shizuku's assistant demon—chirped, and Shizuku dragged the invisible girl along by the hand. The two of them turned back the way they'd

come and started walking up the street.

“Come on. Let’s try and throw them off the scent.”

If they started running, it would only make them look more suspicious. So instead, Shizuku tried not to bump into anyone as she led Lyshien into the throngs of people.

Once they were some distance away, she looked over her shoulder. Shizuku could see Erik talking to the three men. The sight sent a chill down her spine, but she was sure he’d be able to wriggle his way out of the situation. If she and Lyshien had stayed behind, that would have only made things worse.

“Let’s take a look at the street stalls first. I’m sure they’ll have some tasty food to offer,” Shizuku said in the most cheerful voice she could muster, trying to conceal her inner disquiet.

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve dealt with scarier people than them. Plus, we might find the person you’re looking for as we walk around town.”

Lyshien seemed to stifle any further objections, and after Shizuku made sure that the three men hadn’t followed them, they stocked up on bread and prepared food from a nearby stall. The younger girl carried one of the paper-wrapped bundles and held it inside her cloak—if she hadn’t held it like that, it would have looked like the bag was moving through the air by itself.

As Shizuku strode along, both hands full of packages of food, she whispered to Lyshien beside her.

“By the way, what does this guy you’re searching for look like?”

The streets weren’t exactly crowded, but there were a lot of people coming and going. It would be helpful if Shizuku had a rough idea of what the man looked like.

Lyshien was quiet for a moment, then answered hesitantly.

“He’s tall. About...twice my height?”

“There’s no way he can be *twice* your height...”

Lyshien was slightly shorter than Shizuku, but someone who was twice her height would be almost three meters tall. A person like that would instantly stand out from the crowd.

Shizuku heard the other girl murmur to herself, lost in thought.

“Hmm. Oh, I know—”

Lyshien stopped mid-sentence. Shizuku waited for her to continue...but something didn't feel right, so she came to a stop.

“Lyshien?”

Just as Shizuku called out, Mea emitted a piercing cry from her shoulder. Shizuku reached out beside her, but she couldn't feel Lyshien. Startled, she looked around, and at the entrance to an alley behind her on the left, she saw a bag fall through the air—the bag that Lyshien was supposed to be carrying.

“Wait!” Shizuku yelled, turning in that direction.

Having suddenly raised her voice and burst into a run, Shizuku attracted dumbfounded stares from those around her—but she paid no mind to the bystanders as she dashed into the alley. About twenty meters ahead of her, she saw a man standing by some wooden crates. Lyshien stood next to him, her hood down. Shizuku saw that the man had grabbed Lyshien by the arm, and she yelled out to him.

“Stop that!”

Hearing her voice, the young man looked around, and when Shizuku saw his face, she almost yelped. He had ashy-gray hair and a sharp, piercing gaze—the young man Shizuku had spotted that morning in the last town they'd visited.

He looked at Shizuku, then extended his right hand in her direction.

Recognizing the gesture, she raised her voice.

“Mea, protect me!”

The small bird on her shoulder spread its wings and created a barrier, which collided with the magic that came hurtling through the air toward them.

The man was a mage—Shizuku had recognized the gesture he'd made as he

cast his spell—but even so, she didn’t hesitate to run toward him. He watched her with a look of exasperation, then uttered one simple word.

“Stop.”

“Huh?”

All the strength drained from Shizuku’s legs, and she seemed to topple over on the spot. Her face almost smashed against the ground, but she quickly put down her hands to save herself from the impact.

“Don’t do this!” Lyshien cried out.

“If you don’t want those around you to get hurt, I recommend you keep quiet. I have no intention of hurting *you*; I just want to hear what you have to say.”

“It doesn’t matter what you want to know,” said Lyshien. “I don’t have anything to share.”

The corners of the man’s mouth turned upward. His grizzled expression made him look much older than he actually was.

“You can just tell me what you know. Do that, and I’ll make sure you’re looked after. As a member of the royal family, you should want for nothing. My master’s influence can make that possible. Otherwise...”

The young man glanced at Shizuku. The icy look in his eyes made her shiver, and Shizuku realized he was planning on using her as a pawn to manipulate Lyshien. Lyshien must have worked this out almost instantly, too, because she’d gone very pale.

“She has nothing to do with this,” Lyshien asserted.

“Just come with me and meet my master, then. Don’t worry—there are other people who’ve defected from Rozsark, too. He’ll set you all free as soon as he loses interest in you.”

Lyshien pressed her lips together tightly. Her dark eyes darted around indecisively...but then her expression grew a little sad, and she began to speak.

“Fine. I—”

“No, you can’t do this. Don’t give in!”

They both looked at Shizuku, drawn to the sound of her voice. She pushed against the ground and lifted herself back onto her feet, then extended a muddy hand toward Lyshien.

“You’ve finally found your freedom. You can’t give it up now.”

“Shizuku...”

“For sixteen years, you couldn’t speak to a single person. Now, you can *choose* who to talk to and what about. You can’t let go of that freedom. At least not now.”

Shizuku was trying not to hold Lyshien back but to help her with her new life—that was the whole reason she’d stuck by her all this time.

Shizuku tried to hide the fact she was shaking as she scowled at the man, whose name she didn’t even know. Then she quietly began to speak.

“Mea,” she whispered. “Let’s create an opening for us slip back onto the main street.”

The man was only able to see through the invisibility cloak because he was a mage, in which case it was a better idea for them to try to attract public attention to escape. Erik would probably spot them then, too.

Her grazed leg still throbbing with pain, Shizuku tried as hard as she could to steady herself as she stared at the mage.

“It sounds to me like you want to lock Lyshien away in yet another cage. If you know who she is, then you must know what she’s been through, right?”

The man didn’t reply. He just looked back at Shizuku, his eyes devoid of expression.

Slowly channeling her strength into her feet, Shizuku raised her voice.

“I don’t trust anybody who’d take her away, despite knowing what she’s experienced. *Nobody* has the right to do that!”

As those words left her lips, Shizuku began to run.

“Mea! Bring those crates down!” she called.

The pile of crates beside the mage collapsed, and the man stood in

understandable shock as they began to fall on top of him. Shizuku seized the opportunity to grab the young girl by the hand.

She went to rush back onto the road they'd come from—but then, Shizuku's field of vision violently shook.

“...!”

What was that? Shizuku thought to herself. It had almost felt as if something had momentarily shaken her ear canals. The small green bird fell onto the road, and as Shizuku sank to the ground beside Mea, she heard a man sigh from above her.

“It appears you have an intriguing assistant demon by your side. However, if you're unable to work out what's going on around you, then her powers are wasted on a fool like you.”

This was the most honest and unaffected that the man had ever sounded. Overwhelmed by nausea, Shizuku held her breath.

“Stop!” Lyshien cried out sternly. “If you go any further, I'll—”

“Unfortunately, I cannot allow you to use your magic. The reason you were locked away, Your Highness, was because the magical power you possessed was too strong. It is only thanks to that sealing gear you are wearing that your powers can finally be restrained. From the day you were born, living a life of freedom was never an option for you.”

She can never be free?

These callous words made Shizuku lift her head, but all she saw was Lyshien's hurt expression. It was the face of someone who'd tried to move forward, only to be pushed back.

Shizuku's vision was so hazy that she'd started to see Lyshien's face as her sister Mio's.

“Don't worry, Shizuku,” she could almost hear Mio saying. “I'll be fine.”

Although she was trying to stay strong, Lyshien looked like she was about to cry. Before Shizuku had the chance to process what she was seeing, however, words began to escape her lips.

“That’s not for anybody else to decide.”

She wasn’t talking to anybody in particular. It was just the truth—the truth to Shizuku.

The man’s eyes widened. Lyshien’s lip trembled. The young girl looked at Shizuku...then back up at the man. There was determination in her dark eyes, and she began to speak softly, yet with conviction.

“I don’t want to go. I want to live a normal life.”

This wish was the culmination of sixteen years of solitude—a desire that had remained unheard for so long. It was straightforward and juvenile, but it came from the heart.

The man fell silent. He looked at Shizuku, who was still sitting on the ground. The man’s intent, unrestrained gaze put her on edge, but then he suddenly heaved a sigh.

“I guess negotiations fell through... But never mind. You might not have complied, but I have other people who are willing to help me. Unlike you, they *gladly* offered themselves up.”

“Huh...?”

The mage with the ashen hair turned his back to Shizuku and Lyshien, as if he’d never been interested in them at all. As he began walking down the alleyway, he made one final coldhearted comment.

“If you want a chance at living a normal life, I’d stay away from this town. The nobles who live near here like the way you look and have got their henchmen searching for you. The fate you’ll suffer if they catch you will make you *wish* you’d come with me.”

“...Are you talking about those mercenaries?!” Shizuku asked, but the gray-haired man didn’t answer her.

Just before he disappeared out of sight, Lyshien reached out toward Shizuku. She tossed one of her rings on the ground, then pressed her hands against Shizuku’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry, Shizuku,” she said.

A warm power flowed into Shizuku's body—healing magic, something she'd experienced several times before. Shizuku noticed the scrapes vanishing all over her body, and she blinked in astonishment.

"You were able to use magic after all."

"I'm sorry for keeping it from you. I've been advised not to use it in front of people very much."

If the man they'd just met could be trusted, then Lyshien possessed an excessive amount of magical power. That was why she'd been imprisoned. Even now that she was free, her magic was being sealed away to avoid attracting people's attention.

Shizuku shook her head.

"You have nothing to apologize for. Thank you for healing me. We need to focus on getting out of here—and quick. That man might have given up on you, but if those mercenaries are working for someone else, then you're still in danger."

Shizuku reached out toward the small green bird and picked up her tiny body.

"Are you all right, Mea?"

The little bird nodded her head but didn't seem as lively as usual. Shizuku held her feathery friend against her chest, then picked up the ring that had fallen to the ground and slipped it back onto Lyshien's finger.

Without hesitating, she took Lyshien's hand in hers once more.

"Come on, let's go."

Shizuku wiped the mud off herself, got to her feet, and took Lyshien back the way they'd come. Just as they were about to come out onto the street, however, two men appeared from an intersecting alley. They weren't the mercenaries Erik had been distracting, nor was either of them the mage, but they were relatively well dressed and looked delighted to see Lyshien.

"That's the girl. It's true—you really *do* recognize her on first glance," said one man.

"The lord promised us a reward, so try to avoid harming her," said the other.

“Gah!” exclaimed Shizuku. “I’ve heard about these kinds of nobles—the ones that have no concept of human rights!”

Erik had told her plenty of stories about such people, and they sounded particularly wretched. She pushed Lyshien behind her to keep her safe.

Mea was still weak, and Erik wasn’t around to help out, so it was up to Shizuku to find a way to get them out of this situation. She kept an eye on the men as she surveyed her surroundings, hoping for an escape route.

Then she heard Lyshien raise her voice behind her.

“Oh!”

“Huh?”

One of the men had suddenly vanished from sight. Shizuku had no idea what was happening.

A brief scream echoed through the air—then the other man disappeared, too. Lyshien weaved past Shizuku and began racing ahead.

“Oscar!”

The young girl rushed straight into a nearby alley.

There, in the shadows of the buildings, stood a lone man. At his feet lay both of the nobleman’s emissaries. It had all happened in a matter of seconds.

Lyshien leaped at the man, who threw his arms around the petite young girl.

“Are you okay, Lyshien? I was surprised when you didn’t come home or go back to the inn.”

“I teleported to the wrong place and ended up in the next town over...”

“So *that’s* what happened. I should have made you stay at home. I’m sorry.”

His voice was overflowing with affection as he patted her gently on the back. He gazed at Lyshien with a calm, loving look in his eyes, which were the blue of a bright night sky.

The tall man was muscular, and he had a handsome face. In contrast to Erik’s pretty, androgynous features, his were masculine and well defined. While he was young—most likely in his mid-twenties—he had the serene air of a much

older person, and a red creature that looked like a small dragon perched on his shoulder.

Everything had been so sudden that it had left Shizuku in a daze, but she could immediately guess who this man was: He must be the person who'd taken Lyshien out of Rozsark Castle. Rather unsurprisingly, he wasn't actually twice the girl's height, though he was still taller than Erik. He looked at Shizuku and forced a smile.

"Were you the one who brought her here? Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Uhh, sure..."

That goofy response was all Shizuku could muster, but it was understandable. The man was nothing like she'd imagined him to be, as vague as that mental picture was. Since he'd taught Lyshien how to read, Shizuku had envisioned an academic like Erik; however, it was obvious from his physique and the longsword attached to his waist that he was a fighting man. Unlike the mercenaries Shizuku had come across during her travels, he seemed more of a traditional warrior—but considering he had permission to access the castle, that was hardly surprising.



When it came to explaining what had happened, Shizuku didn't know where to start. Her nerves made her whole body break out in a sweat, and she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.

"I didn't do anything special. But, um, it seems like there are still plenty of henchmen lurking around in this city—the kind who work for nobles that have no respect for human rights..."

"I'm aware. I've taken measures to put a stop to that. Still, this girl isn't very streetwise, so I'll get her to stay home and keep a low profile for the time being. Until she's able to teleport properly, at least."

"I never should have tried..."

Lyshien's head drooped slightly, then she stepped away from the man and turned back toward Shizuku.

"Thank you so much, Shizuku."

"I didn't do anything. I'm sorry I wasn't able to help."

"That's not true."

Lyshien grabbed Shizuku by the hand. Her smile was as beautiful as a flowering bud, and her dark eyes were fixed on Shizuku.

"Thank you for believing in my freedom."

These words warmed Shizuku's heart more than any compliment ever had.

"Okay, then. We just need to—"

Before Shizuku could get out the words "reconvene with Erik," everything shook again.

"Huh?"

"Shizuku!"

Lyshien reached out to catch her, but the damage was already done. Shizuku collapsed against the wall and fell to the ground, breathing shallowly as a surge of nausea welled up inside her.

The change was so sudden that she hadn't even had time to comprehend

what was happening.

It hurt.

She was frightened.

She needed to hurry up and shut it away.

Farther away, deeper down inside her.

“I...feel sick...”

An incomprehensible fragment of information flashed through her mind, and she heard the familiar voice of a young man.

“Shizuku!”

“Erik...”

Relieved that he’d come to look for them, Shizuku let go of consciousness, falling into a dream where nobody could reach her.

2. The Silent Bride



She was alone in the dream.

There was nobody else around. Nobody could come in.

She was standing in front of three books. Books that had everything recorded inside them.

Part of her found it strange—frightening, even. Part of her didn't want to be there.

And yet she couldn't bring herself to move. She was alone.

What was it that frightened her? There wasn't anything scary around.

This was normal. This was who she was.

She reached out toward one of the books in front of her.

It was the tale of a king and a witch from long, long ago.



"I...feel...sick..."

Gasping for breath, Shizuku opened her bleary eyes to see the ceiling of the inn.

"It hurts..."

"Don't worry," responded the familiar voice of a young man. He was wiping her forehead with a damp cloth, and as Shizuku lay there on the floor, he peered down at her with his deep-blue eyes.

"You have a mild fever. Your tiredness must be taking a toll on you, so just sleep. You don't need to worry about anything else."

His voice, which washed over Shizuku like gentle waves, had a comforting effect on her. She nodded, still feeling woozy, then closed her eyes again and fell back into a dream.

Having checked that Shizuku's pained expression had relaxed slightly, Erik let out a sigh and stood up. Lyshien, who stood worriedly in the corner of the room, asked him a question.

"How is Shizuku...?"

"She's fine. I think she's just worn out. This is a good opportunity for her to rest, so I'll let her get some sleep."

Erik was surprised to have found her collapsed on the street, but now that he thought about it, Shizuku had been traveling from place to place for more than two months straight at this point. For someone who'd been whisked here from another world, this was bound to have exhausted her, regardless of how slow paced their itinerary might have been.

When they'd first met, Shizuku had been brimming with motivation that she didn't quite know what to do with, and as it turned out, she was far more strong willed than he'd imagined her to be. She'd refused to back down, even when confronted with a manifestation of a forbidden curse, and her mind was so bright, it dazzled him—but there were occasionally times when her body struggled to keep up.

She'd always had a diminutive figure, but Shizuku had become even thinner than before, and they'd been through their fair share of ordeals. Although she maintained her usual cheerful demeanor, her fatigue had undoubtedly built up.

Erik knew she put herself through more than she could cope with—which was why he felt obliged to keep an eye on her.

There was a knock at the door, and Lyshien's protector stepped inside. The man, who called himself Oscar, placed a few paper-wrapped parcels on the small table in front of them.

"I got some magic medicines. Hopefully one of them will help her."

"Thank you. I'll get her to try some," said Erik. "Still, I really think you two should leave. You never know whether someone will report you to Farsas."

Erik was taking Lyshien's situation into consideration, saying this. The sheer amount of sealing gear she was wearing had made him suspect that she possessed outstanding magical strength. Shizuku seemed to view it as nothing more than jewelry, but it actually served the purpose of restraining a mage's powers. Under normal circumstances, just one piece would have sufficed, but Lyshien wore several such articles, so it wasn't difficult to envision that her magical abilities were extraordinarily strong.

Oscar, her defender, must have forbidden her from taking them off for her own protection. If Farsas found out about her, they might have viewed her as a threat and placed her under surveillance. One wrong move, and Lyshien could end up confined again.

Erik's advice brought an uneasy smile to Oscar's face.

"You saw through us pretty quickly, huh? I understand. We'll be on our way. Give her my thanks when she wakes up."

"I will."

"Oh, and use this if you need it."

The man placed a pass for entry into Farsas alongside the bags of medicine on the table. They wouldn't need to apply for permission to enter the country anymore—this pass allowed them to cross the border checkpoint, no questions asked.

Erik's eyes widened. He'd been unsure how they would get into Farsas.

"Thank you. This will be a big help."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," said Oscar. "Perhaps we'll meet again at some point. Next time, I hope I'll be able to return the favor."

Oscar ushered Lyshien—who'd been waiting in the corner of the room—over to him, then said a short chant to open a transit gate right in front of them.

The young girl bowed to Erik and then to Shizuku, who was still asleep.

"Thank you...so very much. I hope we meet again someday."

"I'll pass on the message to Shizuku."

Once the pair had vanished through the transit gate, Erik let out a sigh. He'd never imagined that the man who was taking care of Lyshien would be a mage, too. Plus, he seemed to have some involvement with the royal family. It all seemed quite complicated.

Every nation had a few secrets they preferred to keep hidden. The larger the country, the darker the secrets. Erik was very aware of this fact—which was why he had no intention of probing further into the situation.

He just hoped that Lyshien would be happy now that she'd broken free of it all. Erik had once known a girl who'd suffered the consequences after failing to escape a similar fate, and he prayed things would be different for Lyshien.

"...You need to be careful, too," he said to Shizuku, who was still sleeping.

Erik placed his chair by her bedside and opened a book.

There was no time limit to their journey. Shizuku's health came first, and now that they had an entry pass, there was no need to panic. Perhaps it would be wise to extend their stay in this town for a short while.

Erik kept an eye on Shizuku as he read. She was evidently having a dream of some kind, because her brow had suddenly furrowed, and Erik reached out to gently massage between her eyebrows. Before long, Shizuku's expression relaxed, and her sleep returned to a more peaceful state.

"There we go."

Erik gave a small nod, then turned the page of his book.

Shizuku continued to oscillate between slumber and a semi-awake state, before waking up bleary-eyed three days later.



"I...feel like I had a lot of dreams."

"That's probably because you slept so much."

Erik had been doing some writing in Shizuku's room when he realized she was awake, and he stood up and peered down at her face. The three days she'd spent in bed had left her looking a little gaunt, but her complexion was reasonably healthy. Erik put some water and medicine into a glass, then gave it

to her.

“Drink this. It’s a magic medicine that will help you get back on your feet.”

“Is it okay to take on an empty stomach?”

“Why wouldn’t it be? It makes no difference.”

Erik found Shizuku’s question a little odd, but it made sense—magic didn’t exist in her world. This probably meant that medicine was made differently, too.

Shizuku nodded and gulped it down.

The sweat covering her body must have made Shizuku feel uncomfortable, because she tugged out her collar and looked inside her clothes. Mea had wiped her down and changed her clothes a number of times over the past three days, but Shizuku seemed to have barely any recollection of this.

Shizuku spoke, sounding as if she were in a daze.

“A long time ago, Shula appeared in the land of the living, taking the form of a really big snake.”

“Huh?”

“Shula used a huge number of dead bodies as puppets...and went to battle with Farsas.”

“...Did you dream that, too?”

She cocked her head to one side slightly, then nodded. Her dark eyes seemed to open into the boundless expanse of Negativity, making a shudder run through Erik.

What kind of dreams had she had, sleeping all that time? Shula had never fought against Farsas in the form of a snake. There were no records of such a thing ever happening. It wasn’t as if the incident had been concealed, either, as there was no trace of it in Farsas’s secret records. Had the ordeal surrounding the forbidden curse in Candela simply left a lasting impact on Shizuku?

After drinking the medicine, Shizuku stared at the empty glass. When Erik lifted it out of her hand, she looked up at him with a terribly worried look in her

eyes.

“Erik, I’m scared.”

“Of what?”

“I don’t know.”

Shizuku changed her clothes, then immediately fell back asleep. By the time she woke up the next day, she’d completely forgotten their conversation.



When she woke up, Shizuku was astounded to discover she’d spent four days in bed. She crossed her arms and frowned, then posed a question to the young man in front of her.

“Uhh, are you sure you’ve got the right person?”

“Who else would I be talking about? Just hurry up and eat.”

“Can I take a bath first?”

“Sure, but take Mea with you, in case you pass out again.”

“Fine.”

Shizuku could feel a lingering lethargy throughout her body from the fever, and she still wasn’t fully awake. She wanted to soak herself in hot water and let it wash away all of her fatigue.

She stepped into the inn’s bathing room. Since it was morning, there was nobody else around. Unusually, there was a full-length mirror in the bathing area, and Shizuku casually glanced into it, but she was startled by her reflection. The naked figure looking back at her in the mirror was so emaciated that she could barely recognize herself. It was hard to believe that four days without food had brought about such a marked change in her appearance.

“I—I look like I’ve been working myself to the edge of death or something. I’m such an idiot.”

Erik had insisted that she was suffering from exhaustion, but Shizuku honestly didn’t feel like she was *that* tired. She was disappointed that she hadn’t been able to say a proper good-bye to Lyshien, but considering how long she’d been asleep, she was also relieved that they hadn’t waited for her to wake up.

Shizuku took her time washing away her sweat and lethargy in the bath. It wasn't the kind of bathtub that you submerged your entire body into. Instead, there was a footbath and a large basin of hot water for you to rinse yourself with. As steam filled the room, Shizuku soaked her feet in the footbath and stared at her thin arms.

"I'm looking a little too thin..."

In her old world, she'd often wished that she could lose weight—but now she urgently needed to put some weight back on.

Shizuku went back into the changing room, where Mea was waiting, and the younger girl dried her hair for her. It had grown considerably since she'd been asleep.

The assistant demon had transformed back into a young girl, and she looked up at Shizuku with relief.

"I'm so glad you woke up."

"I'm sorry for making you worry," replied Shizuku. "Were you okay after what happened?"

"I was fine. That magic was just supposed to disorient us, so I was back to normal almost immediately."

Shizuku thought about the man with the gray hair. It sounded as though he was working for someone, but he'd left without putting up much of a fight. Shizuku wondered whether this would anger his master—but at the same time, she didn't have any reason to worry.

"I can't believe I was asleep for four days. It didn't feel like it at all."

Shizuku couldn't help but wonder if, once she'd made her way home, her time in this world might feel as if it had gone by in the blink of an eye, too. It was a bittersweet thought, which proved how accustomed to this new world she'd become.

Shizuku looked up at Mea, who was doing her hair.

"What will you do when I go back to my old world?"

"I would be honored to accompany you, if you gave me permission."

“I’d like that... Thanks.”

Shizuku hated the idea of losing the people she’d met, the memories she’d made, and the person she’d become.

In her old world, she’d hidden in her sisters’ shadows, unsure of who she truly was. Now, though, she felt like she’d grown into a person of her own. She doubted that would have happened if she’d stayed behind and had an ordinary summer vacation. If she managed to successfully return home at the end of this journey, what kind of person would she be by then?

Shizuku glared at her face in the mirror—it looked nothing like you’d expect of an eighteen-year-old. The girl she saw in the reflection with the slightly hollowed cheeks seemed to be saying, “You don’t know what the future holds until it arrives.”

She hadn’t felt it when she’d come out of the bath, but once she got to the restaurant where Erik was waiting, Shizuku finally realized how hungry she was. In fact, her stomach was so empty, it hurt. She took a seat at the table, which was already laden with a variety of dishes, and put her head down in an empty spot.

“Ughhh. I’m starving.”

“I’m not surprised,” replied Erik. “But start with something that’s easy to digest.”

“Y-yeah, you’re right.”

Just as Shizuku lifted her face, someone brought over a bowl of soup, almost as if they’d been waiting for her to move. Erik watched her intently as she sipped the broth, which was devoid of any solid ingredients.

“How do you feel? Should we get a doctor to check you over, just to make sure?”

“Oh, I’m fine. I think.”

“Really? It sounds like there are lots of people trying to see the doctors right now, but as long as we make an appointment, it won’t take up too much of our time.”

“What? Is there a cold going around or something?” Shizuku asked nonchalantly, holding a spoon in one hand.

Erik didn’t respond right away, which made her suspicious, and when she looked at him, Shizuku noticed he was frowning slightly. He made that face only when there was a problem.

“I’ve heard that an epidemic has broken out here, as well.”

“Huh? Is it an airborne infection or something?”

“Not quite. We’ll both be fine; it only affects children between the ages of one and two.”

“Whoa... That doesn’t sound good.”

Parents of young children must have been beside themselves with worry. Shizuku leaned forward at the table.

“What kind of illness is it?” she asked. “Is it life-threatening?”

“No—but it causes a language impediment.”

“A language impediment?”

“Yes. It’s actually spread quite far in the western part of the continent. Every nation is trying to put measures in place to curb it, but at present, neither the cause nor the cure has been discovered. Even Farsas has no idea what to do, and it’s become a major issue. Nobody seems to know whether it’s contagious or not. Its explosive spread began over three months ago, but so far, few children in the east seem to have shown symptoms.”

It was a genuinely alarming topic. Come to think of it, Shizuku could remember Shisea—who’d taken care of her in the first town she’d stayed in—talking about the spread of an incurable disease in the west of the region that only children could catch.

Even Shizuku, who hailed from a world with advanced medical science, was unsure what could have caused this language impediment outbreak. She didn’t know much about illnesses to start off with; her knowledge of medical science in particular was almost nonexistent. Moreover, there was a chance that the condition was unique to this world.

Still, the news of an incurable disease wasn't the only thing that was troubling Shizuku. Now that they had moved to a town near the border, Shizuku could ask Erik about the aftermath of the Candela Castle incident.

"Unsurprisingly, Farsas has placed Candela Castle under their emergency control. After all, the king was among those who died."

"Oh, that makes sense. The throne room was in a terrible state. There were no survivors."

Shizuku reflected on the exchange she'd had with the Negativity in the throne room. She hadn't told Erik about her conversation with that nonhuman entity, but looking back, the fact that it knew she was from another world was strangely terrifying.

The curse had been hell-bent on chasing her and her alone. Was that because she was from another world? If Shizuku had been by herself in the castle, that snake could have ripped her to shreds.

"I hope the rest of my team were safe," said Shizuku.

"I don't know about that, but it doesn't sound like anyone's been arrested for trespassing."

Tarkis and Lydia came to mind, but Shizuku couldn't even imagine where they were or what they were doing.

Erik placed an old bookmark inside his book.

"For the time being, Candela will have a substitute government, supervised by Farsas. King Oltovine of Rozsark is expected to handle the day-to-day running of the country."

"Oh, I recognize that name."

"Yes. He's the man who freed Lyshien from her confinement. He must have some link to Farsas. There might be a complicated story there—a story that could explain why Lyshien and Oscar are avoiding Farsas."

"All of that feels like it's worlds away from me."

"It's best not to get involved."

Erik's handsome face took on a solemn, gloomy look. His attitude toward royal families and members of the nobility seemed fairly cold. In fact, cold wasn't all there was to it—on occasion, his attitude was unmistakably hostile.

Shizuku attempted to analyze his behavior in a nonobtrusive manner, but Erik noticed her looking at him and forced a smile.

"I'm sure Lyshien will be okay. She's not alone."

"...That's true."

Shizuku doubted she'd ever see Lyshien again. She just hoped that the princess would be able to keep her freedom. The Lyshien that Shizuku had spent time with, at least, was a totally ordinary young girl, just like Shizuku's younger sister.



Shizuku stayed in the inn for two more weeks after waking up, which allowed her to get some rest.

In just three days, her skinny, emaciated limbs regained some flesh, and after a week, she started to look healthy again. She checked her reflection in the bathing room mirror once a day and did some simple muscle exercises to improve her physical condition. It was nothing like the workouts Tarkis did, but it was still something. Once her health was stable again, they would have to resume their journey.

Shizuku never knew what she'd find herself up against in this world, but she felt like her physical strength was key. She still studied in the morning and afternoon, but she had also started going for short jogs in the morning and doing ab workouts before bed to help her build up a basic level of fitness. It was the daily routine of an ideal student on their summer vacation.

"If my old world runs on the same timeline as this one, then summer vacation ended long ago, though."

"Why do you have an extended break in the summer?" asked Erik.

"Probably because the heat makes it hard to study—or because kids need to help out on their families' farms. In university, the faculty members also need time to conduct their own research, so that's another factor. They can't make

much progress when they're teaching and have all sorts of other tasks to worry about."

"I see."

Books and notebooks were spread across every inch of the spacious desk. Shizuku was checking through her handwritten dictionary, which listed words from this world alongside their Japanese equivalents, jotting down important vocabulary as she went. Meanwhile, Erik was cross-referencing the notes he'd made as he attempted to decipher a beginner's German textbook that belonged to Shizuku. As soon as he'd grasped the language's basic patterns, he dove straight into reading. That was just the kind of person Erik was.

Being unable to comprehend Shizuku's German-Japanese dictionary was a disadvantage, but going by the questions he'd pose to Shizuku from time to time, his understanding of German was already almost on par with Shizuku's. At this rate, he'd eclipse her English skills as well in around six months.

This thought filled Shizuku with an inexplicable agitation, causing her to grip her pencil even harder as she took down notes.

Oblivious of her distress, Erik stopped writing and looked up from his book.

"Japanese really is the hardest of them all."

"Yeah, I guess it is. People in my old world often say the same."

"There's so much flexibility in the word order. It seems like you can discern some things just by looking at the particles, though."

Erik was pointing at one Japanese sentence, *Ashita ni wa watashi wa toshokan he ikimasu*, meaning, "I'm going to the library tomorrow." He asked Shizuku why the particle *he* had been used in place of the particle *ni*, despite them both being grammatically correct and having the same fundamental meaning.

For a few seconds, Shizuku was stumped for an answer.

Explaining the subtle nuances of particle usage to someone who wasn't Japanese was challenging. Why say *ashita ni wa* with the particles instead of just *ashita* for "tomorrow"? Why use *toshokan he* instead of *toshokan ni* when

you wanted to talk about going “to the library”? While the meaning of the sentence would remain understandable, the choice of particles subtly altered the impression given by the sentence. It would take hours for Shizuku to efficiently convey these subtleties to Erik.

“You hate it when parts of speech change case, but particle usage in Japanese is just as difficult.”

“I—I guess you’re right.”

People always commented on how many different conjugations there were in Romance languages and how hard it was to remember them all, but these languages were relatively flexible when it came to word order.

Japanese was also malleable in terms of word order—but instead of relying heavily on verb and noun conjugations, the language employed particles to determine the structure of a sentence.

From an objective standpoint, English and German actually felt like the most learner-friendly languages. Not only were there set conjugations and a greater number of prepositions, but the word order followed a consistent pattern.

At any rate, Shizuku was glad she was Japanese. She stretched out her arms, having forcibly brought the discussion to a close.

“Ahh...I’m getting a headache,” she said.

“You should replenish your sugar levels and give your eyes a rest,” replied Erik.

Shizuku laughed. It sounded like the kind of advice you’d give someone who was studying for a big exam. She was surprised by just how much she enjoyed times like this, where she and Erik could just sit across the table from one another and casually study together.

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“Ready! Sorry for making you wait so long!”

“There’s no need to rush. Are you sure you haven’t forgotten anything?”

“I’m sure.”

Shizuku placed her bag on her horse’s saddle, put her foot in the stirrup, and

lifted herself up. When she'd first started riding, the saddle had felt extremely high up, but now she was totally used to it. She used a rope to tie her bag in place and stop it from falling.

Erik, similarly mounted beside her, checked to make sure that Shizuku was okay before lightly nudging his horse's flank with his foot.

The pair were about to set off for the northwestern border of Farsas. If all went well, they'd reach a town inside Farsas's borders in two days' time. The magic kingdom was finally within reach. Shizuku was excited—but not just because she might be able to go home. There was something else she was looking forward to.

"I've still yet to see anyone flying. Do people use broomsticks in your world?"

"Broomsticks?" asked Erik. "You mean to sweep?"

"No, to put between their legs and fly..."

"What for? That sounds like it would be a difficult way to move around."

The straightforward, calm way in which Erik replied made Shizuku realize how surreal the scenes she was imagining truly were. Aware of how bizarre her preconceptions were, Shizuku decided not to mention broomsticks ever again. Instead, she simply asked Erik how people flew.

"They use a levitation spell to support their body in the air. If you're skilled enough, that's all it takes."

"Oh, so they basically use superpowers to fly."

"Superpowers?"

"That's what people call magical powers in my world. Most stories involving superpowers are fictional, though. Nobody knows whether they really exist."

"So where do the broomsticks come into it?"

"Can we stop talking about broomsticks, please?"

Shizuku had no choice but to forcibly shut the topic down. If not, Erik would have kept questioning her about it. By placing emphasis on the "please" at the end of her sentence, she had effectively brought the discussion to a temporary

halt.

The two horses trotted down the main road at a gentle pace. The greenery surrounding them made for a beautiful view, and every now and then, a pleasant breeze would waft toward them. On either side of the highway lay rolling hills, covered with lush grass that swayed gently in the wind. Shizuku had never seen sprawling scenery like that before, and she thought about her sisters, wishing that she could show them the breathtaking landscape.

It had been about three months since Shizuku had found herself in this world. She wondered how her family back home would be feeling; her older sister might have cried, and her younger sister had likely been searching for information while bravely supporting the rest of the family. It was easy to imagine what kind of scenes might have played out.

She wished she could let them know that she was okay, if nothing else. The world she'd ended up in was full of unknowns, but she'd been blessed with good people who had helped her out, and she was staying healthy.

She squinted at the long, trailing road ahead, and a breath not quite deep enough to be a sigh escaped her lips.

"What's wrong?" asked Erik.

"Nothing, really... I was just thinking about my family. Do you have any siblings?" Shizuku asked.

"I have a young sister. I haven't seen her in a long time, though."

This was the first time Erik had told her about his family. Even though Shizuku had been the one to ask the question, she was so surprised that she almost dropped the reins of her horse.

"Um, can I ask what your family are like?"

"Sure. They're pretty normal. I have a mom, a dad, and a younger sister. I haven't seen them for about ten years, though."

"Ten years."

Shizuku found herself wondering whether this was normal, but it wasn't as if she could ask him that. Ten years ago, Erik would have only been twelve.

Picking up on her confusion, Erik gave her a bittersweet smile and filled in the blanks.

“I left home at twelve to study as a mage. I was born in a small village, you see. Since then, I’ve moved from place to place attending lectures and conducting research, so I haven’t gone back to my village at all.”

“You mean Wanope isn’t your hometown?!”

“No. I only moved there three years ago.”

“Whoa... I assumed you’d spent your whole life there.”

Shizuku and Erik had spent a fair bit of time together by now, but Shizuku still didn’t know the first thing about his life. She felt like she’d revealed a lot about herself, but perhaps that was because she’d felt so lost in this new world. She’d told him about herself and her family, and she’d even talked about school, written languages, and fairy tales. She would find herself sharing these things with him at random moments, and just having him listen made her feel less trapped. Being the kind of person he was, he always approached things from the perfect distance—he never pried, but he was never dismissive, either.

“Thank you for everything you do for me,” she said.

“Where did that come from all of a sudden?”

Erik glanced over at Shizuku, his deep-blue eyes wide with surprise. The look on his face was strangely amusing, and Shizuku couldn’t help but laugh.

“I make a point of thanking people whenever I feel like it.”

“You know, sometimes I get the feeling that your thoughts are like stepping stones, all scattered around the place.”

“But they’re still kicking beneath the water.”

“Wait, the stones are swimming?”

This image was even more surreal than that of people flying on broomsticks, and Shizuku burst out laughing, unable to hold it in.

Stunned by his companion’s reaction, Erik gave Shizuku a dumbfounded look—but he swiftly concluded that Shizuku’s response was beyond the realm of his

understanding, and he redirected his gaze toward the road.

Before long, a large stone arch appeared in the distance ahead of them, standing alone amid the expanse of greenery.

“That’s where they carry out the immigration checks,” Erik explained, pointing at the gate. “All we need to do is show them our pass, though.”

“Don’t people ever just go around the gate?”

“If they tried that, they’d get caught in the magic wards. Large countries tend to have detection wards in place, so if you don’t go through the inspection gate, you’ll trigger the sensors and be placed under surveillance. Once you reach the nearest town, you’ll be instructed to complete the necessary procedures there.”

“Whoa... So there’s an invisible wall.”

“Setting wards is easier than constructing a fence along the entire country’s border and installing gates everywhere. Do you have walls everywhere in your world?”

“I’m from an island nation, so the sea acts as our border... But some countries have walls; some don’t. It varies.”

The first border-separating wall that came to mind was the Berlin Wall, but that had already been destroyed by the time Shizuku was old enough to understand the world around her. It had been built in Germany, which was split into East and West Germany following World War II. Shizuku had initially assumed that this wall acted as the divider between East and West Germany, but in one of her high school classes, she’d found out that this was a misconception. In reality, this wall had served to split Berlin—which was situated inside East Germany—into western and eastern sections, and the wall that surrounded West Berlin was called the Berlin Wall.

Apparently, many people had attempted to evade the eyes of the guards and sneak over the Berlin Wall—but a magic wall would have made this impossible.

Once the pair had gotten down from their horses, they gave their entry pass to a soldier in front of the gate. The soldier glanced down at the document, then asked Erik a question.

“You’re mages, huh? Are you coming here to study?”

“Yes. There are some documents we want to take a look at in the castle city.”

“If it’s the castle city you’re aiming for, then you should head southeast to the town of Laobbe. You should be able to get permission to use the transit rings, seeing as you’re mages. Plus, the festival’s going to be starting soon.”

“Thank you.”

That was their entire conversation. To Shizuku, it felt like a bit of an anticlimax, but she made sure not to let it show on her face as she climbed back onto her horse and passed through the stone gate.

At last, Shizuku had taken her first step into the magic kingdom of Farsas.



“Right, and then the heavy mortar fell on the monkey’s head...”

“Ah. So mortars can move by themselves,” remarked Erik.

“No, they can’t—and they don’t speak, either. It’s a folktale, so take it with a grain of salt. I think I picked the wrong story to tell you!”

Still astride her horse, Shizuku found herself clutching her head in her hands. It was their second day in Farsas, and they’d decided to swap folktales to help pass the time as they traveled down the main road.

Shizuku had foolishly chosen to tell Erik the Japanese folktale *The Crab and the Monkey*. This story, which was about getting revenge for a parent’s death, revolved around a monkey, a crab, and several other living creatures and inanimate objects. It bore resemblance to many other folktales of its kind, but Erik was the wrong person to tell it to.

First, he’d asked, “Why are the crab and the monkey talking to each other?” followed by, “Do persimmon trees really bear fruit that quickly?” and the endless stream of questions had worn Shizuku out.

“Don’t you have fables in this world? Ones where animals talk, for example...”

“None that are well known. The only animals that can talk in fables and fairy tales are the ones that can talk in real life. Most of our fairy tales are based on true stories.”

“Urgh. I expect nothing less from a world with magic.”

Shizuku hung her head, overwhelmed by the culture shock, and Mea, perched on her shoulder, let out a little chirp. Shizuku’s assistant demon had witnessed firsthand the true story that a folktale was based on.

Just as Shizuku was going to give up, a possibility came to mind. “Don’t you have any myths about gods?”

“We do. Just old ones that have been passed down by word of mouth, though.”

“That’s exactly what I meant! Tell me one!”

Shizuku suspected that the absurd, preposterous nature of these myths might help bring Erik onto the same wavelength as her. The beings that people referred to as gods in Erik’s world tended to be especially high-ranking demons, but there had to be exceptions to that rule.

Shizuku’s eyes were sparkling with excitement, but Erik just grumbled as he racked his brain for something to share.

“There are loads of slightly different versions of the same story. Which one do you want to hear?”

“That sounds promising. That’s what myths are like! Tell me the most famous version!”

“All right, then. This story is about a god called Aetea. Until fairly recently, Aetea was the most revered god on the continent.”

“Until fairly recently? Have things changed?”

“It’s difficult to say. I think the majority of people are atheists nowadays. It’s not that people have any contempt for religion, but not many people actually believe anymore. Everyone’s different, though.”

With that introduction, Erik began telling Shizuku one of the continent’s oldest myths.

It was a myth about the creation of the continent.

Long ago, there was just one continent in this world. It stretched all the way

to the edges of the sea, and though there were some quarrels, the many people who made it their home largely lived in peace.

In those days, there were no “countries,” as such. People worshipped five brothers—all of them gods—and enjoyed peaceful lives under their rule. One day, however, the brothers looked at the growing population and had a disagreement.

The eldest brother wanted absolute control over the people and even suggested that the gods regulate their births and deaths.

The second eldest brother proposed that they pick kings from among the humans to rule over the continent on their behalf and let the people war between themselves.

The third eldest brother believed that they should not interfere any more than they already had. If there were too many people on the land, then the entire species needed to be annihilated.

The fourth brother viewed humans as beings that should be protected, and he said that they should be left to proliferate as much as possible.

The youngest brother, Aetea, insisted that since humans were intelligent creatures, they should be allowed to make their own decisions.

All five brothers insisted that they knew best and refused to give in. In the end, relations between them broke down, leading to the four older brothers breaking off pieces of the continent for themselves and fleeing across the sea.

Aetea, who was left alone on one of the five pieces of the continent, fell into despair, but eventually he went on to marry a human woman. When their children grew up, they, too, became gods and spread all over the continent, providing humans with nature that could enable them to survive on their own.

“Ohh. That’s why people claim there are other continents, despite not having any contact with them.”

“Basically, yes. It seems like they do actually exist, though. There are even records of humans from distant continents being rescued after their fishing boats got stranded.”

Since Erik was the one doing the choosing, Shizuku had been worried that he'd tell her an extremely realistic-sounding myth, but this one was far more fantastical than she'd expected. She felt relieved but at the same time wanted to know more details.

"Does the same story exist on the continent to the east?"

"Apparently so. People say that the eastern continent was created by the second god—the one who recommended the people go to war against each other. I'm not saying that's the reason why, but they saw even more battles during the Dark Age than we did, and strangely enough, you don't get any spirit sorcerers over there."

"Spirit sorcerers are a type of mage, right?"

"Yes. It's a talent you have to be born with, and very few of them exist. It's their aptitude for manipulating the forces of nature that sets them apart."

Erik and Shizuku were on the continent where the youngest god, who respected human dignity, had ended up staying. Shizuku remembered Erik saying that the gods he had fathered spread throughout the continent, so was it thanks to their blessings that spirit sorcerers were born here and not on the continent to the east?

"The actual myth differs depending on the region. Sometimes, the gods' proposals are different, and in some variants, the part about Aetea choosing a wife varies. From around a hundred years before the Dark Age began...meaning about a thousand years ago, most stories started to be documented in writing, but there are no written records whatsoever of the tales that predate that."

"I see. But that's what myths are like. A lot of them have only ever been passed down by word of mouth."

From what Shizuku could remember, the majority of Japanese myths were recorded in famous books like the *Kojiki*, the *Nihon Shoki*, and the *Fudoki*. However, it was theorized that the *Kojiki* had been compiled from oral traditions. That wasn't the only example, either; many ancient myths had been passed down through the spoken word. It wouldn't be surprising if there was a period of time where myths were not recorded on paper at all, if you went back far enough.

Erik responded to Shizuku's comment with a simple "Yeah" and a dour look. Shizuku found this reaction a little odd, but he didn't look like he was going to offer anything more.

Instead, Shizuku voiced a question of her own.

"Do you think Aetea really existed, Erik?"

"No. High-ranking demons don't have blood relations, so he couldn't have had brothers, and he was far too powerful to have been a human mage. At the end of the day, most of the story was probably made up. That said, there might have been some sort of incident that caused that myth to surface..."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. They have myths about the creation of my country back home, too, but it's not like there's any truth to them."

Shizuku glanced at her shoulder and saw Mea sitting there, grooming her wings with her beak. Back when she was in her old world, Shizuku had assumed that magical birds existed only within the realm of fairy tales—but now a bird like that had become her treasured friend.

When Mea noticed Shizuku looking at her, Shizuku broke out into a smile.

"You know what? You never know what things are like until you experience them firsthand. You just have to dive in headfirst."

"I think that maintaining a slightly lower profile might be a wiser decision," Erik said rationally, making Shizuku go quiet.

Just then, they heard a rattling sound behind them, and Erik and Shizuku turned around in their saddles to see a stagecoach coming down the highway toward them. The pair moved toward the side of the road and waited for the stagecoach to pass by.

"That stagecoach looks like it belongs to someone pretty important," Erik muttered, looking over his shoulder. "Not a member of the nobility, but still."

"I guess it's hard for us to predict how much respect they have for human rights, then."

Shizuku watched with considerable curiosity as the horse-drawn carriage approached. Made of wood, it looked like a small room built on wheels, and it

definitely seemed the type of vehicle to belong to someone influential. One man rode in the coachman's seat, and the curtains in the carriage window were drawn—but as it passed by, a shiver ran through Shizuku.

"What's the matter?" asked Erik.

"Oh, nothing. I just felt like I made eye contact with the person inside. It was probably just my imagination."

She hadn't noticed who the person was—just felt *seen* through the gap in the curtain.

As Shizuku watched the stagecoach disappear off into the distance, she shook off the weird feeling she was having, and the pair resumed their southward journey down the road.

It was just before they reached the town of Laobbe that Shizuku discovered her strange feeling earlier hadn't just been all in her imagination.

"I assume you two are travelers?" a tall man with a swarthy complexion asked.

He looked to be in his late twenties and was well dressed with a long sword hanging from his waist. Shizuku thought he might've been the bodyguard to someone important or the like—an impression she got from the fact that he was standing in front of a parked horse-drawn carriage in the middle of the street.

She wondered where the stagecoach that had overtaken them earlier had parked, and she glanced toward the town that awaited farther down the road.

"You out of gas?" Shizuku quipped, but the man ignored her attempt at a joke.

Erik, on the other hand, answered the man's question properly.

"You're right, we are. What seems to be the problem?"

The man with the sword on his hip gave Erik a straightforward reply.

"The festival in Laobbe is about to begin. Since dignitaries will be gathering there, unknown individuals are forbidden from entering the town."

“Weh?!”

If they couldn't get into the town, then they'd have to stay by the roadside or camp out. The man ignored Shizuku's strange squeal and continued.

“I assume this might pose an issue for you, which is why I would like you to stay at my master's residence until the day of the festival.”

“Are you saying that you want to place us under surveillance?”

“That's one way of looking at it, yes. However, we'll make sure you're looked after during your stay. I don't think it's a bad offer.”

This suggestion made Erik frown. Shizuku looked at the man from the side as she mulled over his sudden proposal.

He essentially wanted to put them under a nice-sounding version of house arrest. It was like they'd stepped into a high-security area while a summit was being held.

Shizuku gently whispered something to her traveling companion.

“I don't mind not going to the town, Erik.”

Their plan had been to travel to the castle in Farsas using the transit ring in Laobbe; however, Shizuku didn't care if they took a detour and went to another town. She didn't want to restrict Erik's options—but he remained stony-faced.

“He's making it sound like a suggestion, but I don't think we have the right to turn it down,” Erik explained.

“Huh?!”

In contrast to Shizuku's alarmed reaction, the man standing in their way just laughed.

“I'm glad you caught on so quickly. I can't give outsiders a pass, so if you choose not to comply, your available freedoms will be further restricted.”

They hadn't even done anything, yet he was treating them like would-be criminals. As Shizuku stared at the man in open-mouthed surprise, Erik, standing beside her, calmly asked a question.

“How many days would it take for us to be freed?”

“The festival is in six days’ time. Once it’s over, we’ll let you go. And if you want permission to use a transit ring, I’m sure we can figure something out.”

It was a length of time that wasn’t particularly long, nor particularly short, and Erik turned to Shizuku with a bitter expression on his face.

“I’m thinking of accepting his offer. Are you okay with that?” he asked.

“Sure. I don’t think we have any other option...”

Though she had become somewhat used to horseback riding, Shizuku still struggled to get her horse to gallop at full speed. If they’d be allowed to use the transit ring once the six days were over, then it was best for them to go along quietly.

Once the pair had agreed to his proposal, the man signaled toward the horse-drawn carriage behind him.

“Then I’ll ask you to move to the carriage right away. I’ll get some servants to fetch your horses later.”

“T-that’s so strict...”

Shizuku had ridden in a hooded stagecoach before, but this was the first time she’d seen the sort of carriage that people of status used. The pair got down from their saddles and passed the reins to the man. Hesitant to board the vehicle, Shizuku peered into the coachman’s seat, but all she saw was a large black cloth parcel lying on the floor. The man called out to her from behind.

“Not that way. My master’s inside the carriage itself.”

“Oh, okay...,” said Shizuku, startled.

At the same time, Erik opened the carriage door to find a well-dressed man sitting alone inside.

“Nice to meet you, dear guests. My name is Daytas, and I work as a merchant in the town of Laobbe. I acknowledge that you may feel constricted for a little while, but I appreciate your patience nonetheless.”

The man flashed Erik a friendly smile.



The carriage took them to Daytas’s residence. Since the curtains were closed,

they couldn't see what was going on in the town, and they didn't see a single person as they were led to an external building on the estate.

Once the pair had been left alone inside one of the rooms, Shizuku muttered something to Erik in hushed tones.

"I'm not so sure how much these people respect our basic rights..."

"They do seem pretty strict," replied Erik. "This festival in the town of Laobbe must be quite unique."

Shizuku looked down at her bag, which was sitting by her feet. The olive-skinned man had made sure to take it off her horse and bring it in for her. He said that his name was Nay and that he worked as a bodyguard for Daytas. It was hard to work out what his intentions were, and she was honestly quite wary of him.

Meanwhile, Daytas—who'd been the one to invite them in and had earned a reputation for himself at a young age as a merchant—seemed like a friendly and shrewd individual. He'd smiled and apologized for putting the pair in such a difficult situation, and he said that he'd pay for their meals and anything else they might need during their six-day stay.

Erik looked around the spacious room that they'd been taken to for the time being. There were no windows, and the walls were filled with bookshelves.

"This is certainly an impressive collection," commented Erik. "They don't look to be sorted at all, though."

"They're not? Either way, it makes for a mesmerizing sight."

"Different genres and eras are all mixed in together. It's as if they've just been crammed in at random. Still, there are some fairly valuable books on these shelves. It's fascinating."

Shizuku just had to take his word for it. She couldn't identify any of the volumes by their spines. As she stood next to Erik, gazing absentmindedly at the shelves, she happened to notice some white powder on the hem of her skirt.

"Hm? How did that get on there? Whatever it is, it smells nice."

"What's the matter?"

The powder came off as soon as she wiped it with her hand, and it had a sweet, floral aroma. Just as Shizuku was about to respond to Erik's question, Nay came back to take them elsewhere.

"Bring your bags with you and follow me. You'll be having dinner later. Daytas wants to hear what you have to say."

"I don't think we have anything to talk about..."

When Shizuku and Erik were inside the carriage, they'd told him that the purpose of their journey was to visit the castle city of Farsas for "academic reasons." Of course, this was a lie, and there were a lot of things that they *hadn't* said, but they had no intention of revealing anything more.

Even so, Nay seemed unconcerned as he showed them to their respective rooms in the same building. Once they'd left their bags behind, they were shown to the dining hall.

The food that was served consisted of the most luxurious dishes that Shizuku had seen since arriving in this world. The plates were adorned with an exquisite array of meats, fish, and vibrantly colored vegetables, and Shizuku couldn't help but let out a cry of wonder.

"This is incredible! It's like the Last Supper!"

"A little ominous, don't you think?"

Soon after the pair sat down, Daytas turned up. The slim man looked to be in his mid-twenties and was dressed entirely in gray—apart from his white gloves, which made him look very proper.

"Sorry for making you wait. I know such an apology doesn't make up for all the trouble I'm putting you through, but please allow me to extend a warm welcome to you both."

"Thank you so much!"

They did feel constricted in a sense, but they still had delicious food to eat and a mountain of books to enjoy. What more could they ask for?

As Shizuku savored her first taste of red-fleshed fish since arriving in her new world, she listened intently to what the man had to say.

“In truth, I don’t really view the Laobbe festival as sacred. The festival itself centers around a reenactment of the god Aetea’s wedding, but I’ve only been in this town for a few years myself.”

“Aetea’s wedding? To the goddess Ludia?”

“Yes. I have been graciously invited to play the character of Aetea. Five girls are playing the role of the brides. The women seem to enjoy themselves, but I can’t say I’m very enthusiastic about a spectacle like this.”

“Five people are playing the role of the bride?” said Shizuku, her curiosity piqued.

As soon as she noticed her error, Shizuku went quiet. She suspected that not being familiar with the story of the most famous god on the continent would arouse suspicions.

Neither Nay, who was waiting their table, nor Daytas seemed bothered by her ignorance, though, while Erik tried to help Shizuku out by saying, “That story might not be very well known where she comes from.”

The story in question was the continuation of the myth that Shizuku had heard not so long ago.

After his brothers went on their way, Aetea, alone and in a state of despair, embarked on a journey around what was left of the continent. He hid his divine status, intending to observe the humans from the perspective of an ordinary person.

He sealed away his power as he traveled around, but various issues plagued him wherever he went. Some of these difficulties were chronicled in the form of myths, but some of them succumbed to the obscurity of history.

As his journey was coming to an end, Aetea came to a forest near the town of Laobbe. At the time, the area was covered in thick woods, and Aetea wore himself out attempting to push his way through it. In spite of this struggle, he refused to use his divine powers. As he ventured farther into the forest, he relied solely on droplets of water from the leaves to quench his parched throat.

Eventually, he reached a settlement deep within the forest. The villagers, whose lives were cut off from the outside world, were surprised to receive an

unexpected visitor, and when Aetea begged for a place to stay for the night, they kept him at arm's length. But just as Aetea was reluctantly leaving the village, five young women appeared before him, brimming with curiosity.

Aetea asked them for some water, and a few of the girls appeared bewildered, while the others just smiled. When he asked them for their names, they didn't even try to answer him. Instead, they began to run around Aetea, as if they were trying to encircle him, until finally he left the girls behind and escaped back into the forest.

Then one young girl appeared in his path, almost as if she'd gotten lost looking for the others. She was the youngest and most innocent of them all, and without saying a word, she handed Aetea a jug of water. He thanked her, and she looked down, seemingly embarrassed. When he asked her what her name was, she told him: "Ludia."

This was the woman who would become Aetea's wife.

"Oh. Does this story get reenacted at the festival because it's a local myth?" asked Shizuku.

"It seems that way—but it sounds like they need one more woman to complete the reenactment. After all, there are six women in the story, including Ludia. Or maybe they're all going to play Ludia?"

"This sounds like a fun school festival..."

Shizuku had heard about school plays where several people played the role of Snow White, for example, out of fairness. It seemed like things weren't much different in this other world.

Daytas smiled wryly as he cut into something that looked like an omelet.

"No. We *do* need six people: five to play the women who ignored Aetea's questions and one to play the role of Ludia. However, things didn't work out with the girl who was meant to portray Ludia, and she is unable to return to town. My future prospects are at stake here, but to be honest, I have no idea how to proceed."

"She isn't able to return?" Shizuku asked. "I assume she's not a local, then."

The man gently shrugged in reply. “Her name’s Amabelle Lyshkariza, the daughter of a noble family from the south. We were going to use the festival as an opportunity to get married. It’s a strategic marriage, so to speak—a marriage between two towns.”

“Huh? But if she can’t come to town anymore, then...”

“She’s been complaining, saying that she doesn’t want to have a last-minute ceremony at the festival of a town she doesn’t even know. After all, she hasn’t even met me. Not only that, but she didn’t seem to like the idea of suddenly becoming the center of the town’s attention. I was going to be nominated as a town councilor under the condition that I marry her, and I’ve even made a pact with the most influential figure in town, Lord Deseuah, but if there’s no bride at the festival, everything is going to fall apart.”

“That sounds like a really tricky situation...”

Putting the pros and cons of strategic marriages aside, this festival was an opportunity for Daytas to receive an important promotion—and there was a risk that it was all going to come to nothing.

Shizuku gave him a look of sympathy, which Daytas returned with a bittersweet smile.

“At the end of the day, I’m an outsider. I’ve worked my fingers to the bone ever since coming to Laobbe, and this is what I have to show for it. The noble families in *this* town look down on me, and I’m used to that—but I never expected nobles from a whole other town to whine about me, too. My only saving grace is that the townspeople here are yet to find out about Amabelle’s tantrums...but when they see that there’s no Ludia at the festival, I won’t be able to cover it up any longer.”

Daytas had a sadness in his eyes—it was the look of somebody who’d hit a wall, despite their best efforts. The class system that existed on the continent was likely a burden for those not in the higher ranks.

“Is it too late to convince her?” asked Shizuku hopefully.

“She’s refusing to come to Laobbe until the festival is over. I can’t use a standin, either; everyone already knows she has black hair and black eyes. You

don't find anyone who fits that description very often."

"Oh..."

Shizuku remembered asking Erik about this shortly after their journey began. She hadn't taken much notice of people's hair and eye colors, so she didn't realize that dark hair and eyes were particularly rare. Shizuku had been struck by the fact that Lyshien's hair and eyes were a darker shade of black than hers, but it wasn't something she would've noticed if the color hadn't been so intense.

As Shizuku was mulling over the topic, she noticed eyes directed toward her, and she looked up to see Daytas, Nay, and Erik all staring right at her.

It took her a moment to realize why that was.

"Huh? Are you suggesting that I be the standin?"

The black-haired, black-eyed girl from another world pointed to herself, stunned.



It was a sumptuous meal, but after a certain point, Shizuku had stopped being able to taste it.

She had repeatedly turned down Daytas's request for her to stand in as the role of his bride—but he was so unyielding that in the end she told him she'd think about it and returned to her room.

"People will definitely realize...I'll be standing in for a noble's daughter. I almost feel bad for her."

"I'm not so sure about that. Daytas and Nay are the only people who've seen your face since you arrived. It would be different if you had to socialize with people, but this is a structured event. I doubt anyone would pick up on your lack of refinement."

"You're not getting on board with this, too, are you?!" snapped Shizuku. "Seriously, I couldn't deal with the pressure..."

"I'm just talking about what would happen if you *were* to agree to it. I know you were sympathetic toward his current situation."

Erik was gazing at the bookshelves, looking as unruffled as ever. The pair had been given their own rooms, both with bookshelves.

Arms crossed, Shizuku looked up at the ceiling.

“Well, yes. This is a big deal... It’s like there’s this major project with a bunch of companies involved, but the boss’s daughter has messed things up by being selfish.”

Shizuku had heard that Laobbe was a relatively new town compared to many of those in Farsas, which boasted a long history. Noble families from the castle city had moved here and channeled their own money into the town’s development, which, combined with the fact that it was a considerable distance from the castle city, resulted in Laobbe having a high level of autonomy.

“I heard that the nobility and the council share the responsibility of governing the town, but is that the case all over Farsas?”

“No. I actually think it’s quite rare. It seems that the councilors are decided through elections, but unless they have the backing of a noble family to begin with, it’s very hard to get elected. On paper, it’s a joint government, but the reality is that councilors’ powers only stretch as far as their noble counterparts allow.”

“Hmm. It sounds like running for the council and serving on it are both pretty suffocating tasks...”

Lord Deseuah, the most influential member of the nobility in Loebbe, had offered Daytas a place on the council under the one condition that he married the daughter of a noble family from the south. The family that Amabelle had been born into, the Lyshkariza family, had amassed their wealth following generations of success in merchant ship trading, and forging a connection with them was expected to benefit the town of Laobbe as a whole. Following the wedding, there was a plan to install a direct transit ring between Laobbe and the port town of Nisre, where Amabelle came from. If this plan became a reality, it was expected to transform commerce in the town completely.

Amabelle Lyshkariza’s bold refusal to partake in the festivities stemmed not only from her concerns regarding Daytas’s promotion, but also from her reservations about the development of Laobbe.

“If people find out that I’m a substitute, it’ll create an even bigger issue... I think he should be up front with Deseuah about the situation and come up with another solution.”

“You can’t negotiate like that with members of the nobility—I believe that’s part of the problem. They can be unpredictable, and at times, their actions can seem illogical, yet they still possess unwavering influence.”

“It’s not like we’re dealing with a Greek god here.”

“If I may share my personal opinion, then I’m against the whole substitute plan. It’s too big a responsibility for you.”

“It’s not that the responsibility bothers me...”

They were enduring a form of enforced confinement, but Shizuku still felt like she owed Daytas something for the shelter and food he’d provided. She didn’t mind enduring hardships on her own terms, but still...

“...I think I’ll have to turn him down. At this rate, I feel like I’m going to spin myself a web of lies and get stuck in it.”

“Yeah, I think that’s a good decision. Tomorrow, you can tell him your mind’s made up.”

Erik said good night and went back to his own room.

Shizuku sat on her bed and called out to the small green bird sitting by her pillow.

“You’ll be stuck in here for a while, Mea. I’m really sorry about that.”

Shizuku suspected that people might view the fact that she had an assistant demon as suspicious, so she’d been keeping it a secret from Daytas and Nay. To them, Mea was just a bird.

The bird chirped and spread her wings, and Shizuku lifted up the hem of her skirt.

“Wait, what?”

She took a closer look and realized that some sort of small gold sticker was stuck to it near where the white powder had been.

“What could that be?”

Up until then, the pleats of her skirt had kept it hidden, and she gently peeled off what turned out to be a piece of gold leaf about a centimeter long. It had a nice egg-like shape, but the upper half was slightly misshapen and had a dark smudge—likely because it had been stuck to her skirt. There was a delicate pattern drawn on it in silver, suggesting that it had originally been part of a decoration of some kind.

Shizuku was bewildered, unsure how it had gotten stuck on her skirt.

“Is this pure gold...?”

Could she have accidentally snagged herself on a piece of gold furniture? After very carefully wrapping it in a scrap of paper, Shizuku left her room to ask Erik for advice.

When she knocked on his door, however, nobody answered. She figured he’d gone somewhere to take a look around, but as she reluctantly made her way back down the dimly lit corridor, Shizuku happened to notice something gleaming outside the window.

“...Oh, it’s Daytas.”

There, she spotted the master of the estate standing behind a shrub in the dark courtyard. Dressed in the same clothes he’d had on at dinner, Daytas held a lantern and was looking down at the ground. He looked despondent, which pained Shizuku to see.

Even so, she couldn’t agree to becoming his standin bride. Once he told one lie, he’d need to tell even more in order to cover it up. Whereas Shizuku could just pack up and leave town, Daytas would have to stay there as a councilor.

“Mea, can you stay in here for a moment?”

Shizuku pushed aside her melancholy temporarily and tucked the small bird safely into her breast pocket. Then she trotted down the corridor and headed outside. When she made it to the courtyard, Daytas was still there.

“Daytas!”

She called out to him from behind, making him jump with surprise. Daytas

looked over his shoulder and smiled weakly.

“What’s wrong? Have you forgotten something?”

“No,” replied Shizuku. “It’s about what we discussed earlier... I really don’t think I can do it. My hair has quite a brown tinge to it, and I have totally different facial features... Plus, I was born and raised as a commoner, so I don’t even know how upper-class people act.”

In a certain sense, Shizuku’s Japanese facial features stood out even more than her hair and eye color. Not only that, but she couldn’t possibly behave as the daughter of a noble family would.

Daytas, however, tilted his head to one side, looking confused. “Do you think so? I thought your hair color was rather similar to Amabelle’s, and your behavior is not worth fretting about. I didn’t notice anything unbecoming while we were eating dinner together.”

“Even so...those aren’t the only reasons. I’ve given it some proper thought, and I’ve decided to decline your request.”

“Oh. But why?”

Daytas narrowed his eyes at Shizuku. She looked up at him, then hesitantly started to speak.

“First, I can’t bring myself to take on such a responsibility. And second, I think I should avoid doing things that could be used against you when you do become a councilor.”

From Shizuku’s standpoint, it seemed like Daytas’s lies would come back to bite him when they were exposed. It might not have been the easy road, but she believed it would be in his best interests for him to maintain his integrity.

Shizuku bowed her head in apology. “I’m sorry for being so brazen with my opinions, even though I’m just an outsider. I wish I could have been of more help, since you’re letting us stay here.”

With that, Shizuku remembered the gold leaf that had been stuck to her skirt, and she took out the paper she’d wrapped it in.

“Also, do you have any idea where this might be from?”

She opened it up and showed him the gold leaf.

Daytas didn't answer. Finding this strange, Shizuku looked up at him. His face was cast in silhouette, making it hard for her to discern his expression. She couldn't even tell what he was looking at.

"Um, Daytas...?"

"...I see. I didn't realize something like that would be left behind."

"Huh?"

Daytas suddenly reached out and grabbed Shizuku by the shoulders. His grip was so tight that it made Shizuku scream, and Mea, nestled against her chest, began to stir slightly.

"Why do you think I came to this town? What do you think I've been working toward all this time? I can't afford to let some young girls ruin it all for me!"

"...Mea!" Shizuku cried out, feeling Daytas's fingers dig into her shoulders with bone-jarring strength.

An invisible power repelled the man's arms, and the recoil sent Shizuku tumbling backward. Dirt and grass were scattered around, creating a faint, unpleasant odor. The one thing that left Shizuku truly bewildered, however, was the change she'd witnessed in the man in front of her. She simply couldn't make sense of what had happened.

Daytas scowled as he looked at his arms, which had been forcibly pushed away. His right sleeve was torn, revealing a bleeding gash underneath—Mea must have unleashed too much power. The man clicked his tongue in vexation.

"She has something with her. Nay!"

"Seems like an assistant demon. I'll make her behave."

Nay emerged from the darkness and reached out toward Shizuku. He pointed at Shizuku's chest with his tanned fingers, and the next moment, the small bird let out a cry of distress. Nay hadn't even used an incantation.

"Stop it!"

What had caused the sudden shift in Daytas's demeanor? Shizuku wasn't

certain, but after all the conflicts she'd witnessed throughout her journey, she could tell that they were serious. She desperately racked her brain, then began to speak, searching for a way out.

"Please, stop this violence... I'm sorry you got hurt. I was the one who gave her the command."

"If you know you're in the wrong, then listen to our proposal."

"Sure, if you want..."

As Shizuku spoke, however, she noticed something about Daytas that made her eyes widen. Mea's magic hadn't just created a small tear in his sleeve—the rip extended right up to the back of his white-gloved hand. Underneath, Shizuku could see several cuts in his skin. Although they didn't look fresh, they were definitely recent. In fact, they looked like...

"Scratch marks?"

They weren't the kind of scratches he could have given himself. Come to think of it, Daytas hadn't taken his gloves off even when he was eating.

"...Who did that to you?"

"Who knows? I suppose it must have been a cat," Daytas replied.

"Or—"

All of a sudden, something clicked in the back of Shizuku's mind, and realizing what it was, she clasped her hands over her mouth.

Noticing that Shizuku had gone pale and silent, Daytas smiled.

"What is it? Spit it out," he said.

He spoke in a self-deprecating tone of voice, suggesting that he likely already knew what realization she'd come to. That was *why* he was asking.

Shizuku hesitated...then finally asked. "Where have you got Amabelle locked away?"

"What are you talking about? She's refusing to come to this town—I'm sure I already told you that."

"That was a lie, wasn't it? You said my hair color was similar to hers, but at

dinner, you claimed you'd never even met her... You contradicted yourself. She came to this town just as planned, didn't she?"

This was mere speculation—and Shizuku hoped she was wrong—but the scratches on Daytas's arms looked like they'd been made by human nails.

He gave Shizuku a smile, but it was full of rage.

"You act like you've seen it all with your own eyes," he snapped. "But do you know what she did? That woman called me a stray mutt. She said I should get on my hands and knees to thank her for marrying me. She's beyond help. The nobility sees everyone other than themselves as *cattle*!"

Shizuku gulped, intimidated by the outburst. Every single word that came out of Daytas's mouth was brimming with fury.

His emotions scattered like sparks through the dark garden, as if he thought his anger would prove that he was telling the truth.

"It's not as though I told her to obey me. I just told her that we needed to avoid interfering in each other's business. But that woman tried to control me like an animal! She's the kind of person who would throw stones at you to drive you away if you do something to upset them!"

"B-but..."

If what Daytas said was true, then Amabelle had acted rather arrogantly toward him. Considering he'd climbed the ranks solely due to his own efforts, that must have really hurt his pride.

The look on Daytas's face was contorted with a mixture of humiliation and anger.

"Look at your feet," he said.

"Huh?"

"Your feet. She's showed up at the perfect moment."

Shizuku looked at the ground beside her hand. She could see something amid the scattered soil and unearthed mud. Whatever it was, it was faintly reflecting the small amount of light emitted by the lantern.

That reflection had reached all the way to the window, and it came from a thin piece of gold leaf.

It was egg-shaped, just like the thing Shizuku had found earlier—

And it was stuck to a white fingernail buried in the dirt.

“Huh?”

Shizuku couldn't comprehend what was happening. She stayed frozen to the spot as Daytas haphazardly kicked at the dirt. Mea's magic had gouged out a hole in the dirt, and he started sweeping it away with the toe of his boot.

The pale hand of a woman came into view. Gradually, her arm, covered by the sleeve of her dress, and her shoulders appeared from underneath the soil. However, that wasn't all. Next came her white face—followed by her neck, which bore marks made by human fingers.

“Stop!” Shizuku yelled.

Daytas covered her mouth with his hand, then grabbed hold of the lower half of her face as he taunted her.

“This is what happens to those who don't see their fellow humans as people. Has that sunk into your thick skull yet?”

As she listened to his whispered threat, Shizuku watched *that* out of the corner of her eye. The grass must have been keeping it covered before, but what had emerged from the dirt was a person who was already dead.

A corpse had been buried right beneath her. Shizuku groaned with terror.

The powder that had been stuck to Shizuku's skirt must have been Amabelle's face powder. When she thought about the timing of it, it made sense that both the gold leaf and the powder had stuck to her while she was in the horse-drawn carriage, and the edge of the gold leaf she'd picked up must have been distorted and discolored because Amabelle had scratched Daytas's hand with her nails. Shizuku could also recall there being a large black parcel in the front of the carriage.

“That body was in the carriage when we got on...,” said Shizuku.

“Hmph,” replied Daytas. “It seems you *are* of average intelligence after all.”

Standing underneath the moonlight, Daytas gave Shizuku a sickeningly cruel smile. Any hope that he might revert to the man he had been was lost.

“You wanted to know where Amabelle was? That should be obvious by now—she’s the woman right in front of me.”

His anger had dissipated, leaving something else in its place.

Shizuku, who was still sitting on the ground, listened in silence.

“You are Amabelle Lyshkariza,” announced Daytas coldly. “Now, let that sink in.”



The sunlight pouring in through the window caressed Shizuku’s eyelids. Dragging herself out of a deep slumber, she opened her eyes.

“Oh. Are you awake, Amabelle?”

Hearing an unfamiliar woman’s voice, Shizuku was reminded of everything that had happened the night before, and she jumped up in bed—to discover that she was not in her room in the external building, where she’d spent the previous night, but in the main house, where Daytas lived. It was so ridiculously luxurious that it made her head hurt.

The maid who’d spoken to her was about the same age as her mother. She greeted Shizuku with a friendly smile.

“My name is Auna. I will be taking care of you.”

“Oh, thank you,” replied Shizuku. “...I’m Amabelle Lyshkariza.”

She couldn’t use her own name. And Mea wasn’t around anymore.

Shizuku rose from the pure white bed, the gravity of the situation weighing heavily on her.

Amabelle Lyshkariza no longer existed.

She had been killed following a quarrel with Daytas, who’d gone to bring her to his estate. The same day that Shizuku and her companions had met Daytas, Amabelle had gone to visit him at a villa he owned, but when the topic of conversation turned to the festival and their wedding, Amabelle had broken things off with him. Thoroughly humiliated, Daytas murdered Amabelle in a fury

and tossed her body onto his horse-drawn carriage. On his way back to his residence, Daytas spotted Shizuku and decided to approach her.

“He approached me with the intention of making me Amabelle’s replacement...,” Shizuku mumbled to herself as she washed her face in a clay washbasin.

Shizuku hadn’t been imagining it when she’d sensed someone watching her from the stagecoach that overtook them. That was when Daytas and Nay had spotted her and decided that they could use her as a standin for Amabelle.

Their assertion that outsiders should steer clear of the festival was merely a ruse to capture Shizuku, and they’d ensured that nobody but themselves had seen her since she arrived in town so that they could use her as a substitute. Auna, for example, genuinely believed that Amabelle had arrived in town to take part in the festival.

If Shizuku had meekly agreed to acting as Amabelle’s standin that first night, Daytas’s crime might never have come to light. In the end, however, Shizuku had stepped right into the lion’s den—and now she had no choice but to play the role of Amabelle.

The festival was in five days’ time. There wasn’t a moment to waste.

“First things first—I need to save Mea and get in contact with Erik...”

Shizuku had been detained in the courtyard the previous night and thrown into this room. Mea had been sealed away by Nay and taken as a hostage. Shizuku really wanted to ask Erik for his advice, but now that she knew the truth, she was going to be under constant surveillance. If she acted recklessly, anything could happen to them. Daytas had an unpredictable personality, and Nay seemed to possess a mystical degree of power.

Shizuku could feel anxiety creeping over her—a sensation she experienced fairly regularly—and she slapped herself on the cheeks to snap herself out of this state.

“Are you all right in there, Amabelle?” asked Auna.

“Yes!”

Shizuku wiped her face and walked out of the bathroom. Auna tried to help her get dressed, but she refused. There were still marks on her shoulders from where Daytas had grabbed hold of her, so she had to keep them hidden until they disappeared.

Auna combed Shizuku's hair, which had grown a little past her shoulders, then let out a cry of admiration.

"You really do have beautiful black hair, Amabelle. It must just be the southern sea breeze that's made it a little wild."

"Oh, y-yes, I'm sure."

"I'll tidy up your ends later. For now, let me apply some hair oil."

Their conversation trailed off, which filled Shizuku with relief. At this rate, cracks in her act were bound to show. She wasn't even from the same world as Amabelle, so there was no way she could keep up the charade for very long.

"I'm sure it will be a lovely ceremony. The town church is always very busy. Once you're married, Daytas will become a member of the council, so guests from the nobility will also be in attendance."

"...I—I see."

Shizuku wanted to escape before it came to that, if at all possible—but first, she needed to get a better grasp on what was going on, so she tried asking Auna a question.

"Are there any other guests in this residence?"

Could she get in touch with Erik in some way? As Shizuku grasped for a solution, Auna just tilted her head to the side in thought.

"Well, I think there was somebody in the detached building yesterday, but it seems like they left early this morning. In fact, they left when you arrived."

"Huh..."

Astonished, Shizuku looked at Auna's reflection in the mirror. There was no way Erik would have left her behind. Had Daytas kicked him out now that he no longer had any use for Erik?

The color began to drain from Shizuku's face, but at least they weren't keeping Erik locked away, at least as far as she could tell. She just hoped she could save Mea and break out of Daytas's residence.

Once Shizuku was ready and Auna had left the room, Shizuku went over to the room's third-floor window and looked around.

"For now, I just want to find a way out..."

Shizuku stared motionlessly out the window. The courtyard where she'd been the previous night was shaded by trees and difficult to make out.



When Erik woke up in the morning, the girl he'd been traveling with was gone.

This was an unexpected development that he definitely hadn't seen coming. Unusual for her, Shizuku hadn't woken up and come to him, so Erik had gone to her room instead. When he realized that both she and Mea had vanished from her unlocked room, he inquired with the master of the house.

"Shizuku's gone. Do you know why?"

Daytas, who had shown up after hearing about Erik's concern, responded to this unambiguously pointed question by shaking his head.

"Unfortunately not. Are you sure she hasn't just gone out for a walk?"

"Her things are still here, but she'd never just go out without telling me."

Either she'd been abducted, or she'd found herself in a situation where she couldn't get back.

With a sigh, Daytas asked Erik a question of his own. "Are you suggesting that someone broke in? Was the door locked?"

"When I checked, both her door and the entrance to this building were open."

"Then she must have left of her own accord. We keep both of the keys for safekeeping, but there's no sign that they've been used. The entrance is locked at night, but it can also be opened from the inside."

Unable to argue against this, Erik fell silent.

There *was* a side of Shizuku that would dive into situations headfirst, unable to ignore what was happening right in front of her. However, that didn't mean that Daytas wasn't involved. Erik thought to himself for a moment, then spoke up.

"I want permission to search for her."

"You're very welcome to, but Nay will accompany you while you're inside my residence. There are a number of areas you are forbidden to enter."

Erik frowned slightly at that, but his reply came smoothly.

"Of course. I mean, you don't know whether she and I have been conspiring together, and if she's disappeared to search your house."

"...I'm not accusing you of that."

Unable to conceal his discomfort, Daytas looked over his shoulder at Nay, who'd accompanied him, but the other man only gave a calm, faint smile.

"I have things of my own to take care of—but I can join you on your search this afternoon."

"That's fine with me. I'd also like to search the town. Give me permission to leave your residence."

"Fine. Tell me when you're leaving. Just make sure nobody gets wind of what you've seen or heard here, and hide the fact that you're an outsider. Keep your trips in and out to a minimum. I'm busy negotiating with Amabelle and putting preparations in place for a replacement in case things fall through."

"I understand. Thank you for your cooperation. I'll leave right away."

It seemed that Daytas really was busy, because once the pair had come to an agreement, he swiftly left the outbuilding. Having been left behind, Erik thought things over for a short while. Then he started to get ready for his trip into town.



Shizuku couldn't eat even half of her breakfast. Once she was done with her meal, Auna served her some tea and made an announcement.

"After this, the town dressmaker is coming for your final meeting about your bridal dress."

“...My bridal dress? ...Will it fit me?”

“Of course it will. It’s been sent here from your family home, so I’m sure it will look wonderful on you.”

Shizuku realized that she’d probably asked an awkward question. Sensing a cold sweat on her back, she smoothed it over by adding, “It’s just that this new environment has caused me to lose a little weight.”

But Auna carried on, seemingly unconcerned. “There are only five days left until the ceremony, so we have a lot to do. Don’t worry, though—the town festival will be spectacular. I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Shizuku responded to Auna’s enthusiasm with a vague smile. Regardless of how good the festival might be, Shizuku hated the role she would be playing in it. First and foremost, she knew nothing about what lay outside this residence. There was no way that she could get excited about it.

Once breakfast was over, Nay supervised Shizuku as she moved to the next room.

“I advise you not to entertain the idea of escaping,” he said shortly after they’d begun walking down the hallway.

Shizuku couldn’t help but feel annoyed. Daytas and Nay were the only people who knew she wasn’t really Amabelle. When she spoke, her words prickled with anxiety.

“You’ll kill me if I don’t keep quiet, won’t you? Believe it or not, I value my own life. More to the point, where are Erik and Mea? What’s happened to them?”

“The assumption is that you have gone missing. The man went into the town to look for you, while your assistant demon remains in our care. Once the ceremony is over, you can have her back.”

“...Don’t hurt her. Are you a mage?”

“No—but I’m not an ordinary human, either. Regardless, that has nothing to do with you. Focus your energy on eating properly instead.”

Shizuku figured he was giving her this unexpected warning because he’d seen

how much food she'd left on her plate.

"You're thin," he continued. "You need to eat as much food as you are served."

"I only wish I could enjoy my meals... Are you worried that my dress won't fit? I doubt I can put on enough weight for that in five days."

"That's not the issue. I'm just telling you not to worry any more than necessary. You're not from this town, and you're not even a member of the nobility. Once the ceremony's over, you should be set free."

Shizuku had almost brought up the dead body she'd seen the day before, but Nay's hopeful words made her keep her mouth shut.

The dressmaker was waiting for her in the room she was guided to. Several maids offered to help out, but she shook them off, and once she was alone in the dressing room, she reluctantly put on the bridal gown.

When she came back out, she was alarmed to discover that Daytas was there. The dressmaker let out a cry of admiration.

"Well, would you look at that! It's not every day that I get to see a bride as pretty as you. What do you think, Daytas?"

"What can I say? I'm a happy man."

What a liar, Shizuku thought—but she kept this comment to herself.

The dressmaker checked her measurements, then cocked her head in confusion.

"Did you lose some weight? You seem to be slimmer all over than the measurements from your dressmaker in Nisle suggested."

"I—I've just been suffering from pre-wedding blues," Shizuku said, immediately coming out with an excuse.

Everybody else in the room looked perplexed, and when Shizuku noticed this, she hastily rephrased herself.

"I mean, I think I've lost weight because of nerves."

It might just have been one comment, but Shizuku knew that she needed to

be more careful from now on. She pasted a sweet smile on her face and thanked the dressmaker. The old lady took a few steps back, gazed at Shizuku, then tilted her head slightly to one side.

“How about a bit of a longer veil? I have several in stock back at my shop.”

Was this Shizuku’s big chance?

She hesitated, glanced back at Daytas, then swiftly came to a decision.

“I’d like to see them for myself before I pick one. Would I be able to take a look?”

“That would be no problem at all! I’ll finish my other jobs early and come back this afternoon.”

“Er, could I come and pick one right away? I hate the thought of taking up any more of your time.”

Shizuku wanted to leave the residence and go into town. That was where Erik had gone to look for her. Daytas had probably worked out what she was intending on doing, but since everybody else saw her as Amabelle, he couldn’t stop her right away. His only real option was to keep her confined and threaten her. And after the ceremony was over, he’d no longer have any need for her, so this was really her only window of opportunity. Shizuku was betting on this slight possibility working out, which was why she’d asked to see the veils.

Her legs were trembling beneath her dress. If Daytas had shot her a menacing gaze, she wouldn’t have known what to do—but he was surprisingly forthcoming in giving her his permission.

“If that’s what you want, then go ahead.”

Shizuku was shocked by this response. Daytas glanced at her, as if there was something he wanted to say, then left the room, leaving Nay behind. As he did, Shizuku caught a glimpse of his eyes. It wasn’t a threatening look she saw, nor one of resentment—instead his gaze was vacant. Like a wild wasteland.

Shizuku felt like there was a word to describe that expression, but no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t think it. She stayed glued to the spot, letting the frustration drive her crazy until Auna eventually called out to her.

When Shizuku stepped down from the horse-drawn carriage, she found herself in front of a shop that faced out onto a large street. Several pure-white bridal gowns were on display in the window, and she could tell by the shop's exterior that it was a luxurious establishment frequented by wealthy customers.

Nay took Shizuku by the hand and led her inside. The moment she set foot inside the shop, a row of employees bowed to her in unison, causing Shizuku to tense up. Nay, who was surveilling her under the pretense of being her bodyguard, casually pushed Shizuku forward, guiding her farther inside the shop.

Everything inside the shop's spacious interior was eye-catching and white, and Shizuku gazed at the countless gowns that were on display.

"They're so beautiful..."

"Thank you very much," replied the dressmaker. "The veils are this way, Amabelle."

Being called Amabelle brought Shizuku straight back to reality. If she let herself get preoccupied, then the risk she'd taken to get here would have all been for nothing.

Members of the staff came and went in rapid succession as they brought Shizuku different veils. As she was taking a look at them, she attempted to inconspicuously glance out the window.

At long last, she was able to see the streets of Laobbe. It really was a pretty place. Laobbe might only be a provincial town, but it seemed around the same size as Candela's castle city. The buildings were colorful, with some painted red or green, and an endless stream of pedestrians filled the streets, with rows of flower decorations hanging from the eaves of stores—signs of the festivities to come.

Shizuku chose the longest of the veils that had been lined up for her, thinking that it would obscure her face the most. Then, saying that she'd like to see some other accessories, she walked around the store and noticed a map on the wall.

The map, which was elaborate and likely valuable as a piece of art, seemed to

depict the town from above. With the exception of the central square, the entire town was structured in an orderly manner like a checkerboard.

Shizuku turned back to Nay, who was standing behind her.

“Where is the church that I’m getting married in?” she asked.

“In the central square.”

Shizuku looked out the shop window, wondering if she’d be able to see it, but a tall building directly opposite was obstructing her view. She gave up, but just as she was about to look away, she spotted a familiar young man among the crowds of people.

“Er—”

She had almost called out his name, but instead, Shizuku looked over her shoulder to see Nay’s piercing, cold stare. His sword hung from his waist, even in the dressmaker’s shop, and his gaze chilled Shizuku to the core. Overwhelmed by this menacing look, she turned pale.

Shizuku doubted Nay had noticed Erik. He was just watching every single move she made.

Perhaps having detected her agitation, he drew a step closer to her and whispered something in her ear.

“If you try to escape, I will kill someone else in your place.”

“Wha...?”

“Do you think I’m bluffing? Want to try it out?”

Judging by his tone of voice, he was completely serious. Shizuku knew he wasn’t just trying to threaten her. Daytas had let her leave only because Nay was there—a fact that was just now sinking in for Shizuku.

She smiled uncomfortably.

“It’s nothing. Sorry.”

Shizuku left Nay behind and went back to the center of the shop, where a number of accessories had been laid out for her to look at. She spotted a pure-white quill and asked a shop employee about it.

“Can you really write with this?”

“Of course. It’s what you’ll use to sign your marriage vows.”

“Oh,” responded Shizuku, stroking the soft feather with her fingers.

She dipped it in a bottle of ink, then used it to make little swirls on a piece of nearby testing paper.

Nay peered over her shoulder.

“Amabelle, I think it’s about time we went home,” he said.

“Okay. Thanks.”

Shizuku weaved through the employees, who were bowing to her again, and left the shop—but as soon as she went through the door, she almost tripped on the flagstones, figuring her high-heeled shoes were to blame.

“Agh!”

Nay grabbed her from behind to keep Shizuku from falling, but her shrill cry attracted the attention of the nearby onlookers.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“Be careful.”

He pushed her into the horse-drawn carriage, just like he had earlier, and Shizuku squinted at the little she could see of her surroundings from the window.

I’m sure I’ll reach him, she told herself. Things are sure to work out somehow.



Once the guest of honor had left and the staff at the dressmaker’s shop were making the final alterations to her bridal gown, they were visited by a male customer. He hadn’t come with a woman, which puzzled them, and his deep-blue eyes were so intense that the seamstress who went to greet him flinched.

“Was there a girl here before?” he asked. “She’s young with black hair... Her features are a little unique. I thought I heard her voice.”

“I apologize, but we can’t disclose any information about our customers,” replied the seamstress, gently rebuffing his inquiry. Even so, she couldn’t help

but be charmed by his handsome face.

“...Did I mistake her for someone else?”

He'd heard someone who sounded a lot like Shizuku let out a yelp—but since he'd seen her only from the side, he'd been unable to see her face. Still, it was hard to imagine that Shizuku would stop by a bridal store. Just as Erik was about to leave the white interior of the dressmaker's, he spotted a piece of paper on a nearby table. Someone had drawn some soft, curved lines on it, perhaps testing out the ink.

“...I see.”

It was something that Nay, who'd been keeping a close eye on Shizuku, had missed. After all, he never would have imagined that those curved lines could be letters.

But Erik knew. Shizuku had taught him them herself.

Scattered around the paper were three English words: *true*, *bride*, and *killed*.

The true bride had been killed.

Erik frowned at the message that Shizuku had written in cursive, then he silently left the shop.

“I guess they're using her as a standin after all,” he muttered to himself.

Erik had been suspicious of Daytas from the outset, and the day after telling them about his troubles, Shizuku had disappeared. It was all too convenient. Plus, as soon as Erik had mentioned that he wanted to search for her, Daytas had told him that some rooms *inside* the residence were out of bounds. Since the door leading outside had been open, any normal person would have assumed that Shizuku had gone into town, but Daytas's mind had drifted elsewhere for one specific reason—he knew that Shizuku was inside his home.

“It was Daytas who suggested I look inside his residence,” Erik said to himself, “so I doubt I'll find her in there.”

To complicate things further, there was no way he could confront Daytas head-on. Daytas's own abilities aside, Erik had no idea what Nay was capable of, but the fact that Mea had also gone missing was proof enough that Erik would

be outmatched. Shizuku wasn't used to dealing with an assistant demon, and Mea wasn't used to fighting, but neither of those things mattered—the fact that Daytas and Nay had managed to take care of a mid-ranking demon was a testament to their skill.

Further still, these men had already killed Amabelle. They would stop at nothing to get what they wanted, so Erik needed to come up with a plan as well. Deep in thought, he walked down the bustling streets on his way back to Daytas's residence.

Before he met with Nay that afternoon, Erik grabbed his things and fled.



When Shizuku came back from the bridal shop, she went to her room and ate lunch there. That, however, was when her brief return to house arrest ended. After she'd finished her meal, Nay turned up holding a small box.

"Your companion has disappeared," he announced.

"Huh...?"

Shizuku's eyes widened. Leaving that note had been a last resort—but Erik being Erik, he'd actually spotted it.

She was astonished, but what Nay said next quickly brought Shizuku back to reality.

"He's a pretty smart guy. He slipped out from under our watch."

"Does that mean...?"

"He must have worked out that Daytas is holding you here. If we'd just killed him in the beginning, we could have saved ourselves all this trouble," Nay said casually, leaving Shizuku speechless.

Erik could have been killed just because Shizuku happened to have black hair and black eyes. This didn't make any sense to her. It was too hard to wrap her head around. Feeling more confused than scared, she clenched her fists.

"How could you possibly treat people like that...?"

Was that how far Daytas was willing to go to become a councilor? The man was completely impossible to understand.

As anger surged within Shizuku, her fists began to shake.

“That was just a hypothetical,” Nay added, glaring at her. “Daytas wouldn’t have actually killed him. You guys are different from Amabelle and that other man.”

“Different how?”

Nay tossed the small box he was holding at Shizuku. She caught it in a panic, then opened it. Inside was a small green bird.

“Mea!”

She didn’t look like she was going to be opening her eyes anytime soon, and a black belt was wrapped around her small body like a bandage.

“What is that...?”

“It’s just there to seal away her consciousness,” explained Nay. “It’ll disappear on its own in five days’ time. Pure demons are vulnerable to the powers of beings from other realms.”

On closer inspection, the black belt didn’t look like it was made of fabric, as Shizuku had initially assumed. It had an immaterial quality more like smoke coiling around Mea’s body.

Nay had admitted that he wasn’t a mage or an ordinary human. Was this substance a product of Nay’s unusual abilities?

Holding the small box close to her chest, Shizuku asked him a question.

“Why are you giving Mea back to me?”

“No reason. I’m just telling you to carry out your role. We don’t have much time, so you need to hurry up and come to terms with that.”

Nay went and stood by the desk in the room and knocked on it, as if telling Shizuku she had better get studying. She still couldn’t decide whether he was scary, or whether he might surprise her and be reasonable. Shizuku hesitated, then placed Mea on the windowsill and sat down in front of the desk.

Nay told her how the ceremony would work and what things she needed to do. Not only was there a detailed schedule, but he also taught her things like

how and from which entrance she should enter the church and when it was appropriate to bow. There was so much information, it felt like her head was going to explode.

“Is there *really* not a more suitable standin? I don’t feel very confident about all this...”

“We don’t have time to find one. The more people involved, the more problems will arise. Just make sure you don’t fail.”

Unable to argue back, Shizuku bit her tongue, and with a pained expression on her face, she recalled what she’d learned.

First, she had to enter alone and stand by the five brides at the back of the church. Then Daytas would enter. He would take each of the five brides’ hands and ask them for their names, but they would ignore him and refuse to answer. Finally, he would take Shizuku’s hand. She would respond, “I’m Amabelle Lyshkariza,” and then they would sign their names on their marriage vows.

That was the general order of proceedings, at least.

“So it’s a reconstruction of the myth of Aetea... Do you have outfits ready for the other five brides, too?” she asked.

“No. They’re all daughters of local noble families. They put themselves forward for these roles, so they prepare their own costumes. They’ll be dressed up to the nines, with both theirs and their parents’ vanity on full display.”

“Ugh... That sounds awkward enough in itself.”

Nobody would be able to tell who the main character was. The real Amabelle might have been able to compete with the other girls, thanks to her strong-willed nature, but Shizuku was exhausted just hearing about them.

She let out a deep sigh, but then came to a sudden realization and looked up at Nay. He usually seemed so impassive, but his tone of voice had shown hints of animosity when he’d been talking about the noblewomen.

“Do you hate the nobility, too?”

Shizuku observed a ripple of emotion in Nay’s eyes. Although this look bore no resemblance to Daytas’s earlier wild gaze, she was reminded of it

nonetheless.

There had been a world of drought, desolation, and deprivation behind those eyes—a vast expanse that pushed away everything that entered it.

Nay must have been surprised, because he flinched and stared intently at Shizuku before abruptly averting his gaze.

“I’ll get you out of that church as soon as the ceremony is over. As soon as you meet back up with that guy, you two should leave town.”

With that, Nay fell abruptly silent.

Shizuku didn’t know what he *really* wanted to say, but she could sense an emptiness there, and she kept quiet, too.



There were a few sights that came flooding back whenever he closed his eyes, even after so much time had passed.

The smiling faces of the town children as they threw stones at him.

The way the grown-ups looked at him with disdain, as if he were a piece of dirt.

His mother’s hands as she embraced him. The cold stare of that young girl.

Recalling these sights brought him no joy whatsoever, and yet he couldn’t forget them even for a second. He didn’t even want to erase those memories. He was constantly trapped inside them, even now.

In the end, he’d never be able to break away. He’d be stuck in this dry wasteland forever.

At the end of the day, his only way out was—

“Have you learned what you have to do?”

“Mostly,” Shizuku responded succinctly as she sat across from Daytas at the dinner table.

He wasn’t the kind of person she could have a long conversation with. Daytas was demanding a certain result from her and nothing more, but unfortunately for Shizuku, her life depended on whether she gave him what he wanted.

Shizuku didn't want to act subservient toward the man who was threatening her, but she didn't feel like recklessly picking fights, either.

"Don't mess this up. Everyone's attention will be on how you behave," he told her.

"I'll try my best. I'm aiming to be perfect."

"Good."

It was hard to imagine any other soon-to-be-married couple having a conversation like this. If someone unaware of the current situation were present, they'd surely be scowling at the couple's behavior, but the only other person in the room was Nay.

He was acting as the pair's waiter. Whenever Daytas looked away, she'd glance at Nay's eyes. She couldn't tell what was worrying either of them, but every now and then, she sensed something was off about the two men.

They both had a sort of far-off look in their eyes that was impossible to define. There was probably no point reading into those vacant gazes—Shizuku doubted there was much to be gained from understanding a murderer.

Even so, that emptiness was impossible to ignore, and Shizuku found herself peering into Daytas's eyes nonetheless.

"What's wrong?"

Before Shizuku had the chance to look away, he shot her a piercing glare, and Shizuku tensed up, startled. She'd almost dropped the glass she was holding.

"N-nothing."

"Don't lie. I can see right through you."

There *was something*, but there was no way she could put it into words. Flustered, Shizuku searched for the right words—and ended up voicing a totally unrelated concern.

"What will happen to me once the ceremony is over?"

Nay had told her to leave town, but his words carried only so much influence. If his master said no, then she imagined he'd be overruled. Simply asking the

question might have been risky, but Shizuku wanted to check what Daytas himself was thinking.

The man glanced at her momentarily, and another dry wind blew beyond his eyes. Shizuku felt herself unable to look away.

“When the ceremony is over, you can go wherever you like—as long as it’s outside the town.”

“...You’re letting me go?”

“When the ceremony is over, yes. Or would you prefer to become my *real* wife?”

“Definitely not.”

Shizuku’s true feelings had slipped out without her realizing it, and her expression stiffened. She only realized she might’ve messed up *after* the words had left her lips.

Yet Daytas didn’t seem angry. He just snorted with laughter.

“But if you arouse suspicion before the ceremony is over, you’ll pay for it with your life.”

“Okay. But...”

“But what?”

Shizuku wasn’t sure whether this was a smart thing to ask, but her curiosity won out. She’d never be able to calm down unless she knew the answer.

“What would you do if I went to another town and said you were a murderer? Wouldn’t that create problems for you?”

Daytas had killed Amabelle, and Shizuku knew her body was buried in the garden. Her death was a major issue that couldn’t be covered up, which was why Shizuku hadn’t expected them to let her go so easily.

How was Daytas going to smooth things over after the ceremony? Did he think that silencing the complaints of a suspicious young girl would be easy once he was on the council? Nay might have told her otherwise, but wouldn’t killing Shizuku be the safer option by far?

His cold gaze brushed over Shizuku's face. Every time she looked into his empty eyes, her doubts grew.

"It wouldn't really be a problem. Where you go and what you do after the ceremony is none of my concern."

Daytas stood and left the room, seemingly finished with his dinner. Shizuku just sat there, staring absentmindedly at the ceiling. For some strange reason, the patterns on it looked like they were changing shape.



"'Killed,' huh...? She must have meant the passive voice, rather than the simple past tense. 'She was killed.'"

A man set to join the council and the daughter of a noble family from a faraway land, the pair's marriage was the focus of lively celebrations among Laobbe's nobility and powerful merchants.

Erik was already convinced that they were forcing Shizuku to play the central role. Shizuku had written the words *true bride* on her secret message, implying the existence of a *fake* bride.

As Erik looked at Shizuku's dictionary and her note, he let out a sigh. It seemed she wasn't as bad at learning languages as she thought she was. If she'd had the time, she probably would've been able to explain the situation in further detail.

It was obvious that she'd kept her note as brief as possible because she was under constant supervision—Nay's constant supervision.

"After Lord Deseuah introduced Amabelle to Daytas, it was decided that they would marry. Then she was killed... Daytas must be the one responsible. And Daytas...was the ex-lover of Lord Deseuah's daughter."

Erik had uncovered this information when he'd been doing some investigating of his own in town. Daytas and Lord Deseuah's only daughter, Varola, had once been lovers, and everyone had expected them to marry. However, her father had ordered another bride to be arranged for Daytas. What was the story behind that?

"He's a powerful man... Unless I have proof, he won't even give me the time

of day.”

Erik had escaped Daytas’s surveillance, which was better than them *both* being held prisoner, but he wouldn’t get Shizuku back by playing fair. Erik looked up at the ceiling, his fingers laced behind his head. Then he left the small room to carry out his plan.



Shizuku’s first meeting with Varola had not been a coincidence. Far from it, in fact. Lord Deseuah’s daughter had come to visit Shizuku out of the blue the day after she went to fetch her veil, just as she was practicing for the ceremony.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Varola Deseuah. I’m sure you already know who I am, but this is the first time we’ve met.”

The woman, who didn’t have anybody accompanying her, gave off a haughty air as she smiled faintly. Her attitude, which could have even been described as arrogant, actually made a strong impression on Shizuku, as it was her first time seeing a member of the nobility in the flesh.

“I’ve been dying to meet you, Amabelle,” she continued. “I’m going to be one of the brides on the day of the ceremony.”

“Oh. It’s nice to meet you, too.”

She knew she wouldn’t be able to respond with flowery, stately language, so she didn’t even try. Instead, Shizuku responded in her own words and bowed her head.

When she did, Varola looked shocked. She must have expected that “Amabelle,” being the real bride, would treat her as an equal or as an inferior. This interaction had gone contrary to her expectations, leaving her taken aback.

“You don’t really seem like a member of the nobility,” she remarked.

“People often tell me that,” replied Shizuku.

It made more sense for her to act like an unconventional noblewoman, rather than forcing herself to be something she wasn’t.

Shizuku glanced at Nay, who was also in the room, but his expression hadn’t changed. Having interpreted this as implicit approval, she stood up straighter.

“Did you come here especially to greet me?”

“Yes. I wanted to see what you were like. You’re not at all what I expected, though.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Shizuku apologized.

And I’m sorry that I’m an imposter, Shizuku added internally, forcing a smile. It wasn’t as if she were faking it for fun.

As Shizuku chided herself, Varola shot her a dubious look.

“You’ve met Daytas, haven’t you? What do you think about him? Will you two be able to get along?”

I think he’s a short-tempered murderer. We definitely won’t get along.

—is what Shizuku wished she could say, but they might have gagged her if she did. Varola’s father was the one who’d introduced Amabelle to Daytas in the first place, so he might have forced her to come and check how things were going.

“He’s very good to me. Thank you for your concern.”

“...Right.”

Varola’s response seemed lackluster, and Shizuku frowned slightly. For some reason, she felt like there was something below the surface that only she was oblivious to.

With that, it seemed like Varola’s job was done. She lifted up the hem of her dress with a graceful smile, and Shizuku saw a flicker of relief and sadness in her large eyes.

“He might be lucky, having someone like you by his side,” Varola said.

“Do you think so?”

“Yes. He needs what you have. Well, I suppose I’ll see you again at the ceremony.”

With that, she left almost as suddenly as she’d appeared. Once she was gone, Shizuku turned back toward Nay.

“What did she mean by ‘what I have’?”

“Who knows?” Nay replied. “Probably something so obvious that you don’t even realize you have it.”

Judging by the way he was speaking, this mystical quality wasn’t something that Nay possessed, either.

As it turned out, Shizuku remained clueless right up until the very end.



“Oh! Varola was here?”

Auna had come to take over from Nay, and once she heard what had happened, she hadn’t been able to contain her surprise.

“It was only a quick hello... Do you know her?”

Auna glanced around awkwardly, then lowered her voice.

“The truth is...Varola and Daytas were close until quite recently. I think that’s why she was curious about you, Amabelle. Did she mention anything?”

“Not really. When you say they were close, do you mean that they were in a relationship?”

Shizuku’s frank question left Auna flustered. She’d asked purely out of curiosity, but Auna probably thought Shizuku felt affronted.

“It doesn’t make me uncomfortable or anything,” Shizuku assured her—and finally, she coaxed the full story out of the other woman.

Daytas and Nay had appeared in the town five years earlier. At the time, Daytas had only just turned twenty-two. He used the little money he had to launch a wholesale business, and with a keen eye for quality and an aptitude for seizing the right opportunities at the right time, he quickly increased his clientele and made a lot of money. His exceptional skills turned him into one of the town’s most successful businessmen, eventually granting him access to the mansions of the nobility.

That was how Daytas and Varola first met.

She was the beautiful daughter of a lord, and he, a shrewd young man. He had been the one to make the first move, and the couple soon grew close and started dating. Varola’s father, Lord Deseuah, even gave them his approval.

However, one day, the couple broke up with no prior warning, and Lord Deseuah presented Daytas with another young noblewoman to take as his bride.

“If I were really Amabelle, that story definitely would have given me the pre-wedding blues...,” Shizuku murmured as she enjoyed a rare moment to herself. She’d been allowed a break, so she was using her time to make notes in Japanese on her notepad.

Auna seemed like the kind of woman who loved to chat. Although she’d initially hesitated to discuss her master’s former lover, once she realized Shizuku was interested, it had been like opening up Pandora’s box.

The revelations that followed were not the sort that any bride would have wanted to hear, and if Shizuku really had been Amabelle, she was sure she would’ve ended up in a huge argument with Daytas.

“They would’ve hit a dead end...and the relationship would’ve been over.”

Now that Shizuku saw it from this perspective, Daytas and Amabelle would have been totally incompatible—Amabelle would have needed a tremendous amount of luck on her side to avoid the tragedy of being murdered. Shizuku held her head in her hands.

“Still, it doesn’t seem like Varola *hates* Daytas,” she said to herself.

In fact, she seemed concerned about him and his impending marriage. She’d turned up just to see Amabelle, and Shizuku didn’t get the impression that she despised him or bore a grudge against the man.

Did that mean Daytas was to blame for their breakup?

“Hmm... I can’t wrap my head around this.”

Putting the intricacies of their relationship aside, Shizuku couldn’t even imagine Daytas making a move on anyone. Could a man as short-tempered and arrogant as him really change his behavior when faced with a woman he liked?

Shizuku stopped thinking about it for the time being and lay down on the bed. Just as she was about to doze off, Varola’s faint smile drifted into her hazy consciousness. Her smile had held a hint of sadness when she’d spoken about

Daytas, but Shizuku wondered if she'd ever find out why.



It was two days before the wedding, and Shizuku had committed almost everything she'd been taught to memory. She'd never really had a problem with memorization—once she'd convinced herself that she needed to remember something, it was simple.

As part of her practice, Shizuku rehearsed the ceremony's proceedings with Daytas. "Not bad," he said, making her breathe a sigh of relief.

Daytas looked her up and down. She was wearing a dress she'd been given to rehearse in. "I'd prefer it if you were a little more refined, but this will do."

"Well, I was raised as a commoner, so this is about as good as you're going to get. Mio probably could have played the part a little better than me, though."

"Mio? Who's that?"

"My younger sister."

If Daytas had been from her old world, Shizuku wouldn't have mentioned that she had a younger sister—but they were in a completely different universe right now. No matter how impatient and violent Daytas was, he'd never be able to reach her family.

"So you have a younger sister?" asked Daytas.

"I have an older one, too. I'm the middle sister."

This mention of Shizuku's sisters seemed to have piqued Daytas's interest, but she couldn't understand why. His eyes darted around anxiously before he asked bluntly, "What are they like?"

"What are they like...? Normal, I guess. My older sister is pretty and kind. Everyone likes her. And my younger sister can do anything she puts her mind to and is always full of confidence. She's smart, and she can be annoying at times, but she's cute."

"You're very complimentary about your sisters. Could it be that you feel inferior to them?"

"Sort of. Not so much anymore."

Shizuku's younger sister could tackle any challenge that came her way. She could have played the part of the blushing bride with the air of nobility the role demanded. Her older sister, on the other hand, might have adapted to the situation right away. Shizuku viewed them as "special," in contrast to her.

In the past, that had caused her some distress. It frustrated her that she was the only one who seemed to lack individuality, which was why she'd chosen to leave home.

Before she knew it, however, she'd stopped worrying so much about comparing herself to her sisters. Was that because she'd ended up so far away from them? Or was it because she'd changed as a person? Shizuku wasn't entirely sure.

With a derisive laugh, Daytas sat down on his couch.

"It takes real resilience not to feel inferior when your siblings have something you don't."

"...It's not that I *don't* feel inferior," Shizuku replied. "I just get on well with them."

"You must do. That's why your perception of them hasn't been tarnished," spat Daytas.

It felt like there was a hidden meaning behind his words, but he continued to speak without so much as a pause.

"Not all siblings get along as well as you and your sisters. I'm a prime example of that—my younger sister threw stones at me when she learned I was her brother. She made no effort to conceal her dislike for me."

"...Huh? She threw stones at you? ...Like, metaphorically?"

"No. Real stones. I doubt my story is that uncommon. My father had me with a different woman, and out of consideration for my father's reputation, my mother didn't tell anyone that I was his child. Instead, the two of us lived a frugal life on the edge of town."

With his elbows on the table, Daytas rested his chin in his hands. He wasn't looking at Shizuku but off in the distance, as if he were staring at someone.

“We were shunned by everyone around us. All of the townsfolk derided my mother for having a child with an unknown man, and as soon as my younger sister got wind of the truth, she drove me away like a monster. In the end, we were kicked out of the town...and the incident led to the death of my mother, who was already frail. My father saw it all, but he never tried to help her. I guess what I’m trying to say is that blood ties mean nothing.”

Daytas didn’t look enraged. He’d simply shared what had happened to him, and for that reason, Shizuku didn’t know how to respond. His family was so different from her own that it left her speechless.

His gaze brushed Shizuku’s face again, and she suddenly had the urge to cry.

Perhaps the one thing this man needed was someone who could offer him real emotional support—assuming he could atone for his sins, that is. If there was someone who could water the barren land inside him, there was a chance that he might one day be saved.

However, Shizuku couldn’t be that person. She didn’t feel capable of something like that. The type of person Daytas needed would have to know his past, sympathize with him, and develop a strong urge to support him.

Could she change anything by suggesting this to Daytas? She had a genuine desire to help him and get him to change his ways, but how could she get this across without damaging her own integrity?

It’s impossible for a person to leave the narrow cage called the self. Whether you’re telling them something or listening to what they have to say, there are always bars in the way that hamper straightforward communication.

Shizuku could say a thousand words; maybe a hundred would get through to him, and he’d understand only ten. In the end, he might accept only one or two of them.

Language provided you with a stifling kind of freedom. Eventually, everyone would come to realize how hopeless that was.



With the celebrations having begun the previous day, every corner of the town of Laobbe was teeming with noise and excitement. The central square

was full of entertainers vying for the public's attention, with every performance eliciting huge cheers.

Erik weaved through the excited adults and children as he made his way toward the church. The wedding, which was part of the festivities, was set to be held the following day, and craftspeople were rushing around trying to get things ready. He saw a real mix of equipment and people inside the church, and the corridors, lined with large statues of gods decorated with white flowers, were no exception. Since the work had been outsourced to multiple workshops, there was no one overseeing the wedding's overall organization, which allowed Erik to freely take a look around without attracting suspicion.

He checked the route into the church and where the different entrances were, then he took a look in the rooms at the back that would presumably be used by those involved in the wedding on that day. Finally, he stepped inside the church itself and cast his gaze around the room, noticing the high ceiling and the chairs that had been lined up in preparation for the big day.

It was at that point that he happened to hear a clanging noise behind him, and Erik turned around. A large gold candlestick had fallen to the floor. A young apprentice craftsman reached out for it in a panic, and once he'd picked it up, he placed it back in front of one of the pillars equally spaced out around the venue.

"...What's that?" Erik asked.

"Huh?"

The young man's eyes widened; he was surprised that a strange mage had suddenly spoken to him.

"A candlestick...", said the apprentice. "Why?"

"It's not that, so much as the floor. There's a fire-generating magic circle drawn on the floor, isn't there?"

"Is there? I can't see it. But these are magic candles. Apparently, they all light up at the same time."

Appearing busy, the apprentice quickly dashed away. Erik walked over to the candle and looked down at the floor.

The magic circle drawn on the floor was undoubtedly a fire-producing one. It wasn't especially powerful, but once activated, it would generate fire and heat on top of it.

Upon closer inspection, he saw that the same magic circle had been drawn at every pillar, and all of them were connected by a single magic line. The candles that had been put in place appeared to be magic implements that would absorb that fire to light their flames, but they could have just used self-lighting candles instead. There was no need to create a separate ignition mechanism and draw magic circles.

Apparently, Daytas had been the one who'd decided on the interior decorations. Did he like doing things the hard way? Erik scanned the spacious church with a cold look in his eyes, then left.



When Shizuku pictured a bride on the day before their wedding, she'd always imagined her kneeling down on a tatami mat in front of her parents, bowing her head, and thanking them for everything they'd done for her—but in this world, tatami mats didn't exist. Plus, this was a sham wedding.

Shizuku didn't feel sad about it. In fact, a different kind of anxiety was causing her to lose her appetite.

"You should go to bed early tonight. You'll want your skin to be glowing in the morning," Auna said to her, so Shizuku did as she was told.

She closed her eyes and counted sheep, but she didn't feel sleepy at all. If anything, the harder she tried to fall asleep, the more difficult it became.

Once she'd counted more than eight thousand sheep, Shizuku got up to get a drink from the water jug in her room. It was stuffy inside, so she opened the window to let some air in, and she looked at Mea, sleeping in her makeshift bed on the windowsill.

"The wedding's tomorrow... Just hang on a little longer."

The black belt coiled around Mea's small body had mostly faded by now, allowing the color of Mea's wings to show through. Maybe she really would be freed the following day, in which case Shizuku just needed to find Erik and leave

town. Erik had managed to slip out from under Daytas's watchful eye, and she was sure he'd worked out that she would be in the festival.

With the night breeze brushing against her face, Shizuku let out a sigh. All of a sudden, she noticed a few dozen potted white flowers at the side gate. They hadn't been there when she went to bed, and Shizuku felt herself staring intently at them.

"...They're beautiful."

These white flowers were likely being used in the ceremony the following day. The gate was opened soon after, and Nay came into view. He began loading the flowers onto the horse-drawn carriage parked outside.

Shizuku watched in admiration as he deftly loaded the pots onto the vehicle—yet one of the plants in the shadow of the hedge ended up being left behind. The gate closed, and the horse-drawn carriage disappeared into the distance.

"Oh, he's forgotten one..."

Shizuku could see it from the bedroom window, but Nay couldn't have noticed it. For a moment, Shizuku didn't know what to do, but then it occurred to her that the flowers might wither if they were left out all night. She threw on some clothes and left the room, rushing down the silent hallway and out through the front door. Once she was outside, she started heading toward the side gate.

If the flowerpot had been in the corner of the courtyard where Amabelle's body was buried, she probably couldn't have brought herself to go—but this was in the opposite direction. After making her way through the trees, Shizuku reached the gate. The blooming white flowers were still sitting there, and she lifted the pot up into her arms.

"Good. Got it."

The white porcelain flowerpot was decorated with milky-white paper and had a white ribbon tied around it. The paper shimmered in the moonlight, which made Shizuku smile, and the small white flowers looked really cute. She drew her face closer to smell them...but then, her expression turned skeptical.

For some reason, they didn't smell like flowers.

They gave off a disturbing yet familiar odor, and Shizuku cocked her head in confusion—but just then, she was slammed against the ground. Her field of vision turned white. Shizuku was down on her hands and knees, and she heard the callous voice of a man coming from above her.

“What are you doing here?”

It was Daytas. Shizuku couldn’t answer him. He’d punched her cheek before she could spot him, and the impact made her head spin.

She could taste a mixture of blood and grass in her mouth. Having fallen on her face, she tried her hardest to move her right hand, but Daytas just stamped on it in a rage. Shizuku shrieked, but no sound came out.

“I asked you what you were doing. Were you trying to escape?”

“...N-no.”

Shizuku would probably be killed if she couldn’t justify why she’d been out here. Struggling to hold her cheek in her left hand, she began to explain.

“No... I just saw...these flowers...”

“Is that it?”

“I thought they’d been left behind...”

The man tutted as he lifted his foot. Shizuku pushed herself up with her trembling hands and covered her mouth. She could taste blood, but it was too dark to tell where she’d cut herself.

She was too scared to look up at Daytas but could still make out the white flowerpot in the periphery of her vision.

I’d almost forgotten this is the sort of man he is, she thought to herself.

Shizuku had almost fallen victim to his wrath once before, but since he hadn’t been violent for several days and had assured her that she’d be set free after the wedding, she’d let her guard down slightly. Or maybe it was the look she occasionally saw in his eyes and the story about his past that had made her less vigilant. Either way, she hadn’t expected to end up in a situation like this again—not until he’d actually hit her.

“If your life is as precious to you as you claim, then don’t leave your room for any reason.”

“...F-fine.”

“Get back inside.”

Daytas reached out his hand. Startled, Shizuku leaned back, shaking, and Daytas gave her a self-effacing smile. Instead of pulling her up by the hand, he brushed the dirt out of her hair, then wiped her dirty face with his fingers.

He wasn’t gentle about it, but it was hard to believe that this was the same hand that had hit her just moments earlier. Eventually, he took her hand and lifted her to her feet.

“Can you go back on your own?”

“Sure...”

Shizuku walked away before Daytas changed his mind. As she turned past the hedge, she spun back toward him. He was still standing in front of the pot, looking down at the flowers. It was too dark for Shizuku to make out the expression on his face, but strangely enough, she felt like she knew what it would be.

She spun around and continued making her way to her room. This time, she didn’t look back.



Shizuku had secretly worried that her cheek would swell up or bruise where Daytas had hit her, but when she woke up in the morning and looked in the mirror, she was relieved to see it hadn’t. All she needed to do was get through this one day. Then she’d be free. She wanted to reduce any sources of concern, however minor.

After hastily getting dressed, she placed Mea in the small box she’d been using as a bed, then put it in her bag. Nay was traveling with her, as he always did, and once they were in the horse-drawn carriage, he offered her a small leather bag.

“This is your reward. Take it with you.”

When Shizuku realized what this meant, she frowned at him.

“I don’t want it. If I were to accept something like that, it would make me complicit in your crime.”

“Don’t you want to get something out of this ordeal? Otherwise it won’t be worth your while.”

“It’s not a matter of ‘getting something out of it.’ I just don’t want it.”

It was just as likely that Nay would understand where Shizuku was coming from as it was that he wouldn’t. Maybe she was being childishly stubborn, but she still couldn’t allow herself to give Daytas the satisfaction.

She’d witnessed death a number of times since arriving in this world, but killing someone out of sheer emotion was unforgivable. No matter what had happened between them, using death as a means to an end was wrong.

Shizuku glanced out the carriage window. The town was abuzz with a celebratory atmosphere, and children smiled and placed flowers in each other’s hair. This heartwarming scene would have cheered most people up, but Shizuku just felt sad. She closed her eyes.

Since nobility and councilors would be attending the ceremony, security was extremely tight, and only those involved with the wedding were allowed to enter the church. To make up for this, once the ceremony was over, the newlyweds were supposed to ride around the town in a horse-drawn carriage, allowing the public to get a glimpse of them.

Shizuku, however, would not be there for the eyes of the public. Nay had told her to sneak out of the church’s back entrance before the carriage set off. Shizuku wondered how the crowd would react seeing Daytas alone, but right now, she wasn’t in any position to worry about that.

As soon as Shizuku reached her dressing room in the church, the first thing her attendants did was cover her in makeup. The endless succession of instructions telling her to “Look this way,” “Look that way,” “Close your eyes,” and “Look up” made her zone out halfway through. She was sitting in a chair, so she hadn’t moved an inch, but for some reason, the process was gradually wearing her out. If she had been a real bride, she would have flaked out from

exhaustion.

However, when Shizuku was told that her makeup was done and she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she was left speechless. She'd felt like it had been taking far too long, but the time that her makeup artist had spent had definitely paid off.

Her eyes, which had always been on the larger side, had been enhanced by beautifully applied lines and highlighted with silver, adding a touch of glamour. In combination with her black eyelashes, which looked glossier than they had before, they made Shizuku look cute yet alluring. Although her skin—which had been suffering from a few breakouts—had been carefully covered with foundation, it looked pale and clear, rather than heavy. Pearl-colored highlights and rosy shading had been gently applied to different parts of her face, adding definition to the bridge of her nose and giving her the pink cheeks of a truly happy bride.

With this makeup, she might have really passed for the daughter of a noble family—even if their facial features were different. She looked like herself and yet like a completely different person at the same time.

She sighed in admiration, gazing at the girl in the mirror.

“Whoa, makeup is amazing. This might actually fool people.”

Her makeup artist had been wearing a satisfied smile on her face, but hearing Shizuku's over-the-top comment, her shoulders drooped. Shizuku knew she couldn't sit around and stare captivatedly into the mirror all day, though. The ceremony's schedule had been worked out to the minute.

“Next, Miss Amabelle, you need to get dressed.”

“Oh, okay.”

Shizuku moved to the corner of the room, not wanting to get in the way while her attendants were preparing her dress. From the window beside her, she caught a glimpse of the area surrounding the church's rear entrance. She found herself staring at the open doorway for no particular reason.

Plant pots were being taken out of boxes and carried in through the door, one after another—the same pots that Nay had been moving the previous night. It

looked like they were decorations for the ceremony, as she'd assumed. But just as Shizuku felt satisfied by that explanation, she realized something.

Last night, the smell of the white flowers had strongly resembled that of gunpowder.



Erik had figured out which route the couple would take in their post-ceremony parade, but it would still be hard for him to act in that space of time. Stopping a moving carriage wasn't easy.

Instead, he had his sights set on an even earlier opportunity. Only authorized individuals were permitted to enter the church, however, so in order to weasel his way in, he would first need to approach someone else.

Varola arrived at the church on time, accompanied by two ladies-in-waiting. No amount of makeup could conceal how sickly she looked, however. As she entered the church, covering her mouth with her hands, a young man who'd just disembarked from his own carriage called out to her. Dressed as a mage, the man asked her whether she was, in fact, Lord Deseuah's daughter, then walked over to her.

"I was originally going to speak to your father, but he wasn't home," the man told her, keeping his voice low. "I have something to tell you about the bride who's getting married today."

"Do you mean Amabelle? What's the problem?" Varola asked.

"She's an imposter. She's just an ordinary girl who's been coerced into playing the role of Amabelle."

"What?"

"The real one is... Look."

The man held out a small portrait. The girl in the picture, who had black hair and black eyes, had a decidedly arrogant smile on her face. Her features were totally different from Shizuku's—yet there in the corner of the picture was the name *Amabelle Lyshkariza*, alongside the signature of a famous artist.

"Is this...?"

“I used my connections to get hold of it. There are a number of copies in circulation in the towns in the south. I also have this.”

Erik unfolded the cloth parcel on his palm. Inside were a number of expensive accessories, and one of them, a golden ring, had the name *Lyshkariza* etched into the back of it.

Varola stared at it with a look of disbelief.

“Where did you...?”

“At Daytas’s residence. I was waiting until he and his guard both left, and today, I finally had the chance to search the property. It was clear what happened as soon as I saw where the soil had been dug up in the courtyard.”

Varola’s eyes widened. Staring straight into her eyes, Erik continued.

“The real Amabelle Lyshkariza was murdered. The girl who’s about to become the bride is my companion. I need you to help me.”

The cold edge to Erik’s voice suggested that he wasn’t prepared to take no for an answer.



Once she’d finished getting dressed, Shizuku looked at Nay, who watched her from the corner of the room. For several days, they’d spent the majority of their time together, and yet Daytas’s right-hand man was still an enigma to her.

Beginning to find the silence uncomfortable, Shizuku opened her mouth to speak.

“Isn’t it horrible how everyone ignores the god in the myth this ceremony is based on? I mean, his wife is the only one who speaks to him.”

“An unwillingness to understand is the issue here,” said Nay.

Shizuku thought he was implying that *she* didn’t fully comprehend the story, but upon seeing her reaction, Nay clarified his point.

“The other girls and the villagers had no intention of understanding what the god was saying to them. Only the god’s future wife, Ludia, was genuine and sincere enough to do so.”

Shizuku was taken aback by his surprisingly serious response. Now that she

looked at it from that angle, though, it made more sense. A god's words were often hard to comprehend, leaving plenty of room for interpretation. The other people who Aetea spoke to hadn't even *tried* to understand him. Only the woman who'd treated him with sincerity had been able to become his wife.

Shizuku thought that perhaps the role of the god's wife was like that of ancient Japanese *miko*—female shamans who could convey messages from the gods.

With her newfound understanding, Shizuku let out a sigh.

"Whew, it really is an interesting story."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door to her dressing room, and Nay stood up to answer it. Standing in the doorway was a young girl who appeared to be a servant. She whispered something to Nay, who nodded, then turned back to Shizuku.

"Lord Deseuah wishes to see me. I'll be back shortly, so just stay where you are."

"Okay," Shizuku replied.

He quickly left the room, following the young girl. Shizuku relaxed, alone at last. This moment of relief was soon brought to an end, however, as moments later, she heard another knock at the door. Shizuku rose to her feet in a panic, but with her dress dragging along the floor, she didn't feel confident walking. She opened her mouth, intending on answering by shouting loudly enough for the person outside to hear, but before she could, the door opened by itself and a young man stepped inside.

"Hey. Long time no see," he said.

"Y-yes. It has been a while."

"Sure has. I'm glad to see you're not hurt. Now then, get undressed."

"You might want to watch your phrasing..."

Erik looked skeptical. It was an expression that reminded Shizuku of her everyday life in this world up until now, and she was so relieved, she began to laugh.

Erik wasn't the only one who'd entered the room. Once Varola came in with one of her ladies-in-waiting, she made her way over to Shizuku and gave her a deep bow.

"Forgive me. I didn't know that you weren't Amabelle..."

"I-I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm the one who lied."

When Shizuku bowed back to her, Varola's beautiful face formed a smile. To Shizuku, there was pain in the expression, though she wasn't sure why.

Her face pale, Varola issued her nearby court lady an order with a glance. The other woman went and stood behind Shizuku, placed her hands on her veil.

"I'm sorry you got mixed up in all this. I'll play the role of the bride for you. You should escape as soon as you can."

"Huh? But I thought you were already playing one of the brides."

"My court lady will wear my outfit. It'll be fine. With the veil and the makeup, nobody will be able to tell the difference."

Shizuku was going to be freed after the ceremony either way, but wouldn't this carelessly anger Daytas? She glanced at Erik with apprehension, but Erik just urged her to hurry and left the room. As the court lady removed the pins that kept her veil in place, Shizuku expressed her doubts to Varola, who'd begun getting undressed.

"Daytas...is a scary man. And he's assured me that he'll set me free once this is over. I don't want to cause problems for you, Varola..."

"You're not going to. *We're* the ones who caused problems for *you*—that's all there is to it. It's best if you don't get involved any further. I'll put a stop to this."

In that moment, Varola looked unwell. Still, Shizuku could sense her conviction.

Shizuku's breath caught a little, but she couldn't waste any more time arguing with someone as determined as Varola apparently was. Shizuku took off her dress and changed back into her plain clothes. She took Mea out of her little box and held her small body against her chest. Erik had already fetched all of

her bags from Daytas's residence, so Mea was the only thing she had to worry about right now.

Meanwhile, Varola had swiftly changed into the bridal gown, assisted by her court lady. Once she'd put the veil on to conceal her face, Shizuku gazed at her in a daze.

"Um, is this really okay?" she asked. "Your dad will help us if we need him to, right?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, nothing's going to happen to me. I'll buy you some time so you can get away."

The veil made it hard to see Varola's expression, but Shizuku did as she'd been encouraged to do and reached a hand out for the door. As she did, though, she couldn't help but feel worried, and she looked back over her shoulder.

"...You were Daytas's girlfriend, weren't you?"

For a brief moment, an expanse of emptiness stretched out before them like a dry, barren land. That fractured, irretrievable moment in time lay there between them...and Varola laughed.

"The truth is," she said, "I felt as if someone like you might be able to change him bit by bit. I thought you might try and understand him. But that was naive of me. I'm the only one who can listen to what he has to say; it's always been that way. Though I don't know if I have the right to do that anymore..."

Varola was talking about the past—about things that were unattainable. Having unwittingly touched the depths of Varola's psyche, Shizuku fell silent, unsure what to say.

Something must have happened between them, but Shizuku felt she'd be overstepping her bounds if she tried to find out what it was. So all she could do was suppress those indefinable emotions and bow her head.

"Thank you very much," she told Varola. "...And take care."

Covering her chest where Mea was hidden with her hand, Shizuku left the room. Erik was waiting for her outside, leaning against the wall.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“Yep.”

With that, the pair began walking down the hallway. It was full of people, hurriedly rushing back and forth.

There were barely fifteen minutes before the ceremony was supposed to begin, and time was ticking.



“Lord Deseuah hasn’t arrived yet.”

Daytas scowled when he heard the news—an expression that he never would have made in front of his other employees—but Nay maintained eye contact, unfazed. When Daytas asked him what he meant by this, he retold the sequence of events in order.

“Lord Deseuah’s messenger just called for me, but when I arrived at the specified location, Lord Deseuah wasn’t there. Not only that, but there was no trace of him anywhere in the church. Though Varola seems to have arrived...”

“Did he flee?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t see how the truth could have gotten out.”

Despite his role as Daytas’s attendant, Nay was conveying his message to his master in a rather impolite manner, and Daytas glared at him. Despite this, however, he looked more thoughtful than annoyed.

“Keep searching the venue, right until the last minute,” Daytas commanded. “There’s no point to any of this if he’s not here.”

“Got it. Do you want to postpone the wedding if we can’t find him?”

“...No, we can’t do that. It doesn’t matter whether we keep that girl under confinement—if she’s unveiled to the public, people will realize she’s not Amabelle. And besides, my contract with you ends today.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

Nay knew this better than anyone, but he nodded as if he’d only just remembered, and Daytas’s face contorted into a sardonic smile. Just as his attendant was about to leave the room, Daytas called out to him.

“What will you do after tomorrow? Will you return to your country?”

The olive-skinned man stopped in his tracks. He answered the question without turning around.

“Of course not. I might not be as hung up on the past as you are, but I still have no interest in going back. There’s no place for me there.”

With that, Nay left in silence; even his footsteps were inaudible. The only sound that could be heard in the room was that of the door closing behind him, leaving an expressionless Daytas alone.



Shizuku covered her face as she followed behind Erik. Hurrying along, she worried about Mea, who was still lying against her chest.

The church’s passageways were bizarrely complicated, with some paths leading up and some going down. Yet despite this, Erik seemed to know the way, and he picked a quieter route toward the exit.

As Shizuku approached the atrium overlooking where the ceremony would take place, an area off-limits to regular guests, the scene unfolding below caught her attention.

“Th-there are so many people here... I’m glad I’m not part of it anymore...”

“Pretty much all the influential people from the town are in attendance. It is a festival, after all.”

“I’d hate to have a wedding like this—even if all the expenses were paid for...”

Shizuku glanced down at the church, which was adorned with white flowers and fabric, and her gaze fixed upon something in her line of sight.

“Wait, that flower...”

“Huh? Which one?” asked Erik.

“The one beneath the candlestick. That’s...”

Just as Shizuku was about to tell him that she recognized it, she collided with a man who had emerged from an unseen corridor, making her stagger.

“S-sorry,” she said, apologizing out of sheer habit—but when she looked up,

she froze.

Nay looked down at her, understandably dumbfounded.

“You... What are you doing here...?”

Erik was the first to act. He hurled something at Nay, who dodged it but was caught off balance, and Erik used that opportunity to pull Shizuku by the hand and start running. They swiftly turned a corner.

“We’re in trouble now. I’m not really sure what he’s capable of.”

Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to look over her shoulder. She couldn’t hear any footsteps, but she could tell that Nay was still chasing them because she could sense an unpleasant pressure following them from behind. The pair sprinted down the narrow hallway.

At the end of the passage were piles of leftover wedding decorations and tools about as wide as a person. Shizuku held Mea against her chest so she wouldn’t drop her as she ran, but their escape didn’t end up lasting long.

She could sense Nay closing in on them from behind, and Erik, who’d been pulling her by the hand, shoved her to the side.

“Run,” he said, then immediately turned around to confront Nay.

“Erik!”

Shizuku wanted to stop him, but she’d built up too much of a momentum. Once she was a few steps ahead, she looked over her shoulder, and what she saw left her speechless.

A magic circle had appeared on the floor. Nay had stepped inside it, and innumerable white threads were coiling around him. They had enveloped both his sword and its sheath, preventing him from pulling it any farther out.

Nay glanced at the white threads wrapped around his right arm, then glowered at Erik, who was reciting an incantation.

“A trap, huh? Damn mages.”



“Advance preparation is what we mages do best. There’s no reason to get mad at me—all I want is my companion back.”

Shizuku, who was a few paces ahead of them, watched on with bated breath.

Just then, she felt something move next to her chest, and when she looked down, she noticed that the small green bird was beginning to stir. Mea had opened her eyes.

“Mea!”

In her periphery, she saw Nay forcefully raise his hand. Tearing through the white threads with sheer strength, he managed to unsheathe his sword. He swiftly cut through the threads with its sharp blade, then swung it down toward Erik.

Thanks to the threads that were still in place, however, the sword didn’t move as quickly as it usually would have, and Erik had enough time to step back, causing Nay’s sword to slice through thin air instead. Nay took one step out of the magic circle, then mercilessly attacked Erik with his sword once again.

“Erik!”

Shizuku didn’t close her eyes. Instead, she found herself rushing toward her companion, as if she were being propelled toward him. She heard a high-pitched, metallic sound. As Shizuku watched on in wide-eyed shock, a fearless grin appeared on Nay’s face.

“How amusing. You’re a sword wielder,” he remarked.

“It’s not really my forte,” replied Erik.

From the serious expression on his face, it was hard to tell whether Erik was being honest or not, but either way, he had parried Nay’s weapon with a slender thrusting sword. The young mage deflected the force of his opponent’s sword and pushed Nay back to create some space between them. From Shizuku’s perspective, however, it looked more like Nay had allowed himself to be rebuffed this time.

Nay raised his longsword, preparing for a third strike, and Shizuku could sense he was channeling more force into this one. Erik scowled slightly, then lifted his

own weapon and took a half step back. The odds weren't looking good for him.

But Shizuku stepped in just in time.

"Stop that!"

If Erik's decision to parry Nay's potentially devastating strike was a gamble, then Shizuku's own judgment was, too.

Considering the timing with which Nay had showed up, he probably didn't realize that Varola would be standing in for her. Nay needed a bride, so he wouldn't dare swing his sword at her.

When she reflected on it later, she decided that this assumption was what had spurred her to act. In reality, though, she'd jumped in front of Erik on sheer panicked impulse.

"You..."

The momentum behind Nay's sword weakened, and the look on Erik's face changed as he pulled her close to him to shield her in turn.

In his arms, Shizuku shouted, "Mea! Grab the flower basket!"

The small bird on Shizuku's chest responded to her master's orders by summoning the little strength she had.

There was a flower basket on top of one of the piles of boxes in the corridor, and it fell to the ground. It had been filled with colorful flower petals, and a flurry rained down on Nay, obstructing his vision. Shizuku used this opportunity to pull a rod out of one of the boxes, and Erik released her from his embrace.

"Sorry!"

Nay had never hit her and had actually been quite kind at times. But as she yelled her apology, Shizuku lifted the rod into the air—then brought it down, aiming not for Nay's sword, but for his wrist.

It took Nay only a moment to work out what she was trying to do, but white threads reached out from behind him to stop his movements. Shizuku could hear Erik chanting.

The wooden rod stabbed the man right in his wrist. Although Shizuku wasn't

particularly strong, the impact carried all the way through his body and left Nay's hand numb. It was just for a moment, but in that brief moment when Nay's grip loosened, the white threads pulled his sword away, and as he instinctively reached out to grab it, Shizuku struck Nay's hand again.

The man winced in pain. A white ribbon had been tied around the wooden rod, and Shizuku held her weapon at the ready.

Beside her, Erik snatched the longsword that had previously belonged to Nay, and the young mage shot him a cold glare. Having lost his weapon, Nay glanced at the pair, then laughed cynically.

"How funny."

That was all he said. Unarmed, he took a half step forward.

It was only half a step, but for some reason, it made Shizuku tense up with fear, and Erik pushed her behind him.

"E-Erik!"

"I'll be fine. Just get out of here."

"Even if you run, you'll be caught right away," taunted Nay. "If you don't want this man to die, then you'd better come back with me."

Nay raised a tanned finger in the air. It exuded an unsettling air of mystery, much like that of an ancient sword.

Shizuku was on the verge of calling Mea's name when she heard a cheer echoing in the distance. It was coming from the ceremony—a sign that it was about to start.

Shizuku still stood behind Erik, and Nay narrowed his eyes in her direction.

"What happened to your dress? Did you find someone to replace you?"

"Yeah, Varola..."

He'd spoken to her in the same calm tone of voice he'd used during the several days they'd spent together, and Shizuku had answered it without thinking. Hearing Shizuku's response, a slight frown creased Nay's face. Yet a moment later, he smiled.

“I should have known that woman would be up to something...”

It wasn't a cheerful sort of smile—there was a twisted gloominess to it. Shizuku wasn't sure how to react to seeing his smile for the first time, and when Nay noticed her looking at him, he waved his hand as if to shoo her away.

“You should just go, then. Your life has been spared. Now you and that man can live the rest of your days together.”

“Huh?”

As Shizuku stood there in astonishment, Nay simply turned around and walked away, leaving Shizuku and Erik alone in the narrow hallway.

A few moments later, Shizuku finally looked up at Erik.

“Are we safe?”

“Seems like it. Let's go before it's too late.”

Erik stuffed the sword he'd confiscated into a random box, then started running down the hallway. Shizuku followed him, and as she did, she looked back over her shoulder, but nobody was there.



Daytas had yet to receive any notice of Lord Deseuah's arrival, and Nay still hadn't come back. Despite his growing frustration, Daytas stood up straight and strode confidently into the nave of the church. Six brides were already lined up behind the altar, with the rightmost spot reserved for the woman who would become his wife.

Some of the upper-class attendees observed the talented young man through a lens of self-importance, while others looked on in admiration. Regardless of the spectators' views, Daytas held his head up defiantly as he walked straight down the long aisle.

He was so close to making one of his numerous boyhood fantasies come true.

“One day, I'll become somebody those fools won't be able to ignore. I'll stand before them a self-made man.”

When a young Daytas had made this pledge to his sick, bedridden mother, she'd looked at him sadly. These weren't the words of a boy voicing his childish

ambitions, but an indication of his extreme, deep-rooted obsession.

His mother had passed away shortly after that, and Daytas had lived a solitary life ever since.

He couldn't understand why he'd been unable to overcome the dark loathing lurking within him. So many people on the vast continent had suffered greater misery than him, yet his own life was all he knew. He couldn't find solace in comparing his situation to that of others.

Daytas turned his gaze to the women standing behind the altar.

Five of them would refuse to listen to him. Only one would respond. Yet that was all just a part of the myth. In his real life, not even one person had ever bothered listening to what he had to say—apart from his attendant, that is, who harbored a similar resentment.

Why did he need to tell his story if it wasn't going to get through to anyone anyway? It was ludicrous. Everything was fake. Everyone else sneered at others as they came to mutually beneficial compromises—trivial things like that were enough to make them happy. Daytas, however, couldn't bear the thought of ending up like them.

Standing before the altar, he turned around and bowed to the attendees. Then he turned back and positioned himself in front of the woman standing on the far left. Clutching her gloved hand, he asked, "What is your name?"

She didn't answer. Comforted by this reaction, Daytas took the hand of the next bride.

Daytas would never forget the first time he saw Varola.

It had happened in the back garden of the lord's residence. Daytas had lost his way when the two of them happened to cast eyes on one another. He'd hardly been able to believe that a creature as beautiful as her existed. In spite of her immaturity, she was perfect, and she felt completely unattainable to him.

He'd wanted to try speaking to her but had fretted over it nonstop. In the end, he managed to approach her, shaking with nerves all the while. Varola had looked up at him questioningly, then smiled at him. He asked for her name, and he gave her his. Then the pair took each other's hands. It felt like the natural

thing to do.

The time they spent together was as sweet as sugar—but it ended almost as quickly as it had begun.

When Daytas had told her that he was marrying someone else, Varola's only response had been "Okay."

She probably knew that her father had intervened. The pair hadn't seen each other since, and yet there she was, standing right by him, just one of the many people who wouldn't listen to what he had to say.

Daytas took the hand of the fifth woman. He knew that this was Varola's role. However, as he recited his line, his expression shifted—the woman's hand didn't feel quite right. He looked up and peered through the heavy veil, and although he couldn't really see the woman's face, judging by the faint lines around her mouth, it was clear she wasn't Varola.

Daytas's face tensed up with anger.

She'd spurned him again, fleeing and taking her father with her. Even here at the end, she hadn't been able to bring herself to stand before him. That was just the kind of woman she was.

It was a show of arrogance that he couldn't bring himself to forgive. Still, perhaps it was his fault for having such high expectations of her all this time. He was a fool for thinking she'd give him something in return.

Daytas scoffed at the woman wearing Varola's dress, then stood in front of the last person in line—the mysterious young girl he'd only just met.

She was physically weak but strong-willed, and although she was scared of him, she sometimes seemed to look right through him. He figured that she must have had a pretty straightforward upbringing. While she wasn't entirely naive to the hardships of life, it was clear that she'd been raised with affection and had a genuine urge to trust others. She was kindhearted, and despite all that Daytas had put her through, she still looked at him with concern. She'd never survive adult life with a personality like that. It would be best for her to go back to her family as soon as possible, before deceit and hurt caused her to change.

Daytas took the last woman by the hand. He could feel it trembling slightly

through the white glove, and he turned his attention beyond the veil to the woman wearing it.

“What is your name?” he asked.

There was a short pause.

For some reason, Daytas felt a rush of nostalgia. Yet there was no way for him to get back what he’d lost.

The woman gently took hold of his hand, and the warmth of her touch permeated their gloves—so much so that it was bizarre. It was a familiar sensation, and realizing why that was, Daytas found himself dumbstruck. Then the woman opened her mouth and answered him in a whisper.

“My name is Varola Deseuah.”

Her voice had once been serene and free of discomfort. To Daytas, it had sounded like the most beautiful thing in the world. Like delicate glasswork, she was pure, with an everlasting sparkle.

Daytas did nothing but gaze at the last woman in line. This encounter was far more nerve-racking than their first. And far more sorrowful.



Having broken free from Nay, Erik and Shizuku had run almost all the way to the exit. Following Erik’s directions, Shizuku turned a corner, but the next thing she knew, she was about to fall over.

“Whoa!”

She’d almost tripped over an empty plant pot that was sitting in the hallway, causing her to lose her balance. Shizuku placed a hand on the wall to keep herself upright, then promptly hopped over the pot.

“Th-that was close.”

“You need to be careful. You’re pretty clumsy at times.”

“Thank you *very much* for that piece of advice.”

Shizuku checked over her shoulder, but there was no one there. The pot she’d almost knocked over had reminded her of the white flowers, and she looked up at Erik as they dashed down the straight hallway.

“That reminds me. Daytas hit me yesterday...”

“He hit you?”

“Y-yes.”

Shizuku felt a bolt of static electricity zap through the air, but it had probably just been her imagination. Absentmindedly shrugging her shoulders, Shizuku continued.

“There were all these white flowers in pots. They looked like wedding decorations, but now I think about it, they kind of smelled like gunpowder...”

Shizuku was probably voicing the slight apprehension she had now because, subconsciously, she’d always been suspicious of Daytas’s motives. At first, she’d assumed he wanted to fill the vacancy left by the girl he’d accidentally murdered so that he could become a councilor without a hitch, but his plan was too far too unstable for that to be the case. What if people who knew the real Amabelle showed up? And what would happen when they paraded around town together?

Daytas was constantly on edge—he wasn’t optimistic enough to believe it would all be over once they got through the ceremony. It felt like there was something else that was even more important to him. A motive for holding this ceremony, for example.

That was why the smell of gunpowder was worrying Shizuku. It wasn’t just the unpleasant odor, but subtle and unpleasant premonitions that flickered through the back of her mind.

“...So that’s what he was planning,” Erik responded plainly.

Shizuku looked like she was about to come to a stop, but Erik pushed her forward.

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

“He snuck gunpowder in, then, didn’t he? That means he’s planning to blow the church up. There were strange ignition spells beneath the candlesticks, too. I think his plan was to place gunpowder on top of the magic circles so it catches fire.”

“H-he’s going to blow it up?! Like a terrorist bombing?! But why?!”

“I don’t know.”

The pair turned a corner. They could see the door leading to the outside at the end of the hallway; however, as Shizuku set eyes on it, she started slowing down. Shizuku looked up at Erik, the worry in her eyes clear to see.

“Then we need to put a stop to this... We still have time, don’t we?”

“I don’t know. They wouldn’t wait until the end of the ceremony to light the candles—that wouldn’t make sense. So I can’t imagine we have much time at all.”

Shizuku looked like she was about to stop, so Erik yanked her along by the hand. She knew what he was implying, but Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to run any farther.

“I’m going back. For one thing, Varola’s there...”

“You can’t. Escaping comes first for you. I’ll go instead.”

Facing the door, Erik tapped Shizuku lightly on the back. Then, without a hint of hesitation, he turned and ran back the way they’d come. For a moment, Shizuku watched in astonishment—but it didn’t take long for her to follow him.

“I’m coming with you!”

“What’re you talking about? They’ll recognize you. And besides, you can’t even see magic circles.”

“Uh, you’re right about that. Still...” Shizuku retraced her steps. She was scared, but she had no regrets. “It’s like people always say—two heads are better than one! Let’s hurry up and put out those flames!”

What had Daytas seen in Shizuku’s gaze? What had he wanted from Varola? If Shizuku had really been Amabelle, she would have found herself in an even more confusing situation, but maybe she would have been able to change something, even if only slightly.

Either way, Shizuku could only be herself—a passing traveler, and an outsider who wouldn’t listen to other people’s advice. She felt like she was all alone in the outfield. That didn’t mean she was entirely useless, though. She might not

have been able to help the barren land inside Daytas flourish, but she could still help make sure he didn't lose everything right here.

Erik's face had an unusually stern expression, but he wordlessly led Shizuku back down the hallway regardless, and they set off at a run.

Before they knew it, the cheers had stopped, and the church had been plunged into a deep silence.



"Why are you here?"

At long last, Daytas had managed to muster a few simple words from his dry throat.

"I thought I should be the one standing here before you. That's all."

Varola had said her name during their exchange, but it had been too quiet for the guests to hear. They just sat there watching the frozen pair with looks of mild confusion.

"What about your father? I heard he isn't here."

"He's gone," Varola replied.

"Gone...?"

Daytas could barely see her through her veil. He wanted to shove away the fabric that was obstructing his view, but he couldn't bring himself to. Part of him wanted to see her, but there was another part of him that was reluctant to. He didn't want to see her jewel-like eyes become tainted with scorn for him.

Varola tightened her grip, grasping his hand with her slender fingers. They were so delicate that it seemed like she'd never lifted a heavy object in her entire life.

"I thought this marriage would make you happy. I hoped it might make me feel less guilty, too. But my father had other ideas. Yesterday, he started saying that he wasn't going to make you a councilor anymore...and I couldn't accept that."

Daytas listened in silence. He could have argued back, but he wanted to listen to Varola speak.

“So I killed him. I killed him in the heat of an argument,” she muttered softly.

Grasping the significance of her words, Daytas’s eyes widened, and he grabbed her shoulder with his free hand.

“You killed him?” Varola didn’t reply immediately. She just smiled. “I wanted to give you a gift of some sort, and I thought that would make you happy. You always hated him, didn’t you? When I realized I’d killed him, I felt like I’d done something outrageous, but then I thought about the freedom it would give you, which made me happy... But you killed Amabelle, didn’t you?”

Those words revealed to Daytas that his whole scheme had been exposed. This was why Varola was standing there in front of him, wearing a dress that belonged to someone else.

She was clutching his hand, just like she had the day they’d first met.

Now, though, it was the hand of an adult. Even touching her, Daytas felt a distance between them. They couldn’t remain as naive and innocent as they had been as children.

“Daytas, did you decide to hold this ceremony and get an innocent girl involved just to exact your revenge? Is it because you resent the town that drove you and your mother away? Or do you resent me for throwing stones at you in the past?”

The two of them just stared at each other.



While the ceremony was going on, one of the craftsmen working near the entrance peered into the venue through a small window, a look of confusion across his face.

“Don’t you need to light those candlesticks?” he asked the hired mage standing nearby.

“They’re supposed to be lit when the ceremony is over—when the groom is giving his speech and the bride has gone to get changed.”

“Hmm. Seems a shame not to light them now.”

“Fancy folk tend to get all sorts of funny ideas,” said the mage, yawning.

There were about five minutes until the mage was scheduled to activate the spells with his magic, but the ceremony didn't seem to be proceeding according to plan. Strangely, the groom seemed hesitant to move away from his bride. By now, they should have been standing in front of the altar, signing their vows. What could have happened?

"I'm screwed..."

This was a meticulously planned upper-class ceremony, and the mage had expected everything to go smoothly. In fact, he'd been so sure it would end on time that he'd booked a transit ring slot immediately after it was scheduled to end. He had another job to take care of in the next town he was going to, and the mage looked at his watch and frowned.

He'd been hired to channel his power into a spell at a specific time. Nothing more, nothing less. If the ceremony was running late, then that was his client's problem.

He told himself he'd get started at the scheduled time. Besides, the candles would look prettier lit.

Then he yawned again.



As shocked as he was, Daytas also felt somewhat relieved. Voice shaking, he asked Varola a question.

"When did you figure out who I really was? Did your father tell you?"

"No, I realized before that. I worked it out when you visited our mansion under a new name. You may find this hard to believe after all this time, but I always regretted what I did. I saw how much my mom was affected by the presence of your mother, and that made me do horrible things. But once you were gone, I regretted my actions. When I realized you were back, I was so pleased. I'd always wanted the chance to apologize to you..."

"I got close to you because I wanted revenge."

"I know. I knew that right away."

Daytas could sense the guests behind him beginning to stir. They couldn't work out why neither Daytas nor Varola was moving.

Up until a few days before, Daytas had planned on setting them all on fire. He could still vividly recall how those supposedly sophisticated individuals had insulted and mistreated him and his mother, as if it had happened just yesterday. But right now, all of that seemed inconsequential to him. It was as if something was being washed away, leaving nothing but Varola's voice reverberating inside him.

Daytas stayed silent for a few moments before suddenly taking off his gloves. Then he took off Varola's and held her hands, skin against skin.

"When that man found out who I was, he called me a stray dog. He insisted that I was only making advances on you because I was a lowborn mutt."

"My father was blind—he never understood either of us. Though I'm no better than him in that respect."

Although he didn't verbalize it, Daytas felt the same way.

He'd never understood Varola and had convinced himself that she would never understand him, either. He told himself they had no common ground—that all that stood between them was a deep divide. And yet she'd been experiencing something similar, albeit in a different form. They'd both endured so much loneliness to reach this point.

"I wanted you to be happy. I wanted you to have your freedom. But I guess we both made mistakes." Varola's voice was shaking.

Daytas could tell that she was crying. He lifted her veil, and for the first time in a long time, he stared into her face. The tears rolling down her face were unusually clear. He touched her pale cheeks and wiped them away.

She was right. He had gotten close to her to get revenge. He'd wanted to hurt her. He'd whispered loving words with a gentle smile on his face, but inside, he'd always wanted to rip her to shreds. But now, for some reason, that fervent obsession that had burned inside him had disappeared. He was looking at her through a pure, unaffected lens—just like he had when they first met.

The other brides gawked at the unveiled bride in amazement. The commotion from the crowd grew louder. Varola glanced at the guests, who were beginning to rise to their feet, then gave Daytas a bittersweet smile.

“There’s nowhere for us to go now, is there, Daytas?”

“You didn’t have to join me,” he replied.

Varola silently shook her head, and Daytas fell silent, understanding the meaning behind the gesture.

Once upon a time, the pair’s hands had drifted apart. Their split was a decisive one.

If only they’d held on to one another with the same childlike innocence they’d once had, frolicking and running around the garden together—perhaps their future would have been different.

Now, Daytas held her tightly in his arms, and Varola didn’t fight back. She just sobbed against his chest. He kissed her head, then looked back toward the altar. His gaze fell on the guests, who were beginning to look angry.

They were so foolish, believing that as long as they had power, they could manipulate any situation to suit themselves.

Yet Daytas was no better himself—he had leveraged his influence to seek revenge. A self-deprecating smile played on his lips.

Everything was futile. Nothing could bloom in a barren land.

And yet—as twisted as it was—the wounds that the woman in his arms had suffered only made her shine brighter.



Erik and Shizuku ran toward the entrance of the church, sure that the ignition spell would originate from there.

If Daytas had been honest about setting Shizuku free, he must have been planning to start the fire after Shizuku had left the church. Even so, there wasn’t much time left. The bride would be present for only about fifteen minutes in total. After that, Daytas would offer his greetings to his guests, and the pair would be publicly unveiled. There would be crowds of people waiting to see the newlyweds, so the parade would take up the most time.

Once Erik and Shizuku came out onto the first floor, they headed toward the doors, and a guard who’d spotted them from the other end of the hallway

scowled.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” he roared, his anger palpable.

Erik didn’t slow down. Instead, he whispered some instructions to Shizuku half a step behind him.

“I’ll buy us some time, so you go on ahead. There’s a door right next to the entrance that leads to a small room used by workers. The mage should be in there.”

“Okay!” Shizuku replied. “Oh, but...”

“What?”

“I can’t tell who’s a mage and who’s not.”

What if there were several people in the room? Magic circles were invisible to her, too.

“Huh? Really? Can’t you tell just by looking at them? The mage will be the one dressed like a mage.”

“And what does a mage’s outfit look like?”

“The most simple description is that it’s all one piece.”

“Ohh!”

Now that he said that, it kind of made sense. Shizuku looked at Erik out of the corner of her eye. He always wore a one-piece garment with a belt at the waist. Shizuku just never paid much attention to what other people were wearing.

As clichéd as it was, the phrase *mage’s robes* made her think of something loose and baggy. In fact, the mages who worked for Candela Castle had all been wearing that sort of airy robe, so it had never occurred to her that Erik’s tight clothing could also be characteristic of mages—which was strange, considering she’d already known he was one.

Still, she couldn’t waste any time dwelling on this revelation.

“Okay!” Shizuku replied immediately before quickening her pace.

As the guard opened his arms wide in an attempt to stop her, Erik hurled something at the man’s leg.

“Argh!” shouted the guard, looking down just before falling over onto his backside.

Shizuku used this opportunity to slip past him.

The entrance was right in front of her. Shizuku rushed into the reception area and brought herself to an abrupt halt, then scanned the area, spotting a small door. It had some sort of warning poster stuck to it, but she pushed it open, undeterred.

“I don’t have permission, but I’m coming in anyway!” she called out.

This sudden announcement prompted the five men inside the room to turn around in Shizuku’s direction.

One man, who was dressed in a one-piece ensemble, looked startled by the sudden intruder—but he continued to lower his right hand toward the floor, and Shizuku lunged at him.

“Don’t use your magic! It’ll explode!”

“Explode?!” repeated the mage. “Don’t be so stupid, I’ve already been paid for this!”

“I told you, don’t do this! It’s dangerous!”

“Get away from me! You’re getting in my way!”

The other four men were unsure how to react to this altercation—but then the mage shoved her out of the way, and Shizuku lost her balance and fell over. The man resumed the incantation, directing his hand toward the floor, but Shizuku cried out again.

“Stop! There’s gunpowder in those white pots!”



As Daytas held Varola in his arms, he gestured to the other brides to get down from the platform. Looking perplexed, they stepped back and left the room.

Once Daytas and Varola were the only two people left standing on the altar, he whispered something to her.

“You can still go back. Maybe you could still find a way to be happy.”

Varola responded with a small shake of the head, and Daytas let out a deep sigh. Was this how the god Aetea had felt when he'd held his wife in his arms, too?

They were the only two people in the world who could understand one another—the only ones who knew how the other person felt. Yet he didn't feel lonely anymore. In a way, Daytas almost felt happy here in this moment.

For an instant, the girl who'd fled crossed his mind. Was she already somewhere far away? Daytas certainly hoped so.

With a bittersweet smile on his face, Daytas lifted his bride up into his arms, and Varola wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on tight. Then Daytas reached out toward the altar.



Just as the mage was channeling his magic into the spell, he was stopped by one of the craftsmen in the room. The brawny man gripped the mage's hand as he gazed out the small window, and the mage began to yell with bewilderment.

"What?! Don't tell me you believed the nonsense that girl was spewing!"

"You were supposed to do this after the bride left. Why are you trying to light the candles now?"

"It's already the scheduled time."

"Whether there's gunpowder in there or not, don't just go making up your own rules."

The other craftsmen were eyeing the flustered mage with disapproval as his gaze darted around anxiously.

That was when Shizuku sprinted out of the small room.

"Wait! I'll put a stop to this!"

She could buy them some time. She just needed to win Daytas over and get him to rescind his earlier order. It didn't matter if he hit her—this time, she had no intention of backing down.

Shizuku went back to the entrance of the church, then pushed open the doors to the ceremony hall. She stepped onto the carpet that the brides must have

walked down. At the end of the long, straight aisle, there was an altar, and behind it stood Daytas, holding Varola up in his arms.

He reached out toward the altar, then picked up a lit candle.

The pair turned to the audience. At the back of the altar lay countless white flowers, and Daytas stepped into their midst. As people looked on in confusion, Daytas lifted the candle into the air.

Shizuku, the only person in the church who knew what he was doing, let out a near-shriek of anger.

“Daytas!”

He turned around. Varola caught sight of Shizuku. They both stared in shock, and for a moment, it was like time had frozen. Then Daytas gave a strained smile, a cynical look in his eyes—and hurled the candle at his feet.

The white flowers, which must have been artificial, burst into flames. The hem of Varola’s long dress caught on fire, which she noticed with a smile.

As the petrified audience watched this dramatic twist unfold, Shizuku tried to run up to Daytas and Varola, but someone grabbed her hand from behind. When she turned around, she saw Erik glaring at both her and the couple behind the altar with a stern expression on his face.

“Don’t go.”

“But there’s still—”

Shizuku had wanted to say, “There’s still time,” but in the moment that followed, the deafening sound of an explosion buffeted her, and she was struck by the ensuing blast, debris hurling toward her.

She couldn’t understand what had caused it. Turning back toward the couple at the altar, Shizuku found she could hardly see them, as the area behind the altar was almost completely obscured by smoke.

“Why...?”

Scream after scream echoed through the church, and people rushed toward the entrance, all trying to flee. Despite the horde rushing toward her, Shizuku just stood there in a daze. Erik put his arms around her and tried to drag her

outside.

“Let’s get out of here. Things aren’t looking good.”

“But what about Varola and Daytas?”

“We can’t do anything to save them. They’re already dead.”

“Why?”

A fleeing man bumped into Shizuku, whose eyes were still glued to the back of the church. As she teetered around, trying to keep herself upright, Erik gave her a bitter smile.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured simply.

He took out some kind of medicine and made Shizuku swallow it. As he held her in his arms, she quickly lost consciousness. Then he turned back to the altar one last time.

The church had already been abandoned. It was perfectly still and quiet, in stark contrast to the uproar that was going on outside.



The explosion on the last day of the festival was written off as a double suicide with two casualties. In the investigation that followed, the bodies of Lord Deseuah and Amabelle Lyshkariza were discovered, leading to the prevailing opinion that Daytas and Varola had been opposed to the marriage and killed them both, then themselves.

The nobility, who’d had a narrow escape, tried as hard as they could to search for the girl who’d acted as Amabelle’s initial standin. Fearing that relations between them and Amabelle’s birth family would deteriorate, they wanted to frame her as Amabelle’s true killer. However, hardly anybody knew what she looked like—and in the end, they failed to capture her. Not only that, but the hand marks on the neck of Amabelle’s corpse were those of a man, so the hunt for the young girl was called off.

Daytas’s attendant also went missing after the incident and, much like the young girl, could not be tracked down.

All the blame was quickly assigned to the deceased couple, and the town

went back to its original peaceful state.

Shizuku found all this out two weeks later, in an inn three towns away from Laobbe, when she'd made Erik read the newspaper article out loud for her. Once she heard the full story, Shizuku looked down, her eyes brimming with sadness.

"Part of me wonders whether I could have done more, but I guess that's arrogant of me."

"I don't know. There's nothing wrong with feeling that way, but I'd advise you not to dwell on it too much. You have a tendency to let other people's emotions burden you."

Shizuku nodded and closed her eyes. The image of Varola smiling happily in her final moments flashed through her mind, then vanished.

3. The Anomaly and the Criminal



Shizuku cracked three eggs into something that resembled a bowl and whisked them together, then added some milk from a porcelain jug. She kept stirring the mixture, which turned pale yellow in color, and then gradually added a generous helping of sugar. Finally, she spread butter on the pieces of bread she'd torn up and arranged them on a stone plate. She drenched the bread in the egg mixture, and once it was thoroughly soaked through, she passed it to a man in the kitchen.

"Put this in, please," she said, and he put the plate in the oven. "Just wait a little while! It won't take long."

"Sure."

Erik, who'd laid out his studying equipment in the inn's dining hall, nodded to Shizuku from the other side of the counter. It was Shizuku's own craving that had spurred her to make this snack in the first place, so he wasn't sure whether he was looking forward to it.

Shizuku went and sat down opposite him, then opened her book. The paperback in question wasn't one she'd borrowed from the library but one of her own, full of lines and comments she'd added herself. Before going to college, Shizuku had been reluctant to write directly onto the pages of her books, but a professor she'd had during her first year advised Shizuku and her classmates to take plenty of notes. Apparently, this helped you make new discoveries every time you reread a book, and the notes also made it easier to look things up.

Shizuku was a serious student, and she'd never been picky about keeping her books in perfect condition, so she soon put her professor's advice into action.

The paperback she was reading was the first in a series—of which she had yet to purchase any of the later installments—but she'd turned the pages so many times that the first half of them had already bent out of shape. Tiny notes had been scribbled in the corners, too. It looked completely different from when she'd first bought it.

Shizuku started putting together a rough draft of a report, using her added notes as a guide. When she happened to glance across the table at Erik, she saw that he was copying out kanji characters. As she watched this fully grown adult repeatedly write out the kanji for “tuna,” his face drawn in concentration, she couldn't help but burst out laughing.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked.

“N-no... But why ‘tuna’?”

“It's just interesting how it contains the radicals for ‘fish’ and ‘to exist.’”

“But you don't even know what a tuna is, do you?”

“I've never seen one, nor eaten one.”

This only made Erik's choice even weirder. Why hadn't he chosen a more practical kanji character to learn?

Erik glanced over at Shizuku, whose whole body was shaking with laughter, then looked back down at the page. He wasn't exactly annoyed by her reaction, but it still confused him.

“What's so funny?” he asked.

“Tuna's really good, you know,” Shizuku told him once she'd finally stifled her laughter.

The man from the kitchen brought the baked plate over to the pair, and the three of them each took a portion of the snack Shizuku had thrown together.

A sweet aroma drifted throughout the cafeteria, bringing back sweet memories as well. The bread dipped in the pale-yellow batter had been baked to a golden brown. Delighted, Shizuku cut off a piece of the bread and put it in her mouth.

“I remember now. This is exactly how it's supposed to taste.”

“It’s sweet and delicious. What do you call this?”

“It’s like French toast meets bread pudding.”

“Huh?”

“It seems like the sort of thing kids and young girls would love,” remarked the man who’d let them use the kitchen, not altogether displeased. “I’ll take some for my children.”

He put some onto a small plate and left the cafeteria.

Shizuku added a large dollop of some kind of citrus jam to the fluffy bread, then ate another slice. The flavor of her hot tea and the nostalgic sweetness of the French toast was deeply comforting.

Two weeks had gone by since Erik and Shizuku had been caught up in the trouble in Laobbe. Having shaken off the pursuing nobles, the pair had proceeded down the highway toward Farsas’s castle city.

They’d been staying in this current town for three days, and although it wasn’t as big as Laobbe, its transit rings were open to the public. At present, Erik and Shizuku were having their papers inspected so they could obtain permission to use one.

“It’s really hot,” said Shizuku. “What’s with this weather? I can’t believe you’re wearing long sleeves, Erik.”

“I guess it is. I don’t really feel it, though.”

“At least it’s not humid, I guess—but this heat is really something.”

Shizuku was wearing a short-sleeved blouse and a knee-length skirt. She really would have preferred to wear something even lighter, but people would look at her strangely if she took it too far.

Erik, on the other hand, was wearing some sort of long-sleeved mage attire that covered his neck, yet he didn’t seem hot at all. Shizuku felt warm just looking at him. It almost felt like he was approaching this as some sort of ascetic training.

The writing systems specialist must have gotten bored of the kanji for “tuna,” because he’d begun writing the character for “sweetfish” instead. Although

what he'd written roughly resembled a kanji character, it gave off a rather geometric impression that seemed to show that Erik knew absolutely nothing about the basic stroke types that Japanese calligraphy consisted of.

As Shizuku ate her second helping of French toast, she stared at his notebook. Its pages were starting to resemble the teacups they gave you at sushi restaurants in Japan, covered with the kanji for different fish.

"Do you find this interesting?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Have you ever eaten sweetfish?"

"I didn't even know it existed."

Shizuku had to stop herself from laughing at Erik's predictable response. Sweetfish was a river fish, but she wasn't sure whether they existed in this world. She took a sip of her tea, which had quite a herbal flavor.

"Sweetfish tastes good, too."

"You like fish, don't you?" Erik asked.

"*You're* the one who's been practicing nothing but fish kanji," she quipped back.

At that moment, the door to the cafeteria opened, and some men who looked like travelers filed in. Shizuku checked her watch—noon on the dot—and the men quickly began to occupy the surrounding tables, filling the small dining hall with noise.

Shizuku looked around, wondering whether she should give them her seat. When she lifted her gaze, she met the eyes of a nearby man, who gave her a friendly smile and came to stop alongside her and Erik's table.

"Hello there, young lady. Are you an errand girl?" he asked her.

"...I'm a traveler."

How old did she *look* to these people? Shizuku wondered whether she should just tell people she was soon to be sixteen to save herself the trouble of correcting them—but as she was thinking this over, the man glanced down at

her table and let out a noise of interest.

“What’s that?!”

The man was pointing at Erik’s notebook filled with fish kanji. Feeling the urge to burst out laughing again, she clasped her hands against her mouth, while Erik responded calmly.

“This? It’s a writing system from a country in the east.”

“Whoa. That’s cool. Write something for me.”

“She’s better at it than I am,” said Erik, gesturing toward Shizuku.

“Huh?” said Shizuku.

This sudden turn of events threw Shizuku into a fluster, and the man shifted his gaze toward her, eyes full of expectation.

“You can write on this,” Erik told her, passing Shizuku a scrap of paper from his notebook.

“Wh-what do you want me to write?” she asked the man.

“I’m not sure. Oh, how about the word for ‘wind’? I like the wind.”

“Okay...”

For some reason, this situation reminded Shizuku of seeing foreigners in Japan wearing T-shirts with weird kanji characters on them. As nervous as she was, Shizuku carefully penned the kanji for “wind” on the piece of paper, then passed it to the man. When he saw it, his face lit up.

“This is great! Thanks, young lady.”

Shizuku couldn’t help but smile at his innocent reaction of joy.

Having overheard the man, other guests began to crowd around.

“What’s happening? What’ve you got there?”

“Oh, you think you could write one for me, too?”

“Wait, I’m first.”

“Uhm...?”

How had it come to this? Shizuku, who was surrounded by bizarrely enthusiastic guests, looked to Erik for help, but he was so engrossed in copying out the character for “trout” that he didn’t even glance in her direction.

So for almost an hour, Shizuku wrote kanji after kanji for the travelers. She didn’t end up finishing until they’d all eaten their meals and left the cafeteria. She probably hadn’t paid that much attention to writing kanji since her kanji drill sessions in elementary school. Once Shizuku and Erik were finally alone in the dining hall again, she fell flat against the table and stretched out her right hand, stiff from all the nerves.

“I-I’m exhausted...”

“You did a great job,” Erik said.

The table was piled high with copper coins and trinkets, gifts the men had given her in exchange for writing kanji for them.

Shizuku picked up a small flower brooch and sighed.

“I got so many cute gifts as payment... Maybe I should get another *baito*.”

“That’s Japanese slang for a part-time job, right? Is there something you want?”

“Not really, but I have to rely on you for everything, including our travel expenses. I’d like to pay you back for some of it at least.”

As if dragging him along on this trip wasn’t bad enough, Shizuku had even managed to involve Erik in a series of strange predicaments, causing him no shortage of inconvenience. She might have looked like a child, but she wasn’t one, so she couldn’t help feeling guilty.

However, Erik just frowned slightly upon hearing her intentions.

“The knowledge you share with me serves as ample compensation for your travel expenses and other related costs. I don’t understand why you feel like it’s not.”

“It’s just... I’m not even that knowledgeable. Plus, you’ve given me all kinds of things. And you could have been seriously injured the other week.”

“That’s not your fault.” Erik shrugged slightly. Then a pensive expression

crossed his face, and he suddenly asked about something else entirely. “What’s education like in your world?”

“Are you talking about college, like what I was enrolled in? Or do you mean in a more general sense?”

“Both.”

Shizuku couldn’t help but wonder what he was curious about.

“I’ll just tell you about my country,” she added before beginning her explanation. “Compulsory education ends at the age of fifteen. The government pays for the cost, and everyone studies a wide range of subjects. As a result, our literacy rate is close to a hundred percent—but that’s on the higher end, globally speaking.”

“That’s amazing,” replied Erik. “Do they teach you practical things applicable in your daily lives?”

“No. Well, some of it’s practical, but most of what we’re taught has no direct effect on our day-to-day lives. Other than literature, we learn about history and complex math. We get a general education and also learn the basics of each different specialized field... The teachers make us do all kinds of stuff so we have a solid foundation to our education. Everyone over the age of fifteen is gradually diverted into their respective field, so I think it helps to figure out what you’re good at and what interests you before you get to that stage. I did science in high school, but it wasn’t for me, so I didn’t pursue it further.”

“How luxurious. After fifteen, do you have to pay for your education?”

“Yes. It’s pretty costly. In college, all of your classes are specialized, so the price varies greatly depending on the school.”

Moreover, Shizuku was a humanities student, studying liberal arts. Few of the skills gained from such a course could be immediately applicable in the workforce, so investing time and money into acquiring theoretical knowledge like this was indeed nothing but a luxury. In her head, she thanked her parents, so far away from her now, for letting her pursue such a path.

“I see,” Erik said with a nod.

Staring Shizuku full in the face, he went back to their original topic.

“You know, I’m sure I’ve said this before, but your existence really is unique. We’ve never had a visitor like you before, with knowledge of an entirely different world. The fact that you’re imparting some of that to me is more than enough compensation for the expenses you’ve incurred. You have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

“But I’m only a student. The knowledge I possess is insignificant and trivial.”

“To you, perhaps, but you’re the only person in this world who knows these things. That’s valuable in itself...and it helps me come to all sorts of realizations.”

Suddenly, Erik’s deep-blue eyes clouded over in contemplation—but the next moment, he was back to his usual self.

“If I’m not going to be able to convince you, then think of it this way. So far, the government and your parents have paid for you to receive a sufficient education. Now you’re selling that to help yourself, and I’m paying you for a part of that knowledge. It’s not that absurd, compared to the time and money your parents put into raising you.”

Dumbfounded, Shizuku went quiet.

Her parents must have easily spent millions of yen ensuring that she received a good education. She went to a private college as well, so all in all, it could end up costing them close to ten million yen.

Shizuku had undervalued the lengths her parents had gone to provide for her, which was why she’d undervalued her own knowledge all this time. This perspective hadn’t even occurred to Shizuku until Erik had pointed it out, but his explanation had helped her come realize.

In her old world, she’d been nothing but a novice. Yet here, in this new world, she was a rare intellectual. She hadn’t acquired this knowledge solely through her own efforts, so there was no need for her to feel weirdly inferior about it. Instead, she should be thankful that Erik valued what she knew.

Shizuku let out a deep sigh, then bowed her head to Erik.

“Thank you very much. I’ll do my best.”

“Sure. By the way, let me know if there are any more fish kanji I haven’t learned yet.”

“Isn’t it about time you gave up on fish kanji?”

“Why? They’re interesting,” Erik replied, as if he were stating the obvious.

Shizuku reluctantly wrote out the kanji for “whale” and “pilchard,” then showed them to him.

“So *that’s* how you write ‘whale,’” he remarked.

Shizuku laughed at the sight of Erik’s mild surprise. She cast her eyes downward with a wry smile, then composed herself.

“But make sure you put yourself first, okay? Your life is important,” Shizuku told him.

“I don’t know about that. Your life is important, too, so I’ll just see how I feel in the moment,” replied the enigmatic mage.

With that, he continued copying out his kanji.



The screening process for domestic teleportation wasn’t strict, even if you were heading to the castle city. Still, Shizuku was relieved to discover they’d passed the screening without any issues and had been granted permission to use the transit ring. She’d been concerned that a wanted person bulletin might have made its way over from Laobbe, or that her facial features would raise questions.

Once Shizuku had finished packing, she decided to enjoy one last cup of tea in the inn’s dining hall while she was waiting for Erik. There was nobody else around, so she boiled the water and brewed the tea herself.

Just as she was taking her cup over to the table, however, she heard some light footsteps. A small child had entered the cafeteria. The little boy, who appeared to be about two or three years old, stared up at her with his big eyes, and she smiled at him.

“Oh? Where did you come from?” Shizuku asked the boy. “Are you alone?”

“Alone?” he repeated.

“Where’s your mommy?”

“Mommy?”

Shizuku burst out laughing. It was like talking to a parrot. Her baby cousin, who’d come over to her house to play the previous year, had been just the same, and the grown-ups had made a fuss over him the entire time.

The little boy climbed up onto the chair next to Shizuku. He looked at Mea, sitting on the table in her bird form, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity. Shizuku grinned at him.

“You can wait for your mommy here. If she takes too long to come, we can go and look for her together.”

“Okay,” said the boy.

“How about we do some drawing?”

“Drawing!”

The boy’s face lit up. Shizuku took a looseleaf notepad and her pencil case out of her bag, then started drawing pictures of animals like she had for the boys she’d met by the lake.

“Look, what’s this?”

“A horse!”

“Right! What about this?”

“A dog.”

“It’s a cat. It has almond-shaped eyes, see?”

As she was drawing her next few pictures, the child expressed a desire to join in, so she took a few colored pens out of her pencil case. Sitting there, drawing with the boy, Shizuku absentmindedly thought about what was to come.

They would finally be arriving in Farsas’s castle city. Their journey up to this point had felt long, yet short at the same time, and she could hardly believe how many dangers they’d encountered.

Still, reaching Farsas didn't mean it was all over. They still needed to find a way for her to return to her own world, using several mysterious incidents from two hundred and forty years ago as clues. Farsas, the country that had erased any reports of witch sightings from witness testimonies, must have been concealing some kind of information, so extracting that information from the castle would most likely be their immediate objective.

As Shizuku sat there, lost in thought, the child tugged on her sleeve.

"Green! Green!" he was saying.

"Green? Sure, here you go."

Shizuku offered him a green pen, but he just shook his head. Eventually, the boy leaned across the table and took a yellow pen.

"Oh, you wanted that one? That's yellow," said Shizuku, taking off the pen lid.

As she was doing this, she glanced at her bag. If it was feasible, she wanted to create a dictionary that compared words from her world's language to their equivalents here. She wanted to leave behind as many things as possible that would be useful for Erik.

"I can always buy new English-Japanese and German-Japanese dictionaries... Textbooks, too."

She planned on leaving him everything he needed. As long as she could return the necessary books to the library, it wouldn't be a problem. The most important thing was that she repaid him for all he'd done for her. He held her knowledge in high regard, but the fact remained that the languages she was teaching him would be useless in this world. Even so, Erik saw value in learning them, and it was for that reason that he'd spent all this time supporting and guiding her on her journey.

Feeling a pang of sadness, Shizuku went to pet Mea—but at that very moment, a woman appeared in the entrance of the dining hall with an anxious expression across her face. The little boy quickly looked up.

"Mommy!"

"There you are! I've been worried sick!"

The child's mother ran over and held him tight. Shizuku bowed her head slightly.

"Sorry. I told him to wait here..."

"Don't worry, it's fine," the woman reassured her. "Um, I'm sorry if he's caused you any trouble. I really am..."

Having seen the drawings on the table, the woman apologized profusely, sounding extremely flustered. Then, without even making eye contact with Shizuku, she left the cafeteria. Shizuku cleared her things off the table and thought about the woman's brusque attitude, wondering whether she'd viewed Shizuku as a kidnapper. In the middle of packing up, Erik arrived with a pile of documents in hand.

As soon as Shizuku stepped inside the building where the transit rings were installed, she was immediately reminded of a school gym. The large hall was empty, and its wooden flooring was polished to perfection, with no walls to partition the space off. Instead, desks were arranged throughout the hall. The sight reminded Shizuku of the physical examinations and fitness tests she'd done at school.

Glancing at the transit rings she'd spotted in the distance, she whispered to Erik.

"This is very different from Candela Castle."

"It takes a lot of effort to burn transit rings into stone," Erik explained. "It's much easier to use wood, though it doesn't last as long."

"Oh, I get it," replied Shizuku. "So it's like when people use a brand to mark *kamaboko*?"

"*Kamaboko*?"

"It's a type of processed fish."

The pair lined up in front of the desk with the longest queue. It was going down quicker than the lines they used to have at school doing their physical examinations, and it took less than a minute for Shizuku and Erik's turn to come around. Once Erik had submitted his papers to the clerk, they were allowed

through.

“Come on,” said Erik, turning around and reaching out his hand.

This sight made Shizuku realize for the first time that she was nervous. She silently nodded, then grabbed hold of his hand.

What could the future possibly hold for them?

Shizuku was constantly plagued by these sorts of worries, but this was just one of many trips she’d have to make.

She smiled briefly and took a step forward, confident that all that awaited her was her future self, molded from her own free will.

The pair emerged from the transit ring administration office, located in the southwest of the castle city. As Shizuku left the stone building, she looked up at the sky—and immediately let out an exclamation of disappointment.

“There aren’t any dragons!”

“There’s no town on this entire continent that just has dragons hanging around in the sky. Although now you mention it...”

Erik seemed to recall something, and he was on the verge of speaking when a cat in a nearby window caught sight of Mea and lunged toward her. Sensing that cat’s target, Shizuku swiftly held her demon assistant to her chest.

The buildings in Farsas’s castle city were more ordinary than Shizuku had imagined, but it was still a beautiful, thriving place.

“This is like Prague! I feel like I’m vacationing abroad!”

“Well, technically, you *are* abroad,” commented Erik.

The buildings that lined the streets were not noticeably different from those in Candela or Laobbe. However, every so often, Shizuku caught sight of something that impressed upon her how long the city had been around. After all, Farsas boasted over a thousand years of history.

She noticed scorch marks on some of the gray stone walls and the old windows fitted with stained glass. Next to it, a curtain of thin water cascaded from the eaves of a building, the splattering water flowing into a canal at the

side of the road. It was so clear that Shizuku could see fish swimming inside it. Engraved on the bottom of the canal were magical-looking markings.

A cat pounced at her, and Shizuku caught it reflexively.

“The cats in Farsas are very aggressive... Is that because it’s the magic kingdom?”

“I don’t think magic has anything to do with the quirks of cats. If it’s magic you want to see, then take a look at that,” Erik said, pointing to the wall of a white building just ahead of them.

About three floors up, Shizuku could see a large disk divided into six colors. The part painted red was currently at the top.

“What’s that? A spinning wheel to decide your role at lunch duty?”

“I don’t know what that is, but no. That disk shows tomorrow’s weather forecast. It’s automated using spiritual magic.”

“A weather forecast disk...”

Now that she knew its true purpose, Shizuku could see that there were different patterns—presumably depicting different weather phenomena—etched into the colored segments.

Around her, Shizuku could see a wide array of other mysterious sights, from perpetually burning blue flames in storefronts to crystal windows that reflected scenes from distant locations. Even the magic circles that she came across every now and then had beautiful designs, leaving Shizuku captivated wherever she looked.

As soon as Shizuku put the stripy cat down, it ran into an alleyway, the gold chain on its tail swaying from side to side.

“Th-this place is fascinating...,” Shizuku said, her voice filled with wonder. “I’d love to take a look around.”

“It’s almost twice as big as Candela’s castle city, so I don’t really recommend it. Also, I’m sure you’ll be fine, but watch out you don’t get lost.”

“If I do get lost, is there a lost child center?”

“I don’t know what that means, but I doubt they exist here.”

The pair escaped the bustling street and arrived in front of an inn. As soon as Erik placed his hand on the door, it opened inward, and a young man appeared from inside.

“Oh, you actually showed up. Long time no see!” said the man.

“Yeah. I’m glad to see you’re well.”

“I should be saying that to you. I was worried about you. Ah...”

The man who answered the door had a cheerful smile on his face, and he’d finally noticed Shizuku’s presence. He hurriedly bowed his head.

“N-nice to meet you,” said Shizuku.

“It’s nice to meet you, too. Erik’s told me all about you, Shizuku. My name’s Harve, and for all intents and purposes, I’m one of Farsas’s royal mages. This is my family home. Please, come in.”

He gestured inside, and Erik strode straight through the door, closely followed by Shizuku. It was gloomy inside the inn, which Shizuku assumed to be because it was before opening hours, yet the wooden floorboards had been swept clean. Judging by the tables and chairs scattered around, the space appeared to serve as both an entrance hall and a dining room.

Harve pointed to the staircase at the back of the room, which led up to the second floor.

“You’re welcome to use two rooms in the back. Here are the keys.”

“Thanks,” replied Erik. “Shizuku, I have something to discuss with Harve, so feel free to rest up until dinnertime.”

“Oh, okay. Excuse me, then. Do you want me to take your luggage, Erik?”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not like I have that much stuff.”

Shizuku took a key from Harve and went up to the second floor. She checked the picture on the little card attached to the key, comparing it against the ones hanging on the doors, and opened the door with the same design on it. She put down her luggage, then threw herself onto the bed. Mea, who was lying on her

chest, slowly poked her head out.

“Don’t worry, Mea. There are no cats around anymore. We can rest.”

Mea gave Shizuku a small nod, then flew over to the windowsill. As Shizuku watched her assistant demon gaze outside, Shizuku stretched out her body, stiff with nerves. A long sigh escaped her lips.

“We’re finally here...”

It had been such a long journey already... Just how much more did they have to go before she could get home?

Shizuku got up and looked out across the city from behind Mea. The huge, beautiful chalk castle loomed in the distance, a dignified presence beneath the expansive blue sky.



“Thanks for helping me out. I’m sorry for asking so much of you at such short notice.”

“Are you talking about that portrait? What was that all about? I did get wind of an incident in Laobbe.”

“My involvement in that is nothing of concern, so don’t worry.”

Erik forced a smile, put down his luggage, and took a seat. Harve brought a bottle of alcohol over from the kitchen, then the young mage sat down opposite Erik.

“We haven’t seen each other in so long. What’s it been—four years?”

“I guess so. It doesn’t feel like it, though.”

Harve offered his old friend a mug, and Erik wordlessly accepted it. As the pair sipped their drinks, a slightly different kind of silence drifted through the air.

“...I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. I didn’t think you’d ever return to Farsas,” said Harve.

“I’ll come back whenever I get the opportunity. I just hadn’t had the chance until now,” replied Erik.

“You’re here because of that girl, huh? She seems like a nice kid. Good-

natured.”

“And pretty stubborn, too.”

There was no change in Erik’s expression, but his old friend seemed to read something into it nonetheless. He smiled a little, then directed his dark-green eyes toward the door, narrowing them slightly.

“Seeing you with a girl like that... It kind of reminds me of Lady Katiliana.”

“This is completely different.”

“...I guess so.”

Few words were being spoken, but this evasiveness itself proved how hard it was for the pair to express their true emotions. While the past was the past, the lingering bitterness that had been left behind had refused to fade over the years, and the alcohol Erik was sipping slowly tasted equally bitter.

Harve let out a small sigh, then shook his head to clear it.

“Also, about that other thing you asked me for, I didn’t get anywhere with it. There were no documents related to the incident in any of the locations I’m allowed to inspect. And that first edition they retrieved was nowhere to be seen.”

“Oh. I couldn’t remember seeing it, either, so I thought that might be the case.”

“It wasn’t with those papers you had on forbidden curses? You were allowed to view Class 1 documents, right?”

“I don’t think it was there. Maybe it’s sealed information, with an even higher classification.”

“In that case, you’d need the royal family’s permission to view it.”

Erik could feel the weight of those words echo deep inside him. He already knew the protocol, but this statement still brought back all kinds of memories.

Realizing that his friend had gone quiet, Harve shrugged.

“Leuticia spends a lot of time away lately. There was this forbidden curse incident at Candela Castle, you see. She’s been quarreling with the king of

Rozsark ever since.”

“I know,” said Erik.

“You do? You really do have your ears to the ground, huh? Well, anyway, His Majesty is the person to ask. I could ask him for you...but it would look sketchy, don’t you think? Not only is this outside my field of specialty, but it’s also likely that this is highly confidential information. Don’t you think you’d have a better chance if you took that girl along with you and explained the situation to him directly?”

Even though Erik had half expected Harve to respond like this, he found himself frowning, and he placed his unfinished mug of liquor down on the table. The distinct sound of ceramic clattering against the table echoed around the room.

“Being with me will only make things worse for her.”

But Harve seemed undeterred and just calmly topped up Erik’s drink.

“I really don’t think that’s true,” he said. “His Majesty doesn’t know what you look like, and even if he does remember you, he’s not going to do anything at this point. That’s the kind of person he is. Besides, don’t you need to keep that girl company? She doesn’t have any relatives, does she?”

Although Erik had told Harve about Shizuku in a letter, the other mage didn’t know where she came from—Erik had just told him that she was from a faraway country, that some strange form of teleportation had sent her here, and that she was investigating a past incident to help her get home.

The image of Shizuku’s straightforward gaze momentarily flickered through the back of Erik’s mind. They were the eyes of someone who trusted him and would do anything she could to get what she wanted, filled with an honest determination.

What kind of face would she make if she found out the truth? Would she still look at him the same way? Erik couldn’t come up with an answer—likely because he already knew how she would react.

Harve picked up the bottle of alcohol and rose to his feet.

“Well, take your time thinking it over. I’ll do whatever I can to help.”

“Yeah. Thanks,” Erik replied.

That part of their exchange made the pair feel like time had changed nothing—although in reality, that was far from the truth.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Harve told Erik, giving him a bittersweet smile.



The founding of the nation of Farsas dated back to the Dark Age, an era that had since become ancient history. It had been a chaotic time, marked by warfare and betrayal, when the state of the world changed and national borders were rewritten on a daily basis. It was in this bleak age of despair that the now-powerful nation emerged.

During this period, countless small nations were ruthlessly ravaged and obliterated. However, in the midst of this turmoil, one solitary man appeared. He brought together those who had nowhere left to go and used his wisdom to confront external threats. Slowly, he used his talents to establish a formidable army, then a nation.

Strangely, there was no mention of this founding king’s name in Farsas’s records. The only tales that circulated about him were those of the beautiful queen who was always by his side, and that of Akashia, the Magic-Severing Sword, which had been bestowed upon him by a mysterious nonhuman entity.

Only one such sword existed in the world—a sword that could neutralize magic. An explanation for this ability was yet to be discovered, but throughout the years, it had been passed down as a symbol of the royal line of Farsas, all the way to its current wielder, the 30th king, Lars Zan Graviol Las Farsas.

“Twenty-seven! What a young king! Are all kings in this world that young?”

“No, Farsas is just unique in that respect.”

Three days after they’d arrived in the castle city, Erik announced that they were going to ask the king for his help directly.

Shizuku was understandably nervous. She’d never expected that she would one day get to meet a royal in person. Harve had been the one to get them the appointment, and Shizuku was already worried about making a mistake that

angered the king.

“It’s an unspoken rule that the king of Farsas should wield the royal sword, but it’s not just for show—Akashia is one of the most powerful weapons in existence, capable of countering any mage’s attack. Naturally, its owner needs to be competent enough to use it.”

“Oh, so that’s why it’s inherited by a young person.”

“Yes. Over the past few centuries, kings have generally ensured that their successor will inherit Akashia before they reach the age of fifty.”

“That makes sense. It’s essential that the king of Farsas is a good enough swordsman to wield the royal sword, then.”

This was unexpected, considering they were the ruler of the *magic* kingdom—but magic had only really played a prominent role in Farsas in the last two to three hundred years. When Shizuku heard that Akashia had existed since the nation was founded, it made more sense.

“Still, what could that sword possibly be made out of? It’s been around for over a thousand years.”

“Who knows? I’ve heard that other countries are trying to solve that mystery, though.”

Shizuku knew very little about magic, so she was clueless about these sorts of things, but apparently Farsas’s national heirloom was the only item in existence that was completely immune to magic.

Many people believed that if the reason behind the sword’s capabilities could be uncovered, it would help advance the research of magical technology. However, the royal family of Farsas forbade not only foreign parties, but also their own nation’s mages, from conducting the relevant research.

“Well, I guess it is a national heirloom,” Shizuku commented before shifting her focus to the personality of the king. “What’s he like? I remember you saying he was open-minded.”

“He is, as far as politics is concerned. I’ve never met him in person, though.”

“I’m worried about offending him. He doesn’t have the right to kill anyone

who offends him like an ancient samurai, does he?”

“What are you talking about? That sounds so dark.”

“You’re right about that.”

Erik refilled his cup from the teapot, then shifted his deep-blue eyes away from Shizuku to the white castle in the distance beyond the window.

“The current king is open-minded, but that’s what happens when you’re confident in the power you possess. If we’re talking about his individual character, I’d say the king’s...a tough nut to crack.”

Shizuku gulped, nervous. Unable to imagine what the king would be like, she remained apprehensive. Still, she’d put herself through so much hardship for the sole reason of getting hold of Farsas’s secrets, to see whether they could help her find her way home. She couldn’t afford to stand around scared.

Shizuku had Harve’s mother take a look at her outfit and ensure that she wasn’t underdressed for a royal audience. Despite the scorching heat, she was advised not to show too much of her arms and legs, so Harve’s mother picked her out a long-sleeved shirt and a flared, ankle-length skirt.

After that, she sorted through her bag. She wanted to make sure she had sufficient evidence that she was from another world if she was asked to prove it, and she powered on her phone, which had been off for a long time. In her old world, she’d always made sure that it had enough battery, and somehow it still had charge left over. Shizuku idly tapped the screen, then took a look through her call history, where she found row after row of her friends’ names. At the bottom of the list, she saw her sister’s.

That evening, Shizuku shed a few tears.



The day of the royal meeting came around in a blink of an eye.

As Shizuku stood next to Erik in front of the giant castle gates, she let out a sigh of admiration. The castle was simply magnificent. It reminded her of European castles she’d only ever seen in photos, and the sheer number of windows gave a good indication of how big it truly was.

Shizuku gazed up at the spires that stood just inside the castle walls. There

were four of them, one at each corner.

“This place is amazing...”

“Don’t crane your neck too much,” Erik told her. “It’ll snap off.”

“What?!”

“Come on, let’s go.”

Erik gave his papers to the soldier standing at the gate, who gave the pair a once-over and nodded. The side entrance next to the castle gate opened, letting them inside.

“Don’t wander off,” Erik warned Shizuku before striding off while she took in her surroundings. It was almost as if he knew the place like the back of his hand.

Once they’d gone inside and were walking down a long hallway, he turned to Shizuku.

“Promise me something before we meet the king.”

“Sure,” Shizuku replied. “What is it?”

“I don’t want to cause you any problems, so if you get reprimanded because of something I’ve done, I want you save yourself. Let me take the fall.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku could hardly comprehend what she was hearing. She stared at him, unblinking, her large eyes wide with astonishment—but Erik didn’t look like he was joking.

“Wh-what are you talking about? Is something going to happen?”

“There’s a good chance that it won’t.”

“But there’s still a chance that something *will* happen. In which case...”

Shizuku wanted to suggest that she go alone, or that they give up on visiting the king altogether. She’d always had an equal, transactional kind of relationship with Erik, yet the fact that he had to compensate for her cluelessness in so many situations made her feel guilty. Putting Erik in some kind of danger just so she could return to her old world was out of the question.

She had no intention of sacrificing someone else in order to get back to where she'd come from. If that was what it took, she could just abandon the idea of returning. It would be a painful choice to make, but she'd already established her priorities.

However, before she could say something to Erik, he stopped walking.

"Here we are."

They'd arrived in front of a large door with soldiers guarding it on either side.

The door slowly opened inward, and Shizuku caught sight of a red carpet lying on top of the white marble floor. She looked up at Erik, but he was gazing straight ahead, his expression the same as it always was.

"There's no need for you to worry. I—"

But she couldn't make out the end of his sentence, as it was cut off by the sonorous voice of a man from inside the room.

"You may enter."

For reasons she couldn't comprehend, Shizuku was nearly trembling with excitement and nerves, and she stepped onto the red rug.

Neither weapons, nor anything else that signaled hostility, could be brought into the presence of the king. In accordance with this rule, Shizuku had left Mea at the inn, and her bag was searched by the soldiers. Once this check was complete, the pair went and stood before the king.

The twenty-seven-year-old King Lars was a man with clean-cut features, which made him look even younger than he actually was. His hair was dark brown, and his eyes a light blue. He wore a gentle smile on his face, but with his muscular physique, he exuded a shrewd and authoritative aura that was impossible to hide. He was undeniably regal, and the mysterious glint in his eyes gave him the air of a cunning old man, despite his youth.

As they presented themselves to the king sitting on his throne, Shizuku stayed half a pace behind Erik. She didn't really know how to act in front of a king, but she bowed deeply to him and introduced herself.

"My name is Shizuku, Your Majesty."

Lars looked her up and down, a skeptical cast to his face. “Shizuku?” he repeated.

“Yes. Um, forgive me if I offend you in any way. I am unaware of how to act around a king.”

“That doesn’t bother me. Tell me, why do you wish to know about events that happened two hundred and forty years ago?”

His commanding voice carried a palpable sense of authority, and Shizuku found herself holding her breath, feeling like she’d been stabbed in the heart.

Where was she supposed to start? How could she make him believe her?

She had practiced this part so many times in bed the night before, but now that she was actually in front of the king, the words eluded her.

Shizuku kept opening and closing her mouth as if she were gasping for air.

“What’s the problem? Hurry up and spit it out. I don’t have all day, you know.”

She had to answer him. Her logical brain was begging her to.

But what could she possibly say? Feeling dizzy, she was unsure about everything.

“Shizuku.”

At that moment, a voice as clear as water echoed in her ears, and that familiar sound grounded her.

His determination to support her. His very presence. She’d made it this far because he was always by her side.

Shizuku’s jumbled thoughts started to make sense again. Her mind was beginning to calm down. She looked down at her own hands, then looked back up at the king. Her lips still stiff, she began to speak.

“Your Majesty. You might not believe me...but I came to this world from a very faraway place.”

Shizuku began to tell her story, starting with how she’d stumbled across the black hole on that hot summer’s day.

Although she found herself lost every now and then during her narrative, Shizuku kept reminding herself to stay calm, and eventually she managed to explain the whole situation. Erik elaborated on why they wanted to know about the incidents all those years ago, and Lars listened to him speak, keeping his gaze fixed on Shizuku the whole time.

Once the pair had finished talking, the king shot Shizuku a question, not appearing particularly surprised.

“Can you prove that you’re really from another world?”

“Sort of. I brought something with me from my old world.”

Shizuku took her smartphone out of her bag and showed the king how she used it. Lars narrowed his eyes as he watched her demonstration, and when she took a photo with it, he was understandably a little surprised.

“How far into the distance can it capture?” the king asked.

“With a small device like this, the pictures will get blurrier the farther away the subject is—but in my old world, you can photograph things that are invisible to the naked eye as if they were right in front of you.”

“Interesting. Do you have any other technology in your world that we don’t have here?”

It was a normal question, but it put Shizuku on guard. She remembered the warning Erik had given her: *“Some people might try and extract knowledge from you in order to create powerful weapons.”*

Still, if she didn’t say anything, the king might not believe her story, so she chose to answer his question carefully.

“Magic doesn’t exist in my world, but civilization has progressed in other ways to make up for it. So...there *are* many other examples of advanced technology, besides the one you’ve just seen. Unfortunately, though, I’m not able to re-create them for you. I haven’t been trained in those kinds of technologies...”

Lars nodded without saying a word. Shizuku wondered what was going through the king’s head. He was impossible to read, and she felt herself becoming intimidated, but she used her willpower to control her nerves.

The king's eyes had been fixed on Shizuku for some time now, and it didn't seem like he would look away. The strength of his gaze made Shizuku feel uncomfortable, as if she would break out in a cold sweat all over her body.

"So you're telling me you can do things that we're not capable of in this world?"

"Something like that, I think."

"I see. Well, that's a rather major problem."

She didn't know what he meant by this. Lars sounded a little troubled, but Shizuku couldn't sense any further emotion in his voice, and she stared back into his blue eyes.

"I'd heard the story passed down by word of mouth, but I never expected you to appear during my reign. I wasn't even sure it was true."

"...Your Majesty?"

"Why did you come to Farsas? ...Why did you come to see me? Did you come to find out whether *that* really was broken?"

Shizuku couldn't answer his question. She didn't even comprehend what she was being asked, and an indescribable sense of unease began to rise up from the depths of her soul.

The king rose to his feet. Shizuku looked up at him, his figure well proportioned and tall, but for some reason, the sight triggered a sense of déjà vu.

"It makes things harder now that you've appeared in the form of a young girl—but my duty remains the same."

The king placed his hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist.

Is that Akashia, the royal sword? Shizuku wondered.

His eyes still fixed on hers, Lars unsheathed his longsword and gracefully held it in an attacking stance. Shizuku gazed up at the weapon in silence.

"Begone, interloper."

The sword's mirrorlike blade shimmered beautifully, and Shizuku watched in a

daze as he pointed the sword toward her and swung it down.

The blade descended upon Shizuku.

She waited there, perfectly still, convinced that there must be some hidden meaning to what he was doing. Either that, or the abruptness of the situation had left her paralyzed with fear. In reality, though, he'd swung his sword without hesitation, fully intending to take Shizuku's life.

Shizuku only realized this when Erik pulled her away, and the edge of the sword grazed her skirt. Erik yanked her backward, and she staggered a few steps farther away from the king.



“What are you trying to do?” asked the young man who’d protected her, the anger clear in his voice.

Lars just shrugged his shoulders, acting totally calm.

“What does it matter? She’s not human, but an *observer* that needs to be eliminated.”

“She *is* human. She’s no different than the humans in our world.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I doubt you’ve sliced her stomach open and taken a look inside, have you? On the surface, they can make themselves look however they want. That’s how her kind have been able to infiltrate this continent all these years.”

Lars shot Shizuku an icy look.

“Unacceptable anomalies need to be eliminated.”

...*Anomalies?*

Hearing him call her that made Shizuku shudder.

When she first realized she was in a whole new world, Shizuku had felt like an outsider, but as she’d continued on her journey, that feeling had gradually begun to fade. She’d met new people and had meaningful conversations. There had been no shortage of challenges, and the future often seemed unclear—and yet with each tentative step she took, Shizuku had begun to feel more and more at home in this new world.

But now the truth had once again revealed itself, along with the king’s coldhearted desire to “eliminate” her.

“What if you kill her and she turns out to be a regular person?” asked Erik.

“What if I *don’t* kill her and our continent remains bound by *them*?”

“She doesn’t have that kind of power!”

Shizuku watched this conversation unfold; it still didn’t feel real. Shizuku didn’t really understand what the pair were talking about. The one thing she did understand, however, was that the king wanted to kill her.

Lars locked his blue eyes on to Shizuku, making her shudder. Nobody had ever

looked at her with such pointed determination before, and it sent a chill through her entire body.

The king stepped forward, sword in hand. Erik blocked his way.

“Run, Shizuku,” he said without turning around.

“E-Erik...”

“Just run. I’ll be fine.”

Erik’s tone of voice made it clear that he wasn’t going to accept no for an answer, but Shizuku didn’t know what to say. She took another look at the king. The way he was staring at her made it obvious that he didn’t see her as human, and an indescribable sense of unease surged inside her.

“The king won’t lay a hand on me. Seriously, just go.”

Hearing Erik tell her to go for a third time finally spurred Shizuku into action.

She was the only anomaly in the room—the only one who was perceived to be nonhuman. As hard as it was to believe, that was the truth, which was why she had to escape. If she wanted to stay alive, she needed to go someplace where the king couldn’t get to her, so Shizuku hesitantly turned around.

As she hurried toward the door, she spared a glance over her shoulder at Erik. Lars glanced at her, seeming unperturbed, then returned his focus to the mage standing in front of him.

“Don’t let your emotions prevent you from seeing the truth. Now, get out of my way.”

“I won’t. You’re the one who’s mistaken here.”

Shizuku placed her hand on the door and yanked it toward her. The soldiers who were standing outside couldn’t have heard their conversation, because they only glanced at her briefly with a hint of suspicion in their eyes. As Shizuku slipped past the soldiers, she heard the king’s voice echoing behind her.

“Get out of my way. Or do you want to add *another* offense to your record? Was it not enough for you to get yourself involved with a forbidden curse?”

Shizuku didn’t turn around again. Instead, she started sprinting down the long

hallway.

She retraced her steps, heading for somewhere far away. It was a magnificent castle with a polished floor, but everything Shizuku saw looked warped and distorted. In spite of this, she remained focused on getting out.

She'd believed that once they reached Farsas, doors might start to open for them, yet all that had awaited her here was the incomprehensible threat of death. In the throes of what felt like a nightmare, Shizuku continued to run, all alone.

Where was she supposed to flee to? Would she find refuge somewhere once she'd escaped the castle and Farsas? Would she have to live out the rest of her life afraid in some remote corner of the world? Would she have to give up on everything just to stay alive?

Shizuku caught sight of a soldier farther down the hallway; however, when he saw her, his expression changed. He held up a hand, attempting to block her path.

"Who are you?! Stop!"

But Shizuku veered down another corridor and kept on running, ignoring the man's question. She needed to get out of the castle as quickly as possible, before the king sent pursuers to chase her down or the gate was closed.

Shizuku emerged at a bend in the hallway. There, she came across a large window, through which she could see the castle walls. A staircase leading up them extended inside the castle premises, and the towering walls made Shizuku think of an exquisitely crafted miniature garden.

It felt almost as if they were jeering at her, as if she were an insignificant little insect.

Shizuku came to a halt and looked behind her. No pursuers seemed to be on her tail yet.

"...Where am I even going?"

Just before meeting the king, Erik had told her to sacrifice him if she had to. That said, he'd been talking about *himself* being the source of the trouble, not

her, and while Shizuku had understood how he meant this, that didn't mean she accepted it.

Plus, *she* was the one who the king had set his sights on.

What would she achieve by running away?

Shizuku exhaled and closed her eyes.

All alone in the darkness, she pictured herself striding ahead.

✕

"She got away?"

Lars raised his eyebrows slightly upon hearing the news. It appeared Shizuku had already left through the castle gates by the time his royal order had made the rounds. She'd been remarkably decisive and bold.

The king didn't yell at the apologetic soldier in front of him. Instead, he calmly expressed his thoughts out loud.

"As long as she stays well out of our way, then that's fine... Wait, maybe it's not? This is a real nuisance. I wish she'd appeared in a different form—it would have made her easier to kill."

Once the king had concluded his nonsensical mutterings, he asked for Harve to be summoned. Harve, however, had gotten wind of the situation before the king had called for him, and he was already outside the throne room.

As soon as he was let in, Harve offered the king a deep bow.

"I'm so sorry, Your Majesty..."

"Ah, don't worry about it. You're not at fault. More to the point, am I right in thinking that girl was staying at your family home?"

"...Yes," confirmed Harve.

"Go and capture her, then. I'll have some of my soldiers accompany you. We don't know what kind of power she possesses, so if she resists, don't fight back more than you must."

His order left Harve dumbstruck. What in the world had happened during their meeting? This was no way to treat an ordinary girl, at the very least.

Harve tried to clear up the king's misunderstanding.

"Uhh, Your Majesty, the girl doesn't have any magical powers. She can't even use a sword. She's just an ordinary young girl, no danger to anyone really..."

"She certainly looks like one, that's for sure."

"So—"

"Don't argue back. If you can't track her down, I'll send someone else instead."

Lars directed his blue eyes toward Harve, who could see the full extents of the man's authority within them. Swallowing deeply, he complied with the king's command. Just as he was about to leave, however, Harve asked the one question he was most concerned about.

"Your Majesty, may I ask what happened to Erik?"

"Oh. He refused to back down, so we've restrained him. It's been a long time since someone other than Lettie challenged me so directly. I see why Katiliana was so attached to him now."

The king spoke with a touch of irony, but Harve didn't find his response unsettling, which provided him with some reassurance. It was unlikely that Erik would be executed anytime soon, so Harve still had time to beg the king's younger sister to pardon him.

Nevertheless, Harve couldn't shake the heavy feeling in his chest. Whether he liked it or not, the events of four years earlier kept flooding back.

When his friend had fled Farsas in despair.

He wondered whether Erik would allow himself to abandon Shizuku after what had happened all those years ago.



She continued to climb the stairs, but the spiral staircase inside the tower seemed to go on forever.

No, it was impossible for it to go on forever. There was definitely an end point—so Shizuku continued to ascend the staircase in search of it.

This tower had been constructed to reach the heavens, only to incur the

wrath of the gods. It was a symbol of neither despair nor hope, but merely the humble determination of the lowly human race.

Shizuku raised her head and focused on climbing. Keeping her eyes fixed ahead of her, she raced up the staircase.

Eventually, the exit came into view without Shizuku having stopped once, and she peered out onto the rooftop of the tower.

“I made it...”

Shizuku held down her hair so the wind wouldn’t mess it up. If she reached up, she felt like she would be able to touch the expanse of sky above her head.

The castle’s lookout tower was about the same height as a four-or five-story building. There were several taller constructions, including the castle’s four spires, but they were so high that it was impossible to converse with anyone on the ground, so Shizuku was happy where she was. As she walked over to the outside wall, she began to speak to the small bird on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry for making you come with me, Mea.”

After escaping from the king, Shizuku had shaken off her pursuers and briefly returned to the inn she’d been staying at. Then she’d raced back into the castle, bringing Mea with her. After using her assistant demon’s help to avoid the surprised soldiers, she spotted a nearby lookout tower, ousted the guards, and barricaded herself inside.

Now, having successfully made it onto the roof, she looked down over the castle walls, where she spied a group of soldiers shouting angrily at her.

“Get down! You won’t be able to escape from up there!”

“I’m not escaping. I want to talk to the king. Go and tell him where to find me.”

Having made her intentions clear, Shizuku crouched down against the outer wall, keeping hidden so nobody would fire at her. She rubbed her trembling legs and took a few deep breaths.

“I’ll be fine... I’ll be fine.”

Mea looked up at her questioningly. Shizuku had yet to explain any part of the

situation to her, but the look in Mea's green eyes was anything but accusatory. Strangely, this only made her chest feel even tighter. As Shizuku's nerves threatened to overwhelm her, she gritted her teeth and looked up at the sky.

Although her thoughts were swirling around at a terrifying pace, her conscious mind had gone blank.

Slowly, she felt her nerves start to settle. Her shallow breathing began to calm down, and her narrowed field of vision opened back up again.

Shizuku gazed up at the sky and blinked. Suddenly—

“You called for me?”

A voice that she would never be able to forget rang in her ears. He spoke from all the way down on the ground, but she could still hear him as clear as day, and Shizuku couldn't help but shudder. She'd called for him, so obviously, she needed him there—but part of her had still expected the man to ignore her plea.

Shizuku began to contemplate why the king had chosen to agree to her request—but then she shook her head vigorously, bringing that train of thought to a halt. She got to her feet and looked down over the tower's outer wall. The man was standing directly below the tower, looking arrogantly up at her.

“Your Majesty, I have something I want to ask.”

“Go ahead,” the king answered.

“Why are you trying to kill me?”

The girl's blunt query sparked a commotion around the king.

None of them had known about that. The king was usually such an easygoing man that they couldn't understand why he'd want to capture this perfectly ordinary young girl, and the fact that the girl in question was confused *also* caused significant disquiet among the onlookers. The king's men discreetly examined his behavior, attempting to discern the monarch's true intentions.

“Why are you asking me?” replied the king. “You must know the answer better than anyone.”

“I really don't. You've made some kind of mistake. I'm just a normal person.”

“But you’re *different*,” he declared emphatically.

Lars must have been referring to the fact that Shizuku had come here from another world. He was right—she wasn’t from his world—but even so, Shizuku didn’t feel like that was the only reason why he wanted to kill her.

He’d said to Erik that “her kind” had been infiltrating this continent for many years, but it hadn’t even been six months since Shizuku first came here. That was an important distinction that differentiated Shizuku from these beings he was referring to. She was confident she’d be able to get through to him if she told him the whole story.

“Your Majesty, I’ve been here for less than six months. I was born eighteen years ago, and I’ve been living with my family for the majority of that time. Before coming here, I knew absolutely nothing about your world. I don’t even understand how I ended up here. I just want to go home.”

She was telling him the truth as she knew it, which was all the knowledge she had. She’d come to Farsas precisely to expand on it.

A smile appeared on Lars’s handsome face.

“How can you prove that’s not all an act? You’re an outsider. You must be one of *them*.”

“Who are ‘they’? I don’t even know what you’re referring to.”

“Anyone can feign ignorance if they so desire.”

Shizuku could tell he wasn’t listening to her, and she gritted her teeth.

She’d suspected things would end up like this. She was dealing with a man in a position of power—surface-level arguments wouldn’t work on him. Daytas had been the same way.

Still, she refused to believe that her words were powerless. After all, Lars wasn’t the only person listening. This wasn’t the time to back down.

Shizuku brought Mea down from her shoulder and placed her by her feet.

“If anything happens to me, save Erik,” she whispered softly to her dear friend.

Mea's green eyes stared up at Shizuku, who smiled and nodded.

She looked back down to the ground. In the corner of her eye, Shizuku could see soldiers on the castle walls nocking arrows to their bows. They were aiming straight at her, with only Lars's whims to decide when they would shoot her. At that moment, Shizuku felt like she was standing on the edge of a precipice—and it was up to the will of the king whether or not she jumped.

Her current approach wasn't going to get her anywhere. If she wanted to set things in motion, she needed to get to the core of the issue.

Shizuku bravely fixed her gaze on the king.

"What did you do with Erik?"

"He's locked up in the dungeon. If I drag him out here and put my sword to his throat, will that lure you down?"

"I want you to set him free."

"And I refuse."

It didn't seem as though Lars had ever intended to negotiate, and Shizuku furrowed her brow. Rage started to bubble up from somewhere deep inside her.

Was it possible to be so scared that you stopped feeling fear entirely?

Shizuku, at least, wasn't frightened by the situation she'd found herself in—right now, she was being guided by emotions more powerful than fear. And one of the feelings currently keeping her standing was, quite simply, irrational rage.

Suppressing her anger, which threatened to boil over, she implored the king one more time.

"Please, let Erik go. I'm just a normal human. All he did was help me out."

"In that case, he's guilty, too. Would you like me to bury you both together?"

"Huh?"

Shizuku's voice lowered. She knew she was being provoked, but she could feel the fury rising in her nonetheless. Still, she couldn't let her anger take over, and she spoke so that everyone around could hear.

“You have no intention of listening to me, no matter what I say. You won’t accept anything I say as proof, will you?”

“Who knows? What will you do if I won’t?”

“I’ll pick up the gauntlet.”

That was what Shizuku had decided. She’d gone to that very spot, somewhere his sword wouldn’t reach her, because she’d chosen to fight him.

Shizuku pressed down on the stone with her hands and climbed up onto the outer wall. Lars stared at her in wonder as she stood on top of the tower with nothing to support her, and she gazed icily down at the young king.

“Your Majesty, you said it yourself, didn’t you? Nobody’s cut me open and taken a look inside. On the surface, I could make myself appear however I wanted, so I’m going to offer you some proof—and I’ll risk my own body for it.”

Shizuku wished she could fight the absurdity of the thoughts she was having, but she had no way of doing so. She couldn’t wield a sword, she couldn’t use magic, and she didn’t know enough about this world she’d found herself in.

All she had were her words—and her body. And so she intended to put those things to use.

Lars smiled. He didn’t seem disturbed at all. In fact, he almost looked like he was enjoying himself.

“Are you going to jump from there? You really do have some funny ideas.”

Shizuku looked back at the king, her gaze projecting a completely different emotion from his own. During her six-month-long journey, she’d met some new people and parted ways with others. She couldn’t say she’d put her all into every situation her travels had thrown at her—far from it, in fact. She’d lost some people even before she’d realized what was happening. Daytas and Varola, who’d chosen to end things in the way that they did, were one example of that, yet she was under no illusion that listening to them more would have changed things.

What she did regret, however, was that she’d been too scared to push herself out of her comfort zone.

There was a part of her that was scared now, too. It was incredibly frustrating. But even so...she fully intended on taking that first step forward. She'd already decided on that.

Shizuku let out a deep breath. Her mind was already calm.

She had a slight urge to cry, but even that seemed trivial right now.

Something more fundamental, more *human*, was keeping her going—her anger toward the irrationality of the situation. That was all she had, but it was enough. Sometimes, it was the simplest of emotions that drove people to risk everything.

"I don't wish to die, Your Majesty—but I'm angry enough to make up for that."

Shizuku began to articulate her emotions, her first step toward impressing upon the king her determination.

"You're saying inexplicable things about me. Do you *want* to kill me and pretend I never existed? If you're wrong and I turn out to be a normal human being, what will you do then?"

"I cannot ignore such a possibility if it exists. However, more than anything, you are an extremely suspicious individual. You must realize that, at the very least, yes?"

"I do."

If Shizuku were one of "them"—those beings that the king felt threatened by—then he'd probably be making a good decision.

However, there was one thing that only Shizuku knew.

She was powerless.

She knew that better than anyone else.

"I'm human."

Her dark eyes shone defiantly, the intensity in her gaze eliciting a smile from Lars.

Shizuku's voice pierced the air, reaching the king's ears.

“So analyze me to your heart’s content. Catch my blood and flesh as they scatter through the air. But if, after all your probing, I turn out to be undeniably human...I want you to admit defeat and set Erik free.”

Shizuku’s death probably wouldn’t make much difference to the king. Even if she was an innocent young girl, there were many more citizens whose lives and deaths he was responsible for.

But to Shizuku, her life might have been one out of several million, but she still believed it meant something. She didn’t care if this blow was just one in a sea of others. She was ready to risk it all.

Shizuku didn’t want to die in the face of defeat. She didn’t want to lie curled up on the floor, powerless, when her life was brought to an un untimely end. So she’d chosen to retain her dignity—by gambling her own life.

While it might not have been the outcome she’d hoped for, she didn’t feel hesitant in the slightest.

“That’ll mean I’ve lost, will it?” said the king.

“Yes,” replied Shizuku. “And I will have won.”

“Even though you’d be dead?”

“Even though I’d be dead.”

“How interesting.”

The king smiled, and Shizuku thought to herself, *That’s the smile of the strong and powerful*. Those eyes could see through people’s weaknesses. But Shizuku couldn’t allow herself to recoil in fright. She didn’t want to back down. She wouldn’t let the king decide when she died.

“You sound very human, saying things like that,” observed the king.

“That’s because I *am* human,” replied Shizuku.

“Prove it, then.”

His words left no room for interpretation.

Shizuku closed her eyes. She knew he’d say that—that no amount of arguing would be enough to convince him.

She smiled. The way Shizuku saw it, the essence of a person always boiled down to their mindset.

She was scared, yet she wasn't.

Frustrated, yet not.

She wanted to cry, yet she didn't.

She wanted to live—she didn't want to die.

But if she really had to die, then she wanted to be free to decide how for herself. She hadn't set out on this path hoping for death. She'd set out to win—and this was her way of making that happen.

She stared at the king.

She didn't think about anything else, just the man standing below her.

A finite world.

A warped vision.

Everybody was alone in the end.

People were divided from the moment they were born.

But that—

Shizuku cut off that train of thought, sensing it could go on forever.

"I win," she declared.

She gently jumped off the tower.

Without averting her gaze, Shizuku began to fall.

The last thing she saw was Lars's face, his eyes wide with astonishment.



They were everywhere.

Those fragments inside a person, scattered all around.

They wouldn't be noticed. After all, they were considered perfectly normal in this world.

They were the reason escaping or fighting wasn't an option and gave such a

restrictive kind of freedom.

But at the end of the day, they were what people—

※

“Jumping to your death is such a horrible thing to do. I bet it really hurts.”

“People say that if you jump from a great enough height, you lose consciousness on the way down. I bet you’d be able to pass out, though—you don’t even ride scary roller coasters.”

“Why do you make it sound like I’m planning on doing it?!” Shizuku yelled.

Her younger sister, Mio, didn’t even look up from the book she was reading.

“I mean, you were the one who said you thought it would hurt,” Mio replied reasonably.

Shizuku scowled at her sister, who was rather impassive for her age.

The pair had been enjoying a relaxed day off when a TV report sparked a lively debate about the most agonizing way to die.

Shizuku, sitting next to Mio on the sofa, had started by saying, “Hanging yourself sounds painful,” vaguely echoing what the television presenter had said. Her younger sister, reading her book, had then countered with a realistic argument. She’d often correct Shizuku when her opinions were off, so this was a common scenario in the Minase household. At least, it was when Shizuku had still been around.

Holding the TV remote, Shizuku rested her chin in her hand.

“Dying terrifies me, though. I’d prefer a natural death, like euthanasia.”

“Euthanasia? You do know that’s not natural, right?”

“Huh?”

Shizuku blinked, confused—but her sister had already closed her book and turned to face her, and Shizuku gulped.

Mio gazed at Shizuku with her large eyes, the sole feature the sisters truly shared.

“I’m not going to kill myself, Mio,” Shizuku assured her. “You’re worrying for

no reason.”

“R-really?”

“I mean, I don’t even want to die.”

“Oh, right!”

That was what Shizuku had told her sister, and yet...

Her body was numb.

Even the slightest movement of her fingers sent intense pain coursing through her. She tried to scream, but no sound would come out.

It hurt. She was in pain. She was scared.

She couldn’t lift her arms. Her legs refused to move.

It hurt.

She could taste her own blood—or perhaps she was just imagining it.

She wasn’t sure.

She was scared.

She was in pain.

Don’t come in.

She didn’t feel good.

Save me.

Save me.

“...M-Mom.”

“You’re going to be fine.”

She heard a woman’s voice.

Someone put a hand against her forehead.

They gently stroked her hair.

That alone was enough to fill her with joy.

And then her consciousness was plunged into darkness once more.



“...You! You really do have some twisted hobbies!”

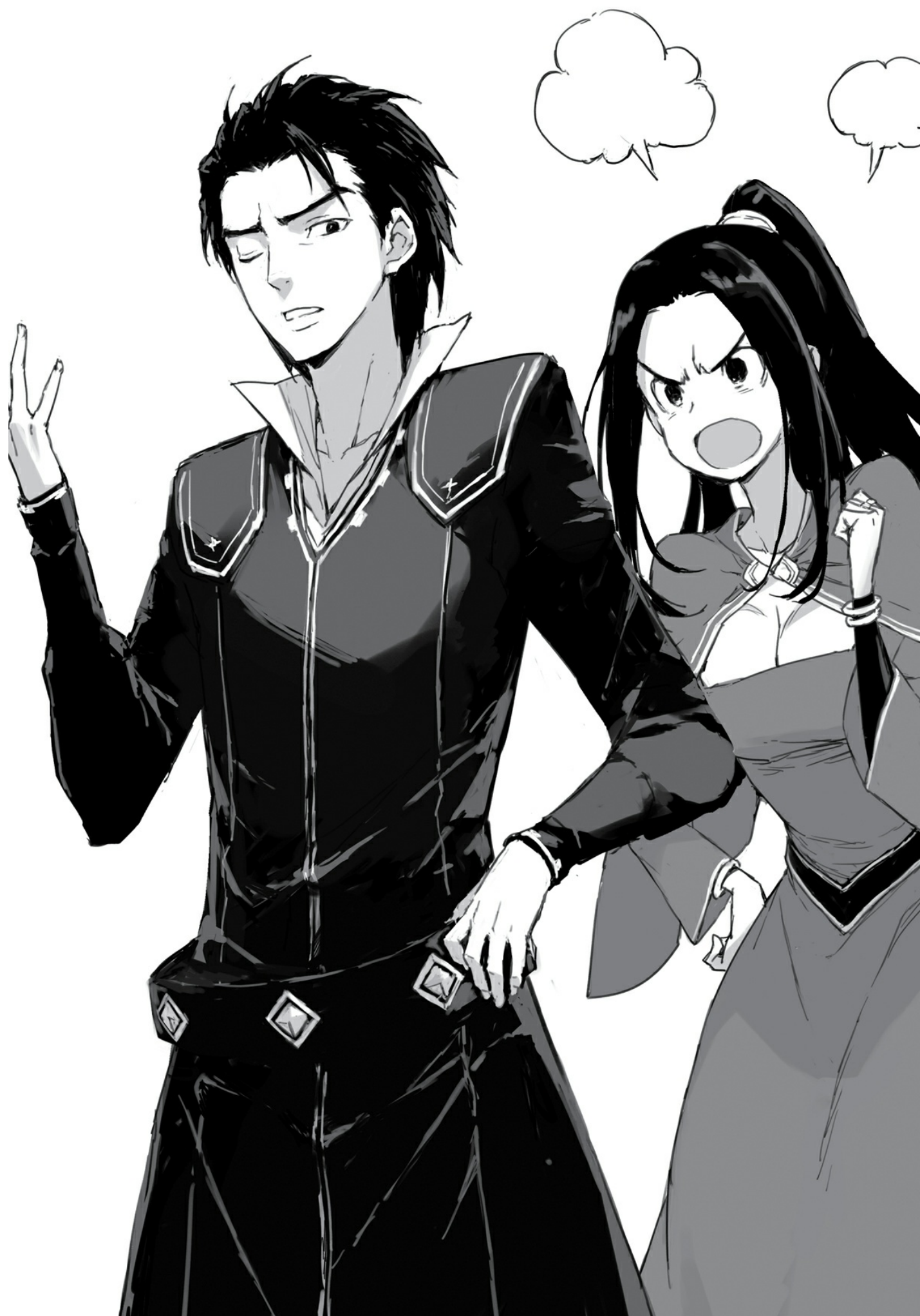
“My ‘hobby’ is thoroughly investigating suspicious individuals.”

“And does that include murdering ordinary young girls? You must be out of your mind!”

“I’m perfectly sane. I saved her, didn’t I? After all, she did look like a human on the inside.”

“That’s because she *was*! Undeniably! Her blood, her bones, and her organs all confirmed that!”

“Try not to get too angry. It’ll give you wrinkles.”



The first thing Shizuku heard when she woke up was this incomprehensible argument coming from right beside her.

A woman shouted sternly at a man, who answered her apathetically. Every time she raised her voice, filled with undisguised rage, it made Shizuku's head pound.

Shizuku opened her eyes slightly and stared at the pale-green ceiling. Did hospitals make a point of using wallpaper that was kind on the eyes nowadays? In contrast, the furnishings were rather ostentatious.

Shizuku turned her head in the direction the voices were coming from to see a young man and woman. The man was sitting in a chair, gazing at Shizuku, while the woman yelling at him had long black hair. Her back was turned away from the bed, but Shizuku got the feeling she'd seen her somewhere before, and she searched her memories for where that could have been.

Before she was able to find an answer, however, the man pointed at her.

"She's awake."

"You should have told me sooner!"

The woman hurried over to Shizuku's bedside in a panic. As soon as she turned around, Shizuku had found herself entranced by her beauty—like that of a white flower blooming in the moonlight. Shizuku looked up at her eyes, which were even bluer than gemstones.

"Uh...Shizuku, was it? How are you feeling?" the woman asked.

"...Everything's sort of fuzzy..."

"You've lost a lot of blood. Your injuries have been healed, but you'll need to rest for the remainder of the day."

"Okay..."

Shizuku couldn't think straight at all. As she tried to move some hair away from her face, she noticed that something felt peculiar. Underneath the bed covers, she was stark naked. That was when Shizuku finally remembered what had happened to her.

“Oh...”

“What’s wrong?” asked the woman. “Does something hurt, by any chance?”

“No. I just figured I’d be in a thousand pieces by now.”

She knew that some people could survive a fall from a five-story building, but that was only thanks to the medical system her old world had in place. She didn’t know how things worked in this world. In fact, she’d half expected to be left to die, even if she *had* survived the fall.

Yet she couldn’t feel pain anywhere in her body. There was always the possibility that she was experiencing phantom limb syndrome, but the woman had assured her that her injuries had been healed, so it sounded like she was back to normal.

The woman grinned at Shizuku.

“Your bones were sticking out in all sorts of different places, and your organs were ruptured. I used magic to heal you.”

“Thank you very much for that... It sounds like you went to a lot of trouble.”

As Shizuku offered the woman this vague expression of gratitude, the man peered down at her. He stared at her so unreservedly that it looked like he was examining some kind of rare animal, and Shizuku couldn’t help but laugh.

“So what did you think, Your Majesty?” she asked. “What color was my blood?”

“As far as I could tell, it was the same color as anybody else’s. Very disappointing.”

Lars smiled at Shizuku, but it was impossible to tell what he was feeling. She wanted to get up, but she wasn’t wearing any clothes. Regardless, the soreness in her joints told her that she wouldn’t be able to move right away, so instead she just smiled as cheerfully as she could.

“I’m just glad I betrayed your expectations.”

“Sure—but I don’t consider this a defeat.”

“Don’t you? I’m not going to concede, either,” Shizuku replied coldly, sticking

her tongue out.

Undeterred, Lars calmly carried on.

“That said, you’ll be keeping a low profile for the time being. Thanks to your brazenness, everyone’s disgusted with me.”

“Of course they are, Lars. You need to take some time to calm down,” the woman said curtly, and Shizuku finally remembered where she’d seen her before. They’d been in the transit ring hall in Candela, and Shizuku had caught a glimpse of her just before teleporting out. She was the younger sister of the king of Farsas.

Shizuku stared intently at the two royals, and Lars couldn’t help but let out a small chuckle at her lack of shame.

“It’s not a crime to be suspicious, you know. Every single day, I suspect that someone might have snuck some carrots into my meal,” said the king.

“Don’t admit that in public. You’re embarrassing yourself,” his sister remarked.

“What’s wrong with carrots? They’re really nutritious,” Shizuku added.

“Returning to the original point,” said the king, “you’re going to be detained for a short while. You can work for me.”

Shizuku slowly took in what the king was saying, then forced a grin.

“I see. We’re going into overtime.”



As Shizuku later found out, the king had instructed a mage to soften the impact of her fall somewhat; however, that had only been enough to lessen the impact to her head. The aftermath of Shizuku’s jump was said to have been so gruesome that one court lady who’d witnessed it ended up fainting. Shizuku felt bad about that, but she knew Lars was also partly to blame. In fact, it seemed as though many people had turned their critical gazes on the king.

Leuticia, who’d returned to the castle just in time, had healed Shizuku’s severe injuries—and during this process, every inch of her body had been thoroughly examined.

Rather unsurprisingly, they reached the conclusion that she was, in fact, a human being.

“What happened to Erik? Can’t I see him?” Shizuku asked Leuticia after Lars had left.

The other woman forced a smile. The look on her face didn’t tell Shizuku much.

“He’s in another location, under house arrest. The truth is that his wrongdoings are, officially speaking, more serious than yours. From what I’ve heard, he was very close to committing treason.”

“...Huh?”

“But everyone knows that my brother was in the wrong. His freedoms are limited for now, but he’s not wanting for anything. Don’t worry about him.”

It didn’t sound like seeing Erik was a possibility.

Feeling a mixture of relief and disappointment, Shizuku went to the room she’d been given, took a bath, then changed into some new clothes.

Mea, back into her girl form, dried Shizuku’s hair for her.

“Are your wounds okay, Master?” she asked.

“Yeah... I’m sorry for dragging you into all that, Mea.”

“As long as things turned out the way you wanted them to, I’m happy.”

Her simple words surprised Shizuku.

True enough, she’d found herself in what was as close to the best-case scenario as she’d envisioned. Shizuku had gone from fearing imminent death if she were discovered to working under the king’s supervision. While she was grateful that Mea saw this as a good outcome, she also couldn’t help but feel a little guilty as well.

As she sat on the bed, Shizuku looked up at the demon girl drying her hair.

“If magic is commonplace in this castle, then you should stay in your current form.”

“I like perching on your shoulder, though.”

“I know, but it’s good that you have a choice.”

That had been the first step—they were able to start moving forward again.

Shizuku would begin working in the castle the following day, and she reflected on the hectic events of the day before.

“He said that Erik...had been involved with a forbidden curse.”

Lars had leveled this accusation against him when Erik had confronted the king during their meeting, trying to give Shizuku a chance to escape. Had he really had a hand in a forbidden curse? He’d always seemed so disgusted by the very idea of them. It was hard for her to imagine Erik doing something like that, but she still didn’t know anything about his past.

There were a few other questions playing on her mind.

What were those beings that Lars was so concerned about?

What was the truth behind the incidents that had transpired 240 years earlier?

Everything felt like a mystery. Whenever she tried to think things through, she got overwhelmed.

Still, she was only just getting started. If she kept struggling forward, the things she wanted—as well as a home to go back to—might one day be within reach.

Once Mea had finished drying her hair, she lay her tired body down on the bed.

She knew she wasn’t going to have any dreams that night. She could just feel it.



Harve greeted the soldiers on guard, then knocked on the door. After a short delay, a response came from inside, and Harve opened the door with a strained smile.

Immediately, he shared the news that he knew his friend was dying to hear.

“Sounds like they saved the girl.”

“Oh,” was all the young man sitting by the window replied, and Harve sat down in a nearby chair.

“I’ve always known you’re reckless, but she’s just as bad. I’ve never seen someone argue with the king, then jump from a tower before.”

“She’s stubborn like that. You never know what she’ll do when she’s angry. It’s scary.”

Erik’s tone of voice was indifferent, but he’d calmed down a fair bit. When Harve had mentioned that Shizuku jumped off a tower, Erik had glared at him with a piercing look, but that, too, had dissipated by now.

“In the meantime, she’s going to work for His Majesty. It’s a nice way of saying she’s under surveillance, I guess. I don’t understand what’s so odd about her.”

“Me neither. That said...does the word *interloper* mean anything to you?”

“Interloper? You mean, like an outsider?”

Erik frowned. Judging by Harve’s reaction, he wasn’t familiar with the term.

Erik couldn’t work out what was really going on. Was there a secret that only the royal family were privy to?

Farsas had a long history and a powerful royal family, which was also perhaps why they possessed more confidential documents than any other nation. The internal conflict among the royals that had unfolded sixty years earlier was just one such event in which almost all the associated documentation was sealed away.

To access these sealed records, you needed permission from the royal family or to be accompanied by a member of royalty viewing the records. To make things even more difficult, there were only two individuals who were recognized as direct descendants of the Farsas royal family—the king and his sister.

For a moment, Erik wished he’d asked her for more help with his research—but then a self-deprecating smile appeared on his face. It was a stupid fantasy. Even if he could turn back time, there was no way a mere mage would be

allowed to view those sealed records. And most importantly, she wasn't around any longer.

Katiliana Til Rosa Farsas was dead.

Erik knew that better than anybody.



There was no such thing as green tea in Shizuku's new world.

The most basic sort of tea resembled black tea in color but tasted more like herbal tea. She'd once asked what kind of plant it was made from, but Erik hadn't been sure, so she still didn't know what the ingredients were. She knew more or less how to make it, though—she'd wanted to know how to make it for herself.

"Here's your tea, Your Majesty," Shizuku said.

"I've never been served tea in such a slovenly manner before," remarked the king.

"Did you want me to kneel down and whisk the tea into a lather for you?"

"Why would you whisk the tea? To spite me?"

"It must be a cultural difference. It's such a shame that we can't see eye to eye," Shizuku replied, feigning remorse. Her expression made it obvious that she wasn't disappointed in the slightest. It didn't matter that she wasn't concealing her dislike for him—the feeling was mutual, and the fact that she was still speaking with any respect to the king was enough of a compromise for Shizuku.

Shizuku, now dressed as a court lady, was just leaving the table when a wadded-up ball of scrap paper whacked her on the back of her head. She scowled.

She knew full well who'd hit her. There was only one other person in the room—the lord of the castle.

"What do you think you're doing, Your Majesty?"

"Show me your true form."

"Give it a rest already!"

Shizuku had the urge to whack Lars with the tray she was carrying, but she managed to restrain it.

Farsas's castle city was hot. It wasn't humid, but the temperatures were high. Yet despite this, everyone in the castle worked with long sleeves on—and seemed totally fine with it.

There was one exception, however. The most powerful man in the country wore simple short-sleeved clothes while he was working. He tended to be lightly dressed not because of the heat, but because it was easier for him to move around, and although he'd been dressed in more formal attire when Shizuku first met him, she figured he must only dress that way for meetings.

The king, who was dealing with some official business in his office, looked down at his documents with boredom.

“Work keeps piling up—and now I've got a suspicious otherworldly visitor to deal with, too.”

“I didn't choose to come here,” said Shizuku. “If you tell me how to get home, I'll go back right away.”

Shizuku, who'd almost been killed on the spot when they first met, wasn't just impolite toward the king—she'd adopted a noticeably prickly attitude around him. This didn't seem to bother him in the slightest, though. She wasn't technically one of his subjects, so perhaps there was no need for him to reprimand her for it.

Erik had described him as an open-minded king, and to some extent, that did seem to be the case. As long as there was no real threat of danger, he seemed to be fairly easygoing.

He took a sip of the tea Shizuku had brewed for him.

“It's hot,” he muttered.

“Is it? I always drink my tea at that temperature.”

“Does that mean you have an unusually high body temperature? Maybe I should conduct another autopsy on you.”

“Everyone in the world has roughly the same basal temperature. Do you

struggle with hot food and drink, Your Majesty?” asked Shizuku.

In truth, she knew that tea in this world tended to be on the colder side. That’s why she’d learned how to brew it herself—so she could make it at her desired temperature.

Since she’d become an apprentice court lady under Lars’s supervision, Shizuku’s work involved rising early to clean his office, occasionally serving him tea, and being ordered around like a maid. Her day came to an end just before sunset.

The other ladies-in-waiting had been confused by her presence. After all, she’d arrived from another country and been appointed as a court lady after jumping off a tower, so they treated her like she was the king’s favorite and gave her a wide berth. In reality, the king treated her more like his nemesis—but Shizuku kept this to herself in order to avoid any unnecessary complications.

“How’s Erik doing, Your Majesty?” Shizuku asked.

Lars, who was organizing some papers, looked up at her. “I’ve put him to work in the archives. Lettie’s busy lately, and we’re short on staff, so it works out perfectly.”

“Where are the archives?”

“Not telling.”

“...”

Shizuku was on the verge of saying, “I really feel like punching you right now,” but she held back and kept silent. If she were to give in to her violent urges, it might have even *pleased* the king. She could imagine him saying, “You’ve finally revealed your true form!” The king’s ability to faultlessly steer conversations to his advantage was infuriating enough, but the idea of succumbing to his schemes was even more loathsome.

“He’s too lenient on you. I, for one, was hoping to torment you until you cracked.”

“I knew your desires were twisted, but you’re also a sadist? I should start

calling you the Sadist King.”

“What does ‘sadist’ mean?”

“It’s what we call people who share the same inclinations as the Marquis de Sade, a renowned writer from my world,” replied Shizuku, being deliberately vague.

Lars replied with just a “Hmph.” The look in his pale-blue eyes was as impenetrable as ever. In contrast to Erik, whose emotions were difficult to discern due to the nature of his personality, Lars *refused* to show how he felt. For him, what he projected on the outside was merely camouflage.

“What’s your world like?” he asked.

“Apart from the lack of magic and the way civilization has evolved, it’s no different from here.”

“Do you have countries with kings that fight one another?”

“No... My country is a democracy—nowadays, at least.”

“I see. I guess the responsibility and the benefits are spread among the people, then,” the king remarked calmly. He bore sole responsibility for the largest country on the continent, yet he didn’t seem jealous of the way Shizuku’s country worked, nor arrogant about how his was administered. Shizuku stared fixedly at the king’s handsome face.

“What’s the problem?” asked the king. “If you want some more jobs to do, I suppose we can go outside.”

“Leuticia gave me strict orders not to let you out of the castle, Your Majesty.”

“Damn Lettie...,” Lars grumbled, clearly annoyed. There was nothing Shizuku could do to help, though. This was a dispute between siblings.

With a lack of anything else to do, Shizuku decided to start polishing the table inside Lars’s office. For a short while, the pair concentrated on their respective jobs in silence—but then Lars abruptly rose to his feet.

“All right, let’s go,” he said.

“Where to?”

“To work. We’re going into the castle city.”

“No, but you’re not allowed. I told you that a minute ago.”

“If I have a job to do, then that’s that. It can’t be helped, unfortunately.”

“Stop being so obtuse!”

As Lars spoke, he sped out of his office—and Shizuku hurriedly followed after him.

Shizuku had stayed in the castle city for about a week, but she’d been so busy preparing for her meeting with the king that she hadn’t had the chance to do any sightseeing. Hence why this was Shizuku’s first time seeing the city’s famous bell.

The pure white bell hung from a seven-story bell tower in the corner of a square, and the sight of it made Shizuku’s jaw drop in amazement.

“Whoa. It’s so pretty.”

“People claim it can grant wishes. It’s been around for about four hundred years.”

“Oh. I guess this is a famous tourist spot.”

As Shizuku gazed at the magnificent sight, entranced, Lars marched over to the door on the bottom floor of the bell tower and used a key to open it. The king stepped inside without saying a word, so Shizuku felt obliged to follow suit.

It wasn’t particularly spacious inside. All Shizuku could see were a desk, a staircase leading upward, and a magic ring etched onto the floor.

“There’s nobody here. What kind of job is this?” she asked.

“I’ve been informed that the bell tower’s facilities have begun to show their age, and that those responsible want my permission to fix them. So I’ve come to take a look.”

“Why would you, personally, need to pay a visit?”

It was a genuine question, but Lars responded by giving her a meaningful look. He stared at Shizuku, who was much smaller than him.

“You’re under my supervision. If you stray out of sight without my permission,

you'll be severely punished. Do you understand that?"

"I know. I've always asked for your permission before going anywhere. What's the problem?"

For now, Shizuku was being allowed to enjoy a small amount of freedom in her captivity. She had consistently informed Lars of her whereabouts, asked for his permission before fetching a glass of water in a bid to dodge any potential complaints, and even stayed close behind him as they made their way to the bell tower. Shizuku couldn't work out why he was reiterating his rules *now*, of all times—but Lars just smiled.

"Okay, then. Let's go."

With that, the king immediately started running up the stairs, and in a matter of seconds, he'd reached the second floor and vanished out of sight. Shizuku was dumbfounded.

Almost instantly, however, she realized what this meant.

"Hey! What are you doing?!"

She was not permitted to leave the king's line of sight without permission. That rule most likely applied when Lars decided to disappear, too.

Shizuku frantically ascended the staircase, chasing after the irrational king. She slipped and almost fell a few times on the way up, but she eventually reached the top floor of the tower.

Lars was already there, waiting. There wasn't a drop of sweat on him. When he saw Shizuku, out of breath and drenched in sweat, he gave her a venomous smile.

"Where did you go? I didn't see you."

"I was trying my best to catch up with you... Cut it out before I get mad."

"You're *always* mad."

As he spoke, Lars jutted his chin toward the ladder that led to the top of the bell tower. He climbed out first, and once Shizuku had wiped the sweat from her forehead, she followed him.

Finally, Shizuku was standing underneath the bell. She brushed away the dirt that had gotten on her hands, then let out a cry of admiration as she took in the view of the city.

“Whoa... It’s so pretty.”

The beautiful, sprawling cityscape looked even more spectacular from up above. The sight was like something out of an intricately drawn picture book. With the castle standing in the distance, the city looked like the setting of a fairy tale, and it stirred Shizuku’s heart.

Meanwhile, Lars inspected the metal fixtures that the bell was hanging from, and as she watched him carry out his task, Shizuku started to feel conflicted. The weight of this enormous city and the lives of all its inhabitants rested on his shoulders. Not only that, but this affluent castle city was only one part of the large nation of Farsas. Shizuku couldn’t even imagine how much pressure Lars must be under.

“I suppose it’s no wonder you have such a twisted personality...”

“Did you say something, girl-from-another-world?”

“Nope. If you’ve started hearing things, you must really need some rest.”

“It looks really easy to jump down from this bell tower, you know. Feel free to give it a go. I know how much you enjoy it.”

“You never disappoint me, Your Majesty. I am amazed at how unselfish you are that you’d let your own country’s tourist attraction turn into a crime scene. I’ll turn down your suggestion, but I really do appreciate the thought.”

There was no handrail, and the ground was a long way down. Shizuku looked over the edge, only to notice a man dressed entirely in black standing in the brightly colored brick square. He looked like a single dark stain on the colorful surroundings.

The man was looking at Shizuku.

“...!”

Shizuku reflexively backed away. The man had been looking at her even before she noticed him. Was that because it was so unusual for someone to be

up in the bell tower? Shizuku's heart began to race. As she stood there, pale with shock, Lars called out to her, having finished his inspection.

"Let's go back, girl-from-another-world. If you want to jump straight down, I'll meet you on the ground."

"...Thanks for your consideration, but I think I'll take the stairs like a civilized individual."

"By the way, the first floor is connected to the back of that ladder over there via a transit ring. It's activated as soon as a living being steps inside."

"Why did you climb all those stairs, then?!"

"Just trying to stay fit," replied the king.

"Really? Then you can take your time on the stairs going back down. I'm going to clean up."

Shizuku picked up a broom that was lying in the corner. Without waiting for Lars to respond, she started sweeping away the dirt that had been bothering her.

"You might have been running too fast to notice it, Your Majesty, but there's mud everywhere here, all the way from the ground floor, almost as if someone had walked straight out of a field and into this bell tower. If someone were to run up here, they might slip and fall, so I'm going to sweep it from top to bottom."

"Nobody apart from me and you would run up here."

"I wouldn't dare if I were alone, either!" Shizuku shouted, but Lars just shrugged and watched Shizuku sweep.

"Your mention of a field made me wonder—do they have carrots in your world?"

"We certainly do. Tons of them. They're an important source of carotene."

"That's a shame. I guess I have no choice but to execute you, then."

"You can't decide whether someone lives or dies based on whether they have carrots or not. I'll sneak one into your food."

“Come at me whenever you want. I’ll notice, no matter how hard you try to deceive me.”

Making the king eat some carrots really was a tempting idea. Shizuku began to visualize a few recipes—ones that could trick even the most ardent carrot-hating child into consuming their nemesis without realizing it.

As Shizuku carefully descended the ladder, sweeping it clean as she went, the king, still atop the bell tower, asked her a question.

“Are you frustrated with this situation?”

“Yes, it’s unpleasant. It’s nice that you’re giving me clothes, food, and shelter—but really, I just wish you’d see me as a human being.”

“Turn back the clock, then.”

“It would be quite the feat if I managed to do that, considering I’m not a mage.”

The king went quiet.

That night, Shizuku remembered that, in this world, not even mages had the ability to turn back time.



“How long am I going to have to live like this for?”

“Hmmm...”

Shizuku’s question brought a sympathetic smile to Leuticia’s face.

She had about a thousand times more common sense than her older brother. Of course, mathematically speaking, that would mean Lars’s own common sense would have to be near zero—but as a public figure, the king seemed to be almost faultless. Shizuku wished that his personality had fewer faults, too, but it seemed like everyone close to the king shared the same view.

“His Majesty is twenty-seven, isn’t he? If he still has such a deep-rooted aversion to carrots at that age, does that mean his suspicion of me will persist for another twenty-seven years as well?” asked Shizuku.

“...I understand where you’re coming from...and I’m sorry,” replied Leuticia.

“I wasn’t looking for an apology, just some reassurance.”

Shizuku was eighteen years old. In twenty-seven years’ time, she’d be around the same age as her parents. She couldn’t bear the thought of being stuck in Farsas for all that time, and the notion that she could still be bickering with the king after all those years filled her with dread.

Shizuku, leaning against the wall of a covered walkway in the castle, let out a sigh.

Standing next to her was Leuticia, who was busy dealing with the aftermath of the chaos in Candela, yet she still took the time to check on Shizuku. Regardless, no matter how much Shizuku begged her for help, her older brother’s mind couldn’t be changed.

“Not even I can truly understand what my brother is thinking. I could use my influence to keep you safe somewhere, if you’d like; however, you would have to be under surveillance.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I doubt the king would be very happy about that. I’ll keep trying with him.”

Shizuku had agreed to Lars’s challenge; it was still too early to run. Instead, she asked Leuticia about something else that had been on her mind.

“Um, do you know how Erik’s doing? I heard he was helping out with another sort of work.”

“He’s working under my supervision. He seems to have a goal of his own he wishes to accomplish, so it’s ideal to have him under my watchful eye.”

“An objective of his own?”

“The information he’s interested in can’t be publicly disclosed. There are restrictions in place to prevent that from happening.”

Shizuku presumed Leuticia was referring to the records about the teleportation incidents that had occurred two hundred and forty years ago, in which case she felt immensely guilty. Since she’d been unable to see Erik, Shizuku hadn’t gotten the chance to apologize to him or seek his advice.

Leuticia gave Shizuku a vague smile.

“He’ll be finished with his current task soon, so maybe you can see each other after that. I know my brother can be a bother, so I will make sure he doesn’t spot you.”

“His Majesty is trying to isolate me...”

It had been the king’s aim to keep Erik and Shizuku separated. He’d expected this would force Shizuku to show her true colors, but his assumption was misguided.

Shizuku looked up at the king’s beautiful younger sister.

“What exactly does he think I am?” Shizuku asked.

That was something she still had no idea about, which made it harder for her to argue back to Lars. Leuticia hummed in thought at Shizuku’s rather obvious question.

“That’s a secret known only by the direct descendants of the Farsas bloodline. In truth, nobody but my brother is allowed to tell anyone about it...but since you’ve already been implicated, I’ll give you a brief explanation.”

“Please do.”

“You said you were from another world, didn’t you? The thing is, you’re not the only one who’s come from elsewhere.”

“Huh?! There are others?! How did they come here?”

“I don’t know, but they’re meddlers. There’s a legend that says the royal family of Farsas must be the ones to eliminate them.”

“Meddlers...”

What did Leuticia mean by that? As far as Shizuku was aware, she hadn’t done any meddling since arriving in this world—she was far too small and insignificant for something like that. She hated the idea that she’d been lumped in with them just because she was an outsider, and she could feel herself growing resentful toward them, despite not even knowing what they were.

“But why do they need to be eliminated? What kind of ‘meddling’ are we talking about here?” she asked.

“The ordinary kind. They toy with and observe us. That’s why they must be eliminated. We’re proud... Proud to be human.”

Shizuku couldn’t really grasp what Leuticia was saying. Couldn’t she explain things in a way that Shizuku could understand? Perhaps she needed Lars’s permission to do so.

Still, in some small way, Shizuku could grasp what Leuticia was hinting at.

Human beings had their own sense of dignity.

In her own roundabout way, Shizuku had found herself in her current predicament for that very reason.



“I don’t know what to do...”

It had been a few days since Shizuku had arrived at the castle, and she was lying in the courtyard, enjoying her first afternoon break. Mea lay beside her on the grass looking up at the sky. They had just finished sharing some tea and sweets they’d brought with them, and they had decided to bask in the sunlight for a while.

Mea, whose green hair was spread out on the grass, softly spoke.

“But you’re trying your best, Master.”

Shizuku had been tossed into an unfamiliar environment, yet she was still fighting on. Although she was glad Mea could see that, it still felt like she was dragging everybody into this mess for her own sake.

She wished she could see the finish line, but it felt like she could end up being berated by Lars for another twenty years if she made one wrong move. Shizuku had been given a break this afternoon only because Lars had decided to test her swimming skills by pushing her into the castle moat. Unsurprisingly, she’d come out looking like a drowned rat, garnering pity from those around her. The king had subsequently announced that she could take the rest of the day off, saying that he was getting complaints from everyone.

Shizuku yawned as she watched the clouds drift by, when suddenly she noticed a shadow looming over her. She looked over at its source to see Harve, the royal mage, who smiled and waved at the girls.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m being mercilessly picked on. What are the chances he’ll suddenly give up and decide to execute me, regardless of how hard I’m trying?”

“I—I highly doubt that would happen... But I can’t make any promises.”

“Make sure to keep records about me, okay? Don’t let them pretend I never existed.”

“As a history specialist, I can almost guarantee that it *would* be covered up.”

“Arghhh! The class system *sucks!*”

Shizuku sat up, head in her hands, and Harve planted himself down beside her.

“I brought some snacks,” he told them, giving Mea and Shizuku a paper parcel each. They opened the small packages to reveal a few cookies in each.

“If it’s getting to you, then you should be able to leave the castle. You’ll be supervised, but I doubt it’ll be any worse than that. If you wait in the castle city, Erik will probably find out what you want to know.”

Shizuku gave a tight smile. That would mean accessing information that wasn’t available to the public.

“But then it would all rest on Erik’s shoulders. I want to do what I can to help. He’s already done more than enough, bringing me all the way to Farsas!”

Harve seemed surprised by Shizuku’s display of determination. He thought to himself for a moment, then gave her a bittersweet smile.

“...How much do you know about Erik’s past?” he asked.

“Zilch. I know he left home early, but that’s about it.”

“Right.”

There was a touch of sadness to Harve’s expression, presumably because he *did* know what Erik had been through. He gazed up at the clear blue sky.

“You’ve probably figured this out by yourself, but Erik used to come to the castle here all the time,” Harve told them.

“...Was he a royal mage?” asked Shizuku.

“Technically, no. He was treated like one, though. I’m only telling you this because anyone who’s been at this castle for more than four years knows this, but Erik used to tutor a member of the royal family.”

“Not Leuticia?”

As far as Shizuku was aware, Lars and Leuticia were the only direct descendants of the Farsas bloodline, yet Harve’s roundabout way of speaking suggested that it wasn’t either of them. As Shizuku had expected, he silently shook his head.

“Her name was Katiliana. The king from two generations ago had a younger sister, and Katiliana was her granddaughter. Perhaps it would be easier to understand to call her His Majesty’s second cousin. Katiliana possessed powerful magical powers, but she struggled to handle them properly. She was around the same age as Erik, but was relatively immature... She was always bored inside the castle.”

Harve’s eyes narrowed, almost as if he were peering into the past, and Shizuku envisioned scenes that he’d likely never seen.

“One day, Erik was invited to become her tutor. He must have been about fifteen at the time. He didn’t smile much, but he patiently stuck with Katiliana and taught her all about magic. Before long, Leuticia took note of his abilities, and he ended up taking on some troublesome work for her, too.”

“Troublesome work?”

Harve hesitated over his words for a moment, then gave Shizuku a rather indirect response.

“Erik isn’t the kind of person who’d usually become a mage. His powers are lacking, to say the least, but he knows how to *use* magic, even if only in a simple way. Do you get what I mean by that?”

Erik had always insisted that he was lacking in magical power. However, he did have knowledge and skill, so Shizuku had never really worried about what he lacked. She thought things over, then gave what she felt to be a reasonable response.

“I get it. He makes up for it with his determination.”

“No. Simply put, his spellcasting skills are second to none. He uses the little power he does have as effectively as he can to produce complex spells. Since he possesses such a small amount of power, he has to use complicated spell configurations to accomplish what any other mage could do with a snap of their fingers. It’s such a waste, considering his talent.”

“A waste? That sounds really impressive.”

To give a crude analogy, it was like he was a machine running on power-saving mode. A feat like that was only possible because of Erik’s advanced technical expertise. What was that a waste of?

Harve smiled and furrowed his brow, troubled by Shizuku’s overly sincere comment.

“It *is* impressive. That’s exactly why I think it’s a waste. If he were even just as powerful as I am, he could have gone much further. But... Maybe I shouldn’t be saying these things. Such thoughts lead to destructive temptations.”

Why was Harve talking about “destructive temptations” all of a sudden? Picking up on Shizuku’s bewilderment, Harve switched back to a cheerier tone of voice.

“So yeah. Leuticia thought highly of Erik’s spellcasting skills and started giving him jobs to do. At the time, he was even tasked with taking care of documents relating to forbidden curses.”

“Forbidden curses?! No way!”

It was surprising to hear that Erik had been involved in that sort of work, considering how much he detested forbidden curses.

Suddenly realizing how loud she’d been, Shizuku covered her mouth with her hand. Harve just gave her a tight smile and waved it off.

“When it comes to forbidden curses, everyone knows that Farsas is in charge. Being the magic kingdom, it’s part of this country’s job to prevent them from being used. The nation retains information about these curses, but it’s tightly sealed away, so only a select few have permission to access those documents.”

“Huh... I see.”

Now that Shizuku thought about it, Erik *had* demonstrated a unique level of awareness back in Candela—he’d detected that a forbidden curse was being set in motion and even attempted to put a stop to it. Perhaps his past experiences played a part in that. It made more sense to Shizuku now, and Harve nodded, seeing her put the pieces together.

“Erik’s incredible spellcasting abilities let him sort through the forbidden curse files, but rather ironically, he wasn’t powerful enough to put one into practice, which made him the perfect guy for the job. Then, three years after he first came to the castle...around four years ago, there was an incident.”

“An incident?”

This ominous-sounding phrase had come out of the blue, and a darkness spread across Harve’s expression as he struggled to keep the smile on his face.

“Yeah. Katiliana tried to cast a forbidden curse but ended up losing her life in the process. Erik was forced to take responsibility for it and left the castle.”

“Huh?”

The girl who Erik had once been involved with had been killed by a forbidden curse.

Shizuku hadn’t heard about that before. Her eyes widened in shock.

“Is that true? But why...?”

“Unfortunately, it is true. He probably avoided talking about Farsas, right?”

“Uhh.”

Harve was right. Not only had Erik been avoiding the topic of Farsas, but he’d even given the impression that he didn’t think much of it.

As Shizuku struggled over how to answer, Harve let out a chuckle.

“Don’t worry—I already know what he’s like. It was the incident with Katiliana that made him like that. Since it involved a member of the royal family, the details weren’t disclosed to people like me, and Erik hasn’t spoken about it, either. Honestly, I didn’t think he needed to take responsibility for it, but there’s

no changing the fact he was Katiliana's tutor. In the end, he went back to his old country."

Shizuku found herself at a loss for words.

True enough, there had been several moments during their journey when she'd detected a hint of sorrow from Erik, like when they'd spoken about Farsas, forbidden curses, or the royal family. Looking back, those topics must have reminded him of what happened to Katiliana. Perhaps his past experiences could also explain why he was so sympathetic toward Lyshien, who—despite being a princess—longed for an ordinary sort of happiness.

"After everything that happened, I didn't expect him to show his face in this country ever again. Yet here he is—and he brought you with him."

Harve closed his eyes, concealing that reminiscent gaze, and smiled weakly. Shizuku could still detect a hint of bitterness in it, though.

"His Majesty has put you in a terrible situation, but you're still trying your best. That's very impressive... I also get the impression that you're the one keeping him standing. I know it's not my place to say that, but still."

"...No, it's fine."

Erik had gone through all sorts of hardships because Shizuku wanted to get back to her old world, but for the time being, she couldn't allow herself to give in. She couldn't just wait around in her comfort zone. She had to prove her own innocence.

"I haven't lost yet—not by a long shot. I'm going to win this fair and square; just you wait."

Regardless of what had happened in the past, Shizuku still had some options available to her. That was why she had to do everything she could to keep moving forward. That was what she'd decided to do.

Harve laughed awkwardly as Shizuku's eyes blazed with determination. Then he stood up and brushed the grass off his mage's robes.

"I'm sorry, I've said way too much. Feel free to come to me for advice if anything's troubling you."

“Thank you so much!”

Shizuku waved at Harve as he walked away, then she lay back down on the grass. The pleasant weather made her want to take a nap, but she knew she’d end up getting sunburned or suffering from heatstroke. After enjoying the sunlight for a little while, Shizuku abandoned that idea and decided to get up, but just before she could, she heard an unfamiliar man’s voice calling out to her from a distance.

“Are you a court lady? What are you doing there?”

“Uh, I was just taking a break...”

Once Shizuku had leaped to her feet in a panic, she saw someone striding over to her from one of the castle buildings. The man, who was in his thirties and wore a dark-green robe, wasn’t someone she recognized, but since he was dressed like a mage, Shizuku assumed he probably worked for the castle.

He stared at her squarely in the face, scowling.

“It’s you,” he spat. “The troublemaker that other troublemaker brought along with him.”

“A troublemaker? Well, I am one of those,” Shizuku replied.

Shizuku was a royally certified troublemaker, yes—but this man was making it sound like Erik was one, too.

According to Harve, some people had a poor impression of Erik simply because he’d been involved in an incident to do with forbidden curses. Even if, on an emotional level, Shizuku wanted to object to such negative opinions, she wasn’t in any sort of position to talk about past events. So she held her tongue and stood up straight.

“I’m sorry. I’ll go back to my room.”

She gave the man a polite nod, then walked past him, with Mea following close behind. She could hear the man snort scornfully behind her back. Still, she refused to turn around, and she went back inside the castle with her head held high.



The final volume was unusually thin, and Erik pulled it off the bookshelf and flipped through its pages. There was no need for him to search the entire book—he was just checking to see whether it contained the information he needed, so the chapter titles were sufficient.

As he'd half expected, it contained none of the information he was looking for. There were no records of the strange goings-on from two hundred and forty years prior in this room, either, and Erik put the book back on the shelf with a hint of a frown.

"Nothing here, was there?"

He suddenly heard a woman's voice coming from behind him. He didn't need to look around to know who it was, and Erik silently shook his head.

"I didn't think you'd believe me unless you saw it with your own eyes. I'm sure my brother will reveal all once his mind's been put to rest."

"I wonder about that. I'm not getting my hopes up."

"I wouldn't tell you something I didn't believe."

"You never know when he'll actually be satisfied, though."

This comment seemed to hit Leuticia where it hurt, because her beautiful face contorted into a scowl. She was the only person in Farsas who could openly reprimand the king, but there was a difference between scolding someone and having them actually listen to you. In the past, a certain young girl had frequently reminded him of that—but upon meeting Lars face-to-face, he was shocked by how wearisome he truly was.

His penchant for coldhearted and drastic decisions was difficult to reconcile with his public reputation and competent management of domestic affairs. He might not have said it directly, but he'd still urged Shizuku to jump off the top of the tower. When Erik caught wind of this, he was too scandalized to speak.

Erik had been allowed to view the royal family's sealed records under the condition that he sort the archives here, and he let out a deep sigh.

"If the king has no intention of telling me the truth, I wish he'd hurry up and admit it. Then I can get out of this country and take her with me."

“That won’t be possible.”

“If me seeing these documents will prove problematic, then you could just wipe my memory.”

“That’s easier said than done. Memory manipulation is a challenging form of magic.”

“It shouldn’t be a problem for you, though.”

This unreserved retort made Leuticia gently raise her hands in apparent surrender.

The room was small, but tightly packed rows of books covered every inch of the walls. As Leuticia looked around at the countless documents, she forced a smile.

“There’s another reason why I let you view these records. I didn’t think you’d make peace with what happened four years ago...with what happened to *her*... otherwise. I wonder if some of your doubts have been put to rest.”

Katiliana.

That forgotten name came flooding back into Erik’s mind—along with the facts that he’d been oblivious to at the time of the incident.

Still, even if the sealed records did reveal the truth to him, there was no changing the past.

“Is there really any point in putting my doubts to rest after all this time?” he asked in a flat tone of voice.

“Not really. If it wouldn’t mean anything to you, then I suppose it’s insignificant.”

For a moment, Erik saw a crack in Leuticia’s smile. Through it, he caught a glimpse of something reminiscent of a freezing cold night.

Regardless, Erik’s expression remained the same. He turned back toward the shelves, intending to sort through the books, when the voice of a graceful, strong individual reverberated through the cramped room.

“Once your work here is done, I want you to compile an investigation report

for the forbidden curse incident in Candela.”

“Why me? It’s not like I went to deal with the aftermath.”

“You were there, weren’t you? Your employment documents were still lying around, and most importantly, there was a magic ring in the basement. I could easily tell who’d drawn it.”

Leuticia had figured it out. Having seen that coming, Erik reluctantly raised a hand to signal his understanding. People tended to formulate their spells in recognizable ways, so he knew there was a chance that Leuticia would recognize his work.

If he kept obeying her orders, she’d just make him do whatever she wanted. Now that he finally had limited access to the sealed records, he needed to uncover something that would help to level the playing field.

Erik took a thin book from the shelf.

“Come to think of it, when the mad king was overthrown sixty years ago, leading to twenty-five years of infighting within the Farsas royal family...the records mention a man who was involved in the conflict, on and off. His name and identity aren’t documented, but it claims that he enslaved the royal family’s mystical spirits, albeit only temporarily. That suggests that he was directly descended from the Farsas lineage, does it not? Who *was* that man?”

Erik didn’t think this had anything to do with the information he wished to uncover—he’d just brought it up because he found it peculiar.

Only individuals who were within five generations of a former king were considered direct descendants of the royal line, but there was no trace of such a man in the family tree. What’s more, only direct descendants had the ability to command the royal family’s mystical spirits, yet records stated that two of them had followed this man’s orders. Who was this hidden member of the royal family? Was he, like the witch whose records had been concealed, a part of Farsas’s undocumented dark side?

Erik’s question, which his tentative research had brought him to, made Leuticia go quiet for a little while. He wondered if she would leave the archives without saying a word, but then she gave him a single-sentence answer.

“The answer to that is most likely the same answer you’re trying to uncover.”

Leuticia smiled at him, but her face looked like a mask.



The Farsasian royal family had a long history.

Farsas was a nation that revered the wielder of Akashia, the royal sword, as king. As such, every member of the royal family born there was expected to embody that same strength needed for a Farsasian king. The royal family had produced an abundance of exceptional swordsmen and unparalleled mages; however, over time, this desire to retain power no matter the cost had led them to intermarry.

This had most likely been what led to the events of sixty years prior, when one king suddenly descended into madness and massacred his blood relatives. That man, who transformed the hall of Farsas Castle into a sea of blood, was named Dysral. Wielding Akashia, he cut down forty-one members of his own family and twenty-two of his vassals, until his surviving relations brought the king’s life to an end—removing him from the royal throne by way of death.

After the king was killed, further discord and suspicion took root among the royal family, ushering in a twenty-five-year period of darkness and infighting. At the center of this unrest was Dysral’s niece, Princess Crestea, who was claimed to be the strongest mage of her time. However, her actions during that dark period of history...were not chronicled in any public records.

“...But you know what I think? If the king of Farsas, the master of Akashia, is supposed to be powerful, then Dysral exemplified that better than anyone else. Why, then, do his great achievements have to be hidden? As a king, he enjoyed victory after victory and destroyed opponent after opponent. It’s just a shame that it culminated in the killing of his own relatives.”

The man, dressed in a dark-green mage’s uniform, sounded drunk. Thanks to the candlelight, the room they were in was brightly lit, and Aviella couldn’t help but crack a smile as she listened.

“Yeah. The Farsasian royal family must see Dysral’s madness and the ensuing conflict as a part of their past they’d rather erase, but there’s no point turning a blind eye to it and suppressing the truth. If people don’t know what happened,

then history will one day repeat itself.”

Aviella stroked her red book, which was lying on the table. She always had it by her side. Even when she had been manipulating her group of heretics back in Candela, that book had never been out of reach.

The man—oblivious to Aviella’s past undertakings—must have been pleased by her response, because he reacted with an exaggerated nod.

“Farsas is losing out by choosing to shun its former king, Dysral. They should’ve surrendered to his power, rather than fearing it. It’s their fault that now there are only two direct descendants of the family line left. Both of them happened to have been born *after* the conflict was over, and neither of them are powerful enough to rule the magic kingdom. They need to undergo a lot more training if they want to become worthy royals. For the twenty-five years that followed Dysral’s demise, the royal family tried their best to better themselves. It was a fitting sacrifice—yes, that’s how Princess Crestea put it.”

The man, who’d said the name of the princess whose existence had been wiped from all records, was intoxicated by his own words. His vision was hazy, preventing him from seeing things clearly.

The only remaining descendants of the royal family, Lars and Leuticia, were both already strong. Although they were born after the dark period was over, they’d worked relentlessly to acquire the strength that a Farsasian royal was supposed to have. Yet this man, who worshipped the former king, didn’t seem to realize that—so Aviella used his ignorance to her advantage. She’d have to contend with the magical powerhouse of Farsas sooner or later anyway.

“In that case, you should give the current king a test. That forbidden curse I told you about was just what you hoped it would be, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. His Majesty still hasn’t noticed. And I even gave him a clue...”

“That’s the way. The fact that you raised a concern with the royal family, despite knowing you could be executed for it, proves you’re a loyal subject.”

“My actions won’t be exposed anytime soon. There’s another nuisance in the castle at the moment.”

A hint of scorn appeared in Aviella’s gaze, but she promptly painted a

bewitching smile on her face and glanced behind her. There stood a man in black clothing who'd been silently listening to the pair's conversation.

She gave the man an order.

"Elzard, go and lend them a hand for a little while. There are too many things that Farsas has forgotten. It's time those who were relegated to the shadows of history jogged their memory."



Her side hurt so much, it felt like it was going to tear apart. She clapped her left hand to her ribs and pushed her leaden legs forward with nothing but sheer determination. Her throat was uncomfortably dry, and she was struggling to breathe properly. She screamed so loudly, it felt like her chest was going to burst, and the agony that ensued made her want to collapse.

Shizuku turned down a narrow path in the middle of the grove of trees. She approached a shady corner and staggered toward a solitary tree; she was reaching her limit. As soon as she placed her hands against it, her entire body weight sagged against the trunk, and without a word, she threw up the contents of her stomach. It wasn't until then that the man who'd left her behind came back, presumably having noticed she was gone.

"At your limit already? You've got zero stamina."

Lars didn't sound annoyed or condescending but was rather matter-of-fact about it all. Shizuku was so close to passing out that she couldn't argue back verbally, yet her mind was screaming at him that he couldn't be serious.

That morning, when Shizuku had reported to the king's office as she always did, the king had announced that they were going for a run. Her eyes had boggled as she struggled to take in what he was saying, but this being a royal order, she was obliged to go along with it. So Shizuku had done as she was told and changed into the kind of linen tunic a young soldier would wear, then followed Lars outside.

There, she'd ended up running thirty laps of the castle.

"I'm on the brink of death here...," she said to herself.

She *had* been trying to build up her stamina—after all, she'd done nothing but

run around since arriving in this new world—but there was a limit to what she could handle. She'd always been terrible at long-distance running, and to top it off, she was having to keep up with Lars, who ran at an abnormally fast pace and wouldn't ever wait for her.

Shizuku was about two steps away from collapsing. In truth, she wanted nothing more than to tumble to the ground, but she managed to stop herself. Instead, she languidly crouched down and looked up at the king, who was standing beside her.

“Why did you want to test my stamina? You already dissected me once...”

“You kept up with me pretty well when we were climbing those steps. I guess you're good at leaping into action on the spur of the moment.”

“Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses...”

Shizuku wanted to punch him, but she didn't have the strength. Her shoulders heaved as she breathed deeply and stared at the grass at her feet. Trails of lukewarm sweat trickled down her back and dripped from her bangs, falling onto the green grass.

As she steadied her breathing, Lars gave her a light tap on the head.

“I have my own work to do. One more lap, and we'll call it a day.”

“You want to keep going...? You really are such an unruly, energetic king...”

“Well, yes. My job demands it of me.”

The king immediately set off running again, and Shizuku followed after him, dragging her worn-out body along with her. It might have been their final lap, but Shizuku was in no fit state to run at all. She had to force her legs to move as she proceeded at a walking pace. Lars must have realized that he wouldn't be able to keep an eye on her if he shook her off, so at long last, he started walking one step in front of her. The pair, who'd been fighting like cats and dogs since the moment they met, silently approached the back of the castle.

As Shizuku wordlessly walked between the castle walls and a thicket of trees, she suddenly pointed to a white building in the woods to her left.

“What's that?” she asked.

She'd been curious since spotting it earlier. It was a striking building that looked more like a shrine than a storehouse, but it wasn't particularly large—about the same size as a cabin. The square structure had no windows, and if it had a door, it must have been on the other side.

Lars looked in the direction that Shizuku was pointing.

"That's the royal mausoleum. It's where the caskets of generations of kings and queens are enshrined."

"So they're not cremated? Are their bodies buried in the ground?"

"Their bodies are just beautifully preserved and put into caskets. They're not buried."

Shizuku, whose breathing had returned to normal, nodded in reply. She had no strength left in her legs but still managed to place one in front of the other.

As far as Shizuku was aware, Lars was the 30th king, so doing some rough calculations, she figured there could be as many as fifty-eight caskets in the mausoleum. It was hard to imagine that many urns being squeezed into such a small building, let alone caskets, so there had to be more space underground.

Shizuku knew that ghosts didn't exist in this world, which might be why she was able to stare right at the building without being the least bit afraid.

"Will you end up in there eventually?" she asked Lars.

"I suppose so. It's about time we had the place expanded. Those caskets take up so much space."

"If you cremated people and just kept their ashes, you'd save yourself a lot of room. That's how we do it in my country."

"We can't make cremation the norm. What if someone was poisoned to death and we lost all the evidence?"

Lars's reply was so forthright that, for a moment, Shizuku almost missed it, but she soon found herself taken aback by his unsettling hypothesis. Were those kinds of dangers something the king constantly lived with? To Shizuku, it seemed far-fetched, but perhaps that was just a normal part of life for Lars.

She couldn't help frowning. Shizuku hadn't warmed up to Lars at all, but

regardless of what was normal for a king, this seemed incomprehensibly restrictive.

Without realizing it, Shizuku let out a sigh, which made the king turn back toward her.

“What’s up?” he asked. “If you have energy to chat, then you have energy to run.”

“I’m going to, Sadist King,” Shizuku spat, but she lacked the energy to muster any anger toward him.

Shizuku lightly clenched her fists as she slowly began to run.

By the time they’d finished their run, it was lunchtime, yet Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to eat anything—she’d already pushed her body to the limit.

“M-my body’s wrecked...,” groaned Shizuku as she slumped over the table.

She was sitting in the dining hall in a corner of the castle, and everyone there knew why Shizuku looked so defeated. The military officers who’d gone past her and Lars when they were running watched her with sympathy.

Lars seemed to view Shizuku as an enemy he didn’t really understand. Ever since she’d been taken on as a court lady, she’d been subject to his abysmal treatment—and it showed no signs of stopping. Three days earlier, she’d been forced to engage in a sword fight and suffered wounds all over her body. Leuticia had healed her when she heard about Shizuku’s bruises, but the dark red welts were nowhere near gone.

How long would it take for the king to be satisfied? Would Shizuku end up buff, or would she die from exhaustion before she got to that point? It was difficult for her to judge that herself. Lars tended to join her in whatever grueling pursuit she was made to endure, but she’d never even seen him out of breath. Shizuku wished she could get revenge one day, but at this rate, it seemed like no physical punishment would affect him.

“This situation is really grating on me...,” she muttered to herself.

“You’re just the same as ever,” a voice replied.

Someone slammed their cup down on the table. It wasn’t the thunking sound

that made her jump but the voice.

“E-Erik!”

“Long time no see,” Erik replied calmly.

He remained standing, wearing his usual inscrutable expression. However, there was something about him that looked different. He wasn’t dressed in his usual mage’s traveling clothes—instead, he was dressed in the same light-blue robe that many of the royal mages wore and carried a thick folder of documents. Seeing this reminded Shizuku of his current situation, which made her let out a sigh.

Still, she hadn’t seen Erik since their meeting with the king.

Shizuku wondered where to start—then pressed both hands down on the table.

“I’m so sorry!”

“No, don’t,” he said coolly.

Shizuku had bowed her head low, and she hesitantly looked up to see his sincere concern.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Uhh...I’m okay. In fact, I think I’m getting stronger.”



“If it gets to be too much, then tell Leuticia or Harve. They should be able to help you out.”

It was tough, but the training wasn’t enough to kill her. What she was going through was unreasonable, but she could still put up with it.

The challenges Lars was giving her were right on the limit of what she could endure. She knew she was being tested, so she was determined to accept whatever he threw her way; otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to live with herself.

Erik noticed the glimmer of determination in Shizuku’s eyes, and at last, his expression shifted. He furrowed his brow slightly as he looked down at her.

“You can be astoundingly stubborn at times. I thought I knew that, but you’ve outdone yourself this time.”

“I’m really sorry...”

Erik must have been referring to her leap from the tower. His response was a perfectly natural one, so she bowed her head again. From Erik’s point of view, he’d given her an opening to escape during their meeting with the king in order to save her—and Shizuku’s actions had rendered his sacrifice pointless. It would be understandable if he were to get mad at her.

Yet he didn’t. Instead, her bow was met with poignant words of reassurance.

“I’m not angry. I was just worried.”

“Erik...”

Shizuku raised her head and looked into his sympathetic deep-blue eyes.

“There are some things you aren’t willing to give up. I hadn’t quite realized that despite how obvious it was... I almost made the same mistake I did in the past.”

It felt as if he was breathing a sigh of relief as he spoke. The emotion behind his words was far more profound than it seemed on the surface.

As Shizuku sat there, at a loss for words, Erik finally gave her a faint smile.

“I’m glad you’re okay.”

His voice was incredibly kind, yet there was a hint of tension mixed in with the warmth. Maybe Erik was permanently plagued with regrets about what had befallen the girl he'd once lost. Whether that was the case or not, this was an aspect of his past that Shizuku couldn't bring up—and so she had no choice but to focus on what she *could* do.

Shizuku remorsefully bowed her head once again, and as she did, Erik took the opportunity to give her a warning.

“But don't push yourself too hard trying to outdo the king, okay? You'll reach your limits sooner than you realize.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Shizuku had expected Erik to berate her, but that was all he said. He'd given her plenty of harsh yet honest advice in the past, but he'd barely ever scolded her. She was sure that was just the type of person he was, but that didn't mean she should take advantage of it too much.

“Leuticia has ordered me to go to Candela and compile a written report about the forbidden curse incident there, so I'll be gone for a short while. If you need anything, tell somebody other than the king. And make sure Mea stays by your side.”

“Got it.”

“Also, you should do things in your own, unique way. Don't let other people make you do things like they expect you to. The king probably wants to see your individuality shine through.”

Erik tapped Shizuku lightly on the shoulder, then left without taking a seat.

The pair's chance meeting had been a brief one. It was hard to believe they hadn't seen each other in two weeks, but that was probably the best Erik could manage, given the situation.

Shizuku picked up the cup that Erik had left behind.

“My own way of doing things, huh...?”

What was it that Lars really wanted to see from her?

She raised the cup to her lips. With every sip, the faintly sweet tea seemed to

wash away her exhaustion.

Once she'd finished the drink, Shizuku nodded to herself.

"Yeah, let's try that."

So far, she'd been playing the game in her opponent's half of the field. It was time to go on the counterattack.

Empty cup in hand, Shizuku headed for the kitchen.

First, she'd tried communicating with words. When that didn't work, she'd resorted to putting herself on the chopping block. That was all the effort Shizuku had put into Lars. Ever since then, she'd been undergoing *his* trials.

This time, she was going to do things differently.

The freshly made golden-brown pancake gave off a sweet aroma, and Shizuku spread a generous helping of butter on top. In truth, she would have liked to add some maple syrup as well, but she had yet to spot any in her new world, so there was nothing she could do about that. She put it on a tray before it got cold, then headed to the king's office.

"Coming in, Your Majesty," she announced.

The king responded with a lethargic grunt of acknowledgment, and Shizuku pushed the door open.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A snack."

Shizuku put the plate down in front of Lars, whose demeanor was completely lacking in warmth. He squinted at the almost perfectly round pancake.

"Did you make this?"

"Yes. The only ingredient in it is my resentment toward you, so please, enjoy."

"That's not true. It obviously contains flour."

Lars picked up the knife as he spoke, then lifted some of the fluffy, plump pancake to his mouth.

Shizuku watched him intently. She knew he'd notice something was up if she

stared *too* hard, so she tried her best to seem normal.

The king chewed the simple pancake in a sophisticated manner, then swallowed it. A moment later, he looked up.

“You put carrots in this, didn’t you?” he said.

“How could you tell?!”

“It tastes like carrot. Obviously.”

“But the chunk I used was just the size of my pinky! And it was grated into tiny bits!”

“You’re so naive. Did you really think it would be that easy to fool me?”

Shizuku groaned. Her scheme had been foiled after just one bite; she hadn’t expected the king to notice the carrot *that* easily, and she had planned to tell him once he was already a good way into it. Disappointed, she slumped her shoulders.

“Why would you cook something for me, when you spend every day scowling in my direction? It’s as if you were *begging* me to suspect something. If you want to get revenge on me, you’ll have to be a little more creative.”

“Well, I’m sorry it was so obvious!”

“It really was. Do better next time,” said Lars, putting another piece of pancake in his mouth.

Shizuku’s jaw dropped. Why was he eating it, despite knowing there was carrot in it? The king continued to eat, an unruffled expression on his face, until before long, only half of it was left.

At that point, he finally put down the knife and pushed the plate away from him.

“That’s all I can manage. You should eat the rest.”

“It doesn’t look like you hate carrots *that* much,” commented Shizuku.

“I do hate them, but it’s been about seven years since I last had any... I thought I’d be able to finish it, but there’s no fighting my distaste for them.”

“You should have just thrown in the towel.”

Shizuku had braced for the plate being thrown at her, at the very least. Deflated, she took the plate from him and moved it to the table in the corner of his office, then began to eat the pancake she'd made. The flavor that filled her mouth was sweet and airy, and to her, at least, there was no trace of any carrot. Having missed lunch, Shizuku had no trouble devouring the leftovers.

"I really enjoyed that," she said, putting the plate back on the tray. "So shall we get started?"

"Get started with what? Where's this coming from?"

"Let's settle this once and for all. You've already confirmed that my body is the same as humans from your world. So next, I'm going to convince you using my words."

This was likely what Erik had meant when he told Shizuku to do things her way. She was going to speak to the king directly, as an equal, having a conversation. This was Shizuku's way of showing him who she was.

The only thing Shizuku had been given in this world was her ability to communicate—so she was going to use it.

She stood up straighter, then fixed her gaze on the king.

"As I told you before, magic doesn't exist in my world, but our civilization has progressed further than yours. I believe there are five continents in your world, but mine has even more. They all exist on the same planet."

"A planet? You mean like the ones up in the sky?"

"Yes. But so far, we haven't made it to any other planets that harbor intelligent life-forms. We haven't been able to observe any other worlds, be they on other planets or otherwise, so we didn't know this world even existed—or at least, I didn't."

Shizuku was trying her best to explain and make Lars understand. She'd only avoided trying this before because she had been scared on some subconscious level of sharing her knowledge.

"The history of humanity leads us back through the history of our planet. Humans, as we know them today, emerged two hundred thousand years ago

through the process of evolution. From that point on, we split up across different continents, acquired knowledge, and built civilizations.”

She needed to be as careful as she possibly could—there was a chance that Shizuku could trigger some kind of change in this world if she spread her knowledge indiscriminately.

“One other thing that makes my world different is that we don’t have distinct realms like you do. Since there’s no magic—or perhaps, no recognized form of magic—the existence of different planes of existence is not recognized in the era I’m living in. I don’t know whether that’s the reason, but I seem to be immune to your world’s miasma. Erik theorized that since my soul is from another world, it’s not connected to any other realms,” said Shizuku, not even pausing to take a breath.

Then, she refocused her gaze on the king.

“This conversation needs to stay within these four walls. I’m afraid that it could negatively impact the way things are in your world.”

Lars might have had a twisted personality, but he was by no means stupid. He must have understood why Shizuku was making this request, and his response came almost immediately.

“So, since your people aren’t able to see our world, there’s no reason why you would be meddling in our affairs. I suppose that’s the point you’re trying to make. You said something along those lines when you were on top of the watchtower, too.”

“There’s a possibility that I’m just not aware of that sort of thing. I was a regular student, so I’m not privy to any information that’s been concealed from the masses. That applies to the majority of people from my world. I’m sure people there are treating my disappearance as a mystery... It’s generally unheard of for people to vanish out of the blue.”

“Because magic doesn’t exist, I assume,” replied the king. “Maybe you don’t have mages because there’s no magical plane.”

“I say that our civilization is advanced, but we’re completely oblivious to this world’s existence. Even if people *did* know about it, I think we’d come up with a

different way of interacting with you. They wouldn't just send an ordinary person here."

There was a chance that Lars would deem everything she was saying to be a lie, but she couldn't let that risk stop her from speaking.

"By the way, the average life expectancy in my country is just above eighty. And there are three hundred and sixty-five days in a year."

Shizuku exhaled and turned to face the king directly.

"Now's the time for our question-and-answer session. Fire away."

"A question-and-answer session, huh...?"

Shizuku had almost expected to be ignored, but Lars actually had some serious questions for her. He scrutinized her intently, then began to speak.

"What do people in your world think the human mind is?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

That had come from out of left field. Shizuku shifted her focus onto this topic and thought to herself for a few moments, then responded with a question for Lars.

"People in this world think that humans are made up of their minds, bodies, and souls, right? Is that what you're talking about here?"

"You're well informed. Only a certain subset of mages and academics know that."

"I heard it from Erik."

Lars nodded, seeming to accept this explanation.

"That *is* what I meant, but I don't want what we think to influence your answer."

His question was more straightforward than any she'd been given at college, but that was precisely what made it so difficult. Shizuku turned it over in her mind. After puzzling over Lars's question for a short while, she finally formulated an answer.

"In my country, scholarly pursuits are broadly divided into the humanities and

the sciences—and their takes on your question are different.”

“What’s a ‘take’? How do they differ?”

“Well, I’m in the humanities, and I’m only just starting out, so take this with a grain of salt...but the main goal of the natural sciences is to explore the connection between the mind and the body. Do you know what a ‘brain’ is?”

“The thing inside your head? It’s the organ that processes your thoughts.”

“Exactly. In my world, we try to understand the mechanisms behind people’s emotions by studying the brain, which is just another part of the body. This involves determining how various substances are produced in the brain and how they elicit different feelings and moods in people. We also study how these mechanisms change in response to different stimuli. This knowledge enables us to use medications to regulate the chemicals in the brain, which in turn helps us treat mental illnesses.”

Lars’s wide-eyed expression was quite a sight to behold. She smiled awkwardly.

“Emotions are created by substances?!” he cried.

“Yes. It’s not that strange, though, is it? Our blood and flesh are made up of substances, too. Fundamentally, that’s what we humans are made up of.”

This was a core concept that couldn’t be disproven. For a moment, Lars seemed to struggle to believe this, but he hid any surprise on his face when he noticed Shizuku watching him.

“Continue,” he stated simply.

Shizuku fell silent again for a moment. Then, once she’d gotten her thoughts together, she picked up where she’d left off.

“However, it wasn’t that long ago that these substance-related mechanisms were discovered. There are plenty of things we still don’t know, so research is still ongoing. Meanwhile, the humanities’ approach stemmed from religion and philosophy and has a history of over two thousand years. That’s the one that I specialize in. Not only does that discipline seem to be more compatible with your world’s ideology, but it’s also the one that discusses the existence of the

soul.”

“Is the soul not made up of substances?”

“We don’t know. Maybe we just haven’t discovered the relevant substances yet, but I think the mainstream view is that the soul is just a concept.”

“Souls do exist. Some forbidden curses consume human souls to give them immense power,” Lars argued.

His mention of the term “forbidden curses” made Shizuku frown. It reminded her of the incident in Candela, as well as the story about Erik’s past. Lars noticed this change in her expression and seemed to have sensed the reason behind it, too.

“If it bothers you, then you should ask him about it yourself.”

“Stop reading my mind. It would be bad manners to ask about something like that... Besides, you’re trying to keep us from seeing each other, aren’t you? Using us as slave labor...”

“Both of you are being properly remunerated.”

“I’m being paid, too?!”

This was the first Shizuku had heard about that. She hadn’t seen any compensation so far and, until that moment, had presumed that her clothing, meals, and accommodations were all she’d get in return for her labor and the bullying she had to endure. She’d been working for the king for less than a month, but now that he mentioned it, maybe it was just that her payday hadn’t come around yet.

Shizuku was taken aback, but Lars responded matter-of-factly.

“It’s only natural that I’d pay you what you’re worth.”

“I guess you’re pretty scrupulous for a tyrant...”

“You’re the first person who’s ever called me a tyrant.”

“You’re definitely tyrannical when it comes to me, at least.”

“I’m giving you a thorough teasing, that’s all.”

“Don’t try to talk your way out of it.”

If the king was aware he was teasing her, Shizuku hoped he would change his ways—but since he didn't view her as human, there wasn't really much hope. Shizuku was on the brink of hurling a string of abuse at him, but when the king wordlessly urged her to continue speaking, she stopped herself.

"...In the field I'm studying, the mind has many different definitions, depending on the time period and the individual. I can't remember all of them, though, so I can't explain them to you."

"Then how would you define it?"

"I think it's what makes us human."

Lars wasn't taken aback by her prompt reply, but it did trigger a small change in his expression. He fixed his powerful, steady gaze on Shizuku; it was as if he could see through anything.

Shizuku wasn't going to be overwhelmed by that, though. She gently shifted her brown-tinged black eyes toward the floor—but not because she was intimidated by him.

"I believe that it's the mind that sets humans apart from mere animals. The most remarkable potential that we humans have is our capacity for intellect, reason, emotion, and willpower, and to actively use them. That's what makes us human...don't you think?"

"But animals have emotions and a will of their own, don't they?"

"Yes, but they don't have reason. Regardless of whether you abide by its logic or not, your capacity for reason has an effect on your emotions and intentions. The struggle between rationality and emotion, having pride in your goals and putting them into action—I think those things are another part of being human."

"Does that mean that humans with no sense of reason are animals?"

"If they're the ones rejecting their own rationality, then yes. At the very least, they wouldn't be people."

The young girl's declaration, which could have even been described as scathing, made Lars smile with apparent amusement. Shizuku didn't know what

had pleased him, but he was in a visibly good mood. Still, she wondered why she had to have this kind of discussion with a man like him, and she gave him an annoyed look.

“Your Majesty, if you want to talk more about this, can I go and fetch my books? I have loads of different ones.”

“No. I want to hear it in your own words.”

“Is this an oral examination?!”

“Apparently, royal mages do this kind of assessment, as well. I leave everything to Lettie, so I don’t know much about it, though.”

“Mages really are the intellectual class, aren’t they...?”

Watching Erik always left Shizuku with that impression. Harve said he specialized in history, too, so it seemed like mages in this world doubled as academics.

Lars carried on, ignoring Shizuku’s amazed reaction.

“But in your world, the mind is nothing but a mass of substances, isn’t it? Why, then, do you study the old way of doing things? What is there to be gained from that now?”

Shizuku couldn’t mock him for asking this, and it couldn’t be ignored, either. It was a question that she was constantly subjected to: “What’s the point of studying?” Some people questioned the purpose of perpetual debate that yielded no answers, given that science was gradually unraveling the mysteries of humanity.

Shizuku stared Lars squarely in the face. Her personal feelings toward him didn’t come into this.

“Your Majesty. Don’t you think there are multiple causes behind how we feel? Even if emotions are created by substances within the body, that’s just one factor. The question of what triggers someone’s feelings and thoughts is a separate issue altogether. So...we humans are still full of mysteries. I enjoy studying, and I have no intention of stopping. Besides, isn’t it interesting to learn about stuff that doesn’t have any practical use?”

Even if Shizuku's efforts ended up being fruitless, she found studying fascinating and thought that was a lovely way to be. With every new thing she learned, she realized just how complex, earnest, and delightfully wide-ranging human thinking could be. Shizuku herself was just standing at the gateway of academic exploration—and yet it was still so much fun.

She shrugged gently.

“Do you have any other questions, Your Majesty?”

Lars fixed his blue eyes on her. His expression was open, but his thoughts were still impossible to read.

After a little while, he looked back down at the papers in front of him.

“Not really. Today's a busy day for me, so I don't have time to hang around with you. As long as you don't leave the castle, you're free to do as you please.”

“Understood. You'll have to excuse me, then.”

Shizuku bowed as Lars shooed her away with his hand, and she exited the room.

As soon as Shizuku stepped out into the empty hallway, a wave of nerves washed over her, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“I—I guess that didn't go too badly...”

She hadn't been unexpectedly struck down by Lars's sword, at least, and she felt like he'd taken some interest in her world, even if only a little. She wasn't optimistic that she'd be able to prove her innocence right away, but any progress was good progress.

What would she talk to him about next? Shizuku mulled this over as she stepped out into the courtyard, where Mea waited for her.

“How did it go, Master?”

“I didn't crash and burn, but I'm not sure whether it went well, either...”

Shizuku had done what Erik had most likely been hinting at, but this was Lars she was up against; she couldn't be too confident in her progress. It was totally impossible to read what the king was thinking or to predict his next move.

As soon as Shizuku felt herself beginning to worry, she looked up at the clear blue sky.

“There’s no point thinking about it now. I think I’ll get a little exercise and do some jogging, so can you turn back into a bird?”

“Okay.”

The green-haired girl immediately raised her arms, nodded her head, and transformed into a bird. Shizuku placed her assistant demon on her shoulder, then began jogging around the circumference of the castle, going slightly faster than a walking pace.

When Lars had forced her to run, she hadn’t been able to pace herself, but running alone was a good way to lift her mood. At other times of the day, people would have been startled to see Shizuku doing laps of the castle in her court lady attire—but now, there was nobody to be seen.

Just as Shizuku had entered a grove of trees at the rear of the castle, Mea let out a warning call, prompting Shizuku to slow her pace.

“Huh? What is it?”

She looked all around but didn’t know what Mea was warning her about. The next thing she knew, Mea had returned to her girl form and had extended her arms, stepping in front of Shizuku to shield her. The green-haired girl scowled at the greenery that surrounded them both.

“What’s your goal this time?”

“...You again?” came the voice of a young man, sounding annoyed.

A lone man had emerged from the seemingly deserted grove. He was dressed in a dark-blue mage’s robe, like those worn by the royal mages of Farsas; however, Shizuku recognized his face and gray hair.

“Gah! What are you doing here...?” she exclaimed.

“I’m the one who should be asking you that,” the man retorted bitterly.

He was the mage who’d tried to take Lyshien away.

Shizuku turned pale.

“You were a Farsasian mage all along?!”

The man raised his eyebrows slightly, his gaze fixed on Shizuku. His glare almost made her wince—but then, suddenly he broke into a smile.

“Hang on, you’re the outsider who jumped off the tower, aren’t you? You’re just as stupid as ever.”

“Huh? Yes, that was me. So what?”

“Master.”

Mea tugged at Shizuku’s clothes, bringing her back to her senses. She’d reacted to the man’s blatant mockery with belligerence, but she couldn’t forget that he was a royal mage. If possible, she wanted to avoid making any more enemies within the castle walls.

Shizuku suppressed her internal anger and rephrased herself. “Um, I’m sorry. You’re right, but I would rather not argue with you here. I was just a little surprised. I’ll see you around sometime.”

Shizuku casually waved the man good-bye and turned to start running again, but the man called out and stopped her.

“If you go any farther right now, you’ll end up in trouble.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku had already been dragged into her fair share of trouble, but as she looked back over her shoulder, the man warned her again.

“Go back. If anything happens to you in there, I don’t intend to stop it. The princess loves entertaining stories.”

“The princess?” Shizuku repeated. “You mean Leuticia?”

The man didn’t answer, just disappeared into the trees. There was a pause, then Mea looked up at Shizuku.

“...It seems like he teleported,” the girl told her.

“What? But everything inside the castle is within walking distance...”

It was no surprise that a royal mage could use teleportation magic, but it was suspicious that he’d warned Shizuku not to go any farther. She placed a finger

on her chin and thought to herself.

“Should I go and see what’s there?”

“I don’t recommend it. We don’t know what lies ahead,” replied Mea.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

Shizuku felt awkward retracing her running route, but she was hesitant to completely disregard the man’s advice. She was about to prompt Mea to turn back the way they’d come when suddenly Mea reached out and took Shizuku’s hand.

“Master, someone’s coming.”

“Gah.”

Someone had appeared from the other direction while Shizuku and Mea were deliberating over what to do. If the girls started running, they’d be challenged as soon as they emerged into a clearing.

Shizuku and Mea hurriedly hid among the trees. As they waited with bated breath, they heard a single set of footsteps through the grove.

“Our preparations are complete. All we need to do now is wait for the right moment.”

“I’ll give the core to you. It works the same as last time. You can only pick one person, though, so choose wisely.”

Shizuku tried even harder to stifle her breathing. Both of the voices were male, with the first one sounding slightly older, and the second one younger.

The older man laughed.

“It’s obvious who I’m going to choose—the strongest king that Farsas ever had.”

Shizuku didn’t know what they were talking about, but it was alarming nonetheless. Shizuku tried to stay unnoticed, praying that the men would leave as soon as possible.

But what followed was an unnatural silence. Just as Shizuku broke into a cold sweat, the younger voice responded.

“Do as you please. While the person’s physical abilities may be enhanced, their magical powers won’t come back. There’s no use having a witch around, for example.”

“That doesn’t matter to me. What happened to Lady Crestea was a shame, but it’s in the past now.”

The pair’s voices started to become more distant, and Shizuku poked her head out slightly from among the trees, glancing at the men as they walked away. One of them was tall and dressed in black, while the other wore a dark-green mage’s robe.

Shizuku cocked her head slightly.

“Is the man in green that unpleasant guy we met in the courtyard the other day?” she asked Mea.

“I think so... He possesses the same magical powers.”

“Yeah, I knew it. I feel like I’ve seen the other one before, too.”

Something tugged at the back of Shizuku’s mind as she watched the man in black walk away, but perhaps it was only her imagination.

She looked down at Mea by her side—only to discover that the color had suddenly drained from the girl’s face. She was shaking slightly, too.

“Wh-what’s the problem? Was it something they said?”

“No... But that man in black noticed we were here... His magical power was directed toward us.”

“Huh?”

There *had* been an unnatural pause. Was that when the man noticed Shizuku and Mea were there? If so, why had he let them go? Did he think that being overheard was no big deal?

Shizuku squeezed Mea’s hand in an attempt to reassure her.

“B-but what they said was kind of confusing... Like that bit about Farsas’s strongest king.”

It would’ve made more sense if there were some sort of tournament to

decide who would become king, but the Farsasian crown was passed down through the royal line. Lars was the only person who could be king.

The men's suspicious, clandestine conversation left Shizuku baffled. After waiting a while to make sure they'd gone, she turned back the way she'd come.



She was fading out of consciousness.

Yet in the land of the royal sword, the three books didn't make an appearance in her dreams. Nor did she find herself standing in a white room.

So Shizuku remained unaware of what had once happened here.

She couldn't unravel the hidden story.

"Shizuku? Are you okay?"

She could hear a gentle female voice. The woman's face was so close that, for a moment, Shizuku couldn't recognize who it was peering down at her. Her features were impeccably sculpted, and those blue eyes shimmered like jewels at the bottom of the sea, leaving Shizuku entranced by their color.

Eventually, she realized who she was looking at.

"Leuticia! Why are you here...?"

"I heard you were in the kitchen," replied the king's younger sister, pulling out a chair and sitting down opposite Shizuku.

They were in the corner of the castle's spacious kitchen, and Leuticia gave Shizuku a worried look.

"You looked completely out of it just now. Are you sure you're all right? Perhaps you're worn out."

"Oh, no, I'm fine! I was just daydreaming while waiting for my baking to finish."

Shizuku pressed her fingers to her temples. She felt like she'd been hovering on the edge of a dream, without actually slipping fully into that state.

Feeling dazed, Shizuku gently shook her head and forced a smile.

"What have you been doing, Leuticia? You must be busy with the Candela

case.”

“I am. I’m going there again this afternoon, and I’ll have to stay for some time, so I thought I’d come and see you first.”

“Thank you for thinking about me...”

Perhaps the two siblings of the royal family balanced each other out perfectly. Still, Leuticia had showed up at just the right moment. Shizuku glanced at the handcrafted clock on the table, then stood up.

“Wait a moment. They’ve just finished baking.”

“Oh, really?”

Shizuku took the iron plate out of the semicircular white stove built into the wall. The iron plate seemed to be under some kind of spell—it wasn’t hot to the touch, nor could it exceed a given temperature. It was Shizuku’s third time using the castle’s high-grade oven, so she’d become fairly accustomed to it.

Shizuku transferred the cookies onto a plate. There were no cookie cutters, so they were all just round, and she put the plate down in front of Leuticia.

“They’re hot, so be careful.”

“May I have one?” asked Leuticia.

“Of course. I’m still practicing, though, so I apologize if they don’t taste great,” Shizuku warned her.

Leuticia reached out with her porcelain fingers, showing no hesitation. She took a bite out of one of the pale golden cookies, then suddenly broke out in a smile. It was the first time Shizuku had seen that sort of expression on Leuticia’s face—she looked just like an ordinary girl. Shizuku couldn’t help but smile, too.

“I’ll go and brew some tea,” she told Leuticia. “I’ll make sure it’s not too hot.”

“Thank you. These are really delicious. Are they a snack from your country?”

“No, they’re from the east of the continent. I learned how to make them when we were traveling through the region.”

Not only did the cookies originate from a faraway country, but they were also the food of commoners. It was no wonder Leuticia didn’t know about them.

As Shizuku was pouring lukewarm water onto the tea leaves, Leuticia took a second cookie.

“I asked my brother about this, too, but you don’t use much of the technology and knowledge from your own country, do you?”

“Not really. There’s a lot of things I know about but can’t use myself, but generally speaking, I’m trying to adapt to the local way of doing things. Still, there are some things that slip through without me realizing it.”

Shizuku checked that the tea leaves had unfurled, then started pouring the tea into glass cups. The pink-hued tea had a refreshing aroma.

“Erik warned me once that if, by any chance, I were to accidentally trigger a cultural invasion, there’d be no going back. I want to respect your existing culture, and I enjoy learning all about it. Every day, I learn something new.”

Whether it was recipes or the history of various nations, Shizuku’s new world was overflowing with knowledge she had yet to uncover, and she felt blessed just to be able to come into contact with it. Her goal was to return to her old world—she didn’t want anything more than that.

Shizuku sat down and picked up her cup of tea, and Leuticia gazed motionlessly at her. Her eyes were blue and clear, reminiscent of the endless depths of the sea. Not only did they seem to be scrutinizing her, but it also felt like they could see through anything.

Shizuku startled, noticing the other woman staring at her, but before the silence had the chance to turn awkward, Leuticia broke out in a wide smile.

“Yeah. You really are like that,” she said.

“Leuticia?”

“It’s nothing. But...I can see why Erik’s with you, given your personality.”

Did Leuticia mean they had similar personalities? Erik did like studying, but Shizuku didn’t think she was as much of an oddball as he was.

The king’s younger sister bit into her fifth cookie and proceeded to eat it in an elegant manner, then lightly flicked her fingers.

“Doing ordinary things comes naturally to you. For people like us, that can be

hard, even when we know what to do...”

Leuticia’s remark settled over Shizuku, like something quietly sinking into the dark depths of the sea. When she said “us,” was she talking about her and Lars? Or the girl that the royal family had lost?

The fact that the royal family of such a large country had only two direct descendants suggested that there was a lot more to the story, but Shizuku hesitated to inquire further. Instead, she just accepted things the way they were.

Leuticia lifted her cup of tea to her mouth and looked wistfully at the plate of cookies. When she noticed Shizuku watching her, she gave a beautiful smile.

“That’s nothing for you to worry about. Oh, but keep an eye on my brother. If he gets to be too much to handle, tell me right away. I’m planning on figuring something out for you soon.”

“I appreciate your concern, but please let me handle this. Now that I’ve mastered how to use the stove, I’ll be able to make my next move before too long.”

“I-is that so? These cookies were already tasty enough.”

Leuticia seemed a little put off by Shizuku’s boundless enthusiasm, but Shizuku figured she was just imagining it.

Shizuku took one of the remaining cookies.

“You can take some back with you if you’d like,” she told Leuticia. “They’re delicious cold, too.”

“Are you sure?! Thank you!”

Shizuku figured that Leuticia had looked regretfully at the plate of cookies because she was too full to hold any more. Her ever-shifting facial expressions were possibly one of her most innate qualities, and they made her seem younger than Shizuku, rather than older.

Shizuku wrapped most of the remaining cookies in pink paper as the chefs observed from a distance. She’d originally baked them so she could practice using the oven, rather than for her to eat herself, and she only needed enough

for Mea. As long as the cookies made Leuticia happy, her smile was reward enough.

Shizuku passed her the bundle of baked goods.

“Um, if you happen to see Erik, please share some with him,” she added hesitantly.

Erik was working in Candela, and she didn’t know when she’d get to see him next, but her baked goods could signal to him that she was safe. Leuticia nodded, giving Shizuku a captivating smile.

“I’ll make sure of it. Bake me some more when I return.”

With that, the king’s beautiful younger sister walked away, carefully carrying the paper parcel.

Once Shizuku had seen her off, she turned back toward the magic stove and started working on the dessert she really wanted to make.

“Are you trying to trick me?”

“No. I’ve just tried looking at things from a different angle.”

Lars sat before the carrot-colored cake, and Shizuku almost wondered if he would growl like a dog. But she was proud of what she’d baked. Having asked the chefs which amount of each ingredient to use, her cake had risen well on the first try.

Shizuku had cut it into slices, then placed it on Lars’s office desk. To top it off, she’d added a little cream—very little. Insultingly little.

“I’m trying out a different approach. Rather than disguising the taste of carrot, I’m trying to get you to appreciate how delicious they are. Go on, dig in.”

“What a shamelessly over-the-top idea. I take it you’re trying to get revenge head-on.”

“This isn’t revenge—far from it, in fact! I’m taking your health into consideration here. I want to stop you from being so picky.”

Lars responded to this claim with a scowl but obediently ate a mouthful of cake nonetheless.



Shizuku couldn't tell whether his compliance was a show of integrity or not. Regardless, she was too invested in the situation to tell him he didn't have to try it, so she simply watched him with an icy look in her eyes.

"...It tastes like carrot," said the king.

"That's because it has a whole carrot in it. I'd be worried if it *didn't* taste that way. I initially considered stewing the carrot in shoyu, but there wasn't any."

"Shoyu? What's that?"

"A flavoring we use in my country. You don't have miso or bonito flakes here, either, do you? It's such a shame."

Not only had Shizuku not seen any soybean products since arriving in this world, but the only fish-based food she'd encountered was smoked fish. Shizuku felt like fish stock and soy sauce could make almost anything edible, but since neither of those existed, there wasn't much she could whip up spontaneously.

As a result, Shizuku was stuck re-creating recipes she only vaguely remembered, checking the ingredients one at a time. Since the cake had been made for Lars, however, she didn't feel remotely upset if the flavor was a little off.

The king didn't comment on the flavor of the cake at all. After swallowing just one mouthful, he pushed the plate away.

"If you want a flavoring, then make one. What's that 'shoyu' stuff made from?"

"Soybeans, I think..."

"Well, we have soybeans. What about miso?"

"Soybeans."

"..."

"..."

Lars gave her a look that was hard to describe, but Shizuku knew full well what he wanted to ask. In the moment, even Shizuku had found it odd that they

were both made from the same core ingredient, so she beat him to the punch and started telling the king about her country's two famous flavorings.

"They taste completely different, though. They're probably made in completely different ways."

"Different how?"

"I'm not sure about that... I always bought them ready-made."

"..."

"They're fermented! No student is going to make that kind of stuff themselves!"

Shizuku didn't want him to question her credibility over something like this, and she decided to look into how shoyu, miso, and tofu were made once she returned home safely. Even as a modern Japanese person, there were so many things she struggled to explain that at times, it made her feel ashamed.

Lars, meanwhile, didn't seem interested in probing further, and Shizuku took back what remained of the cake. Turning back to his paperwork, Lars asked her a question.

"That reminds me, you're unhappy about your current situation, aren't you? You don't like being at my mercy."

"I'm *extremely* unhappy about it," replied Shizuku. "Do you even need to ask?"

"You're only unhappy about it because you know I'm pulling the strings, though. What if you were being controlled by someone as we speak, without even realizing it? Imagine you unwittingly became the subject of an experiment, and someone started making notes about you."

Shizuku found this hypothetical bizarre, but she was always ready for a discussion with the king. She curled her lip and gave him her obvious answer.

"I'd be mad. I'd wonder who the hell they thought they were."

"I see."

The king didn't look like he wanted to expand on his abrupt question. As he

continued taking care of his paperwork, Shizuku gave him a dubious look and cocked her head to one side.

“What was that about? It makes me anxious when there’s no punch line.”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll tell you...tomorrow. Lettie isn’t around today, and neither is the other one.”

By “the other one,” he must have meant Erik; Shizuku couldn’t think of anyone else he could be talking about, meaning that he must still be in Candela. Unable to fathom what Lars wanted to discuss with the three of them, she frowned.

“Is it a meeting for you to reflect on all your mistakes and apologize?” asked Shizuku.

“I have no mistakes to reflect on. I still think that killing you would have been the easier option.”

Shizuku reacted to this predictable response with a sardonic smile. By that point, little comments like these didn’t even ruffle her feathers. In fact, she’d be more surprised if he suddenly showed her some warmth.

“...That said, Lettie’s been badgering me to admit defeat, and she has me wrapped around her little finger,” Lars said, tossing a document he’d signed.

Shizuku had never heard him use that tone of voice before, and she stared intently at him. Perhaps this was the first time he’d revealed to Shizuku how he really felt. Judging by the look on his face, his younger sister’s lectures had left the monarch in a bit of a sulky mood, and this unexpected reaction made Shizuku forget any displeasure she was experiencing.

“...Do you have a sister complex?”

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing. You must really love your sister.”

“‘Love’ is not the right word, but she’s all the family I have.”

Lars’s retort had inevitably made Shizuku think about her own sisters, and she narrowed her eyes.

“What? Do you have a sister, too?” asked Lars, having picked up on the change in Shizuku’s expression.

“...Yeah. One younger and one older.”

Shizuku’s frown melted away as warm, nostalgic memories came flooding back. Her eyes stung with tears. With everything she’d been going through, Shizuku hadn’t had the chance to think about them.

Lars glanced at her, then shifted his focus back to his paperwork without saying a word. The silence stretched for a short while, then Lars stopped what he was doing and held out one of his papers to Shizuku.

“Read this, carrot girl.”

“Why are you calling me that...? Also, I can’t read your world’s language.”

“Really? Is that what happens when you come from another world?”

“I’m in the process of learning your written language, so I can understand the gist of something by picking up simple words...”

At Shizuku’s level of proficiency, however, castle documents would be impossible to read. Shizuku took the document from Lars, but as she’d predicted, it was indecipherable. She felt like the conversation was going nowhere, until the king surmised the main points of the text.

“Remember how we went to see that bell tower the other day? I thought it would be good exercise for you, so I replied to the custodian and said that I would personally go to inspect it. However—”

“You took me on that inspection so you could force me to exercise...? You let me out of the castle for that...?”

“The custodian has died.”

“Sorry?”

Shizuku couldn’t comprehend this sudden turn of events, and Lars took the document back from her.

“He died suddenly, right after submitting his request, and was buried not long after. We went to the tower two days after it happened, almost as if we’d just

missed him. Yesterday, however, his body—which was supposed to have been buried—was discovered inside his home.”

“Huh?!”

“He was wearing the same clothes he’d been buried in. Since he lived alone, nobody knows when his body appeared.”

Shizuku couldn’t tell which part of the story she should focus on first, and after organizing her thoughts, she asked Lars a question of her own.

“Does that mean...someone dug his body up?”

“That’s the natural assumption to make. Was it you?”

“Stop mindlessly blaming everything on me. No, it wasn’t.”

If there was some likely explanation, it would be easier to cope with—but this was just eerie. Lars sank deep into thought upon hearing Shizuku’s response, and a few seconds later, he gently posed her a question.

“Back when we visited the bell tower, you swept up the dirt, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I did. It was covered in field dirt from top to bottom.”

“What made you think it was dirt from a field?”

“Huh? Well...it was the kind of soil that people put their hands in... The stuff that’s easy to dig up...”

At that point, Shizuku fell silent. The dirt that had been scattered throughout the tower wasn’t dried-out soil, nor sand with pebbles mixed in it, but soft-looking black dirt. Could it have been—?

“Your Majesty, you don’t think that someone dug his body up and dragged it all the way to the top of the tower with dirt still on it, do you?”

What would be the point in that? Even if that was what happened, the most terrifying part was not knowing the reason behind it.

Shizuku frowned, while Lars remained silent. He stared at his paperwork with his head in his hands, then eventually told Shizuku that she was dismissed for the day.

Shizuku found this peculiar but left the king’s office anyway.

“That conversation ended on a pretty strange note...”

She had her suspicions about what had happened, but there wasn't anything she could do about it right now. So with nothing else to occupy her time, Shizuku headed back to her room. Just as she was approaching the covered walkway, however, a man coming from other direction noticed her and came to a stop.

Harve walked over to her and smiled, carrying a book under one arm.

“Are you on your break, Shizuku?” he asked.

“The king made it sound like I could take the rest of the day off. I'm blaming that carrot cake I gave him.”

“...You gave him something like that? Whoa.”

“I feel like I'll go crazy if I don't get him back every now and then.”

Feeling fairly satisfied with herself, Shizuku reclined against the railings of the walkway. Harve gave her a tight smile and stood by her side. From here on the third floor, they could look down over the castle's rear garden. Amid the gardeners trimming the trees, a man in a dark-green mage's robe pushed his way into the grove. He was the man who'd accused Shizuku in the courtyard of being a troublemaker—she was sure of it. Shizuku pointed at his back.

“Harve, do you know who he is?”

“Huh? Oh, that's Dylguey. He's a mage who specializes in the history of Farsas.”

“You recognized him right away, huh? Are you close?”

“No, it's the clothes. He's the only one who wears that color.”

“Oh.”

The majority of Farsas's mages wore navy-blue robes, and although it didn't seem like this was their uniform, it was unusual for mages to wear a robe of a different color. That meant the man Shizuku had spotted in the grove behind the castle must have been Dylguey, too. She recalled the conversation she'd overheard from behind the trees.

“Harve, do you know who Farsas’s strongest king would be?”

“Huh? Where’d that come from all of a sudden? I know of a few famous kings, but as for the strongest... Wait, the strongest in what sense? Swordsmanship? Accomplishments?”

“Uhh, swordsmanship...I guess...”

Since history was Harve’s specialty, Shizuku had expected him to know a few individuals who fit this description, but it seemed like this wasn’t a frequent topic of discussion. Still, Harve happily helped her out—perhaps because the subject was within his field of research.

“Fair enough. The king of Farsas is famous for wielding Akashia, after all. People say that the founding king of Farsas was a strong swordsman, but there are no records of his name. The country was created during the Dark Age, so that’s no surprise. There’s also the twenty-first king, who brought an end to the Age of Witches... And the eighteenth king, who achieved numerous heroic feats in battle.”

“As I thought, there’s no shortage of famous kings.”

“No. They all tend to be military men. Those that reigned during peaceful times don’t tend to stand out as much, but all of them would have been well trained. Our current king is the strongest person in the castle right now, for example.”

“Oh...”

Shizuku felt drained just thinking about the numerous training sessions the king had made her join him on. In this current era of peace, he probably viewed Shizuku as an unexpected adversary who’d emerged from out of the blue, and she sighed and asked Harve another question.

“So do witches still exist?”

That was something else that had been brought up in the secret conversation that Shizuku overheard. Not only that, but they also had something to do with the incidents Shizuku wanted to know about from two hundred and forty years prior.

“Only six witches existed in the past. Three of them have been confirmed dead. We don’t know about the rest. If they *were* still alive, then I guess we’d have some thousand-year-old witches in our midst.”

“That would be absurd...”

In other words, there was no way of knowing whether witches still existed. What, then, had those men meant by “*There’s no use having a witch around*”?

Once Shizuku had thought things over herself, she told Harve about the conversation she’d overheard.

“There were two of them, and I think one of them was Dylguey. They were saying all kinds of confusing stuff, like, ‘*Our preparations are complete,*’ ‘*Like last time, the core can only choose one person,*’ and, ‘*I’m choosing the strongest king that Farsas ever had.*’ According to Mea, the other man—who was dressed in black—noticed that we were hiding from them.”

Shizuku racked her brain and told him the fragments she could remember, but Harve looked suspicious.

“That does seem odd. Still, the fact that they left you alone after noticing you makes me think it was no big deal. If it really was Dylguey, he could have been talking about a magic thesis or something... Why were you hiding in the first place?”

“The mage we ran into immediately before warned us that we’d find ourselves in trouble if we heard them. He was a young man with gray hair, and he’s rude and violent—the kind of guy who travels around to other countries trying to abduct powerful mages.”

Apart from his youth, the man didn’t have any other remarkable physical attributes, which made him hard to describe. If Shizuku had to name one thing that set him apart from other people, it would be his unpleasant personality.

This comment made Harve tilt his head to one side, perplexed.

“Huh, is he one of our mages? What was that about abducting powerful mages?”

“Maybe ‘abduct’ wasn’t the right word. He was saying he wanted to capture

this one mage girl and hear what she had to say... We crossed paths at the northwestern border. Turns out he's from Farsas."

"No Farsasian mage would get up to that kind of mischief. As a general rule, our royal mages don't even leave our country's borders. Who *was* that man you met?"

"...What?"

The conversation had taken a sudden suspicious turn. Shizuku crossed her arms and groaned.

"Huh...? I wonder who he was, then... Was it a daydream?"

At this point, Shizuku's story felt too unclear to share with anybody, and Harve gave her a strained smile, seeing Shizuku's confused expression.

"There's a lot about this that doesn't sit right with me. I'll take a look at our records and check who's been where as of late."

"I'm sorry my story was kind of vague."

Shizuku felt bad for wasting his time like this—unlike her, Harve was busy. Rather than sharing some parting words, Shizuku gave him a bow, but when she looked up, one more thing came flooding back.

"Uhh, do you know who Crestea is?"

"Huh?"

This question made Harve's eyes widen, but he quickly covered it with a smile.

"I do. Do you remember me telling you about Katiliana? Crestea was her grandmother."



Crestea, Lars's great-aunt, was already deceased.

She'd been the king's younger sister two generations before Lars, and she was a mysterious woman and an exceptional mage. She had rarely left the castle and spent the last ten years of her life shut away in her room in the castle, never showing her face.

Katiliana turned up a short while after her death.

It was unclear who Crestea had married and how her child had come to give birth to Katiliana. According to the records, Crestea had been single for her entire life. However, infighting had plagued the Farsasian royal family ever since Crestea had been a young girl, all the way up to shortly before her granddaughter, Katiliana, arrived at the castle, causing some conjecture that Crestea had given birth to a child in secret to avoid getting swept up in the chaos.

The internal strife within the royal family had all stemmed from one man's descent into madness.

"The former king, Dysral... I'm glad I didn't come to this world during his reign."

Shizuku was lying down on her bed, ruminating over what Harve had told her.

When Shizuku brought up the name "Crestea," Harve had used the opportunity to introduce another idea to her. "There's another strong king that I neglected to mention," he'd said, "although he's more infamous than famous."

"He suddenly gathered all his relatives in one hall and cut them down with his sword... That's like the Tsuyama massacre," said Shizuku, having been reminded of a notorious spree killing that happened in rural 1930s Japan.

Dysral had demonstrated remarkable sword skills from a young age, but at the same time, he'd also been known for his quick temper. There were numerous outrageous anecdotes about him, such as the story of how he'd suddenly decided one day to invade the neighboring country and slaughter its people.

Eventually, his temper culminated in the slaughter of his own family. After Dysral had killed sixty-three members of the royal family and his own vassals, people finally fought back, leading to his death. It was a story so grisly that even Harve stumbled over his words while telling it.

Following that incident, Dysral's name was removed from the royal line, and a new king ascended to the throne.

“But, Master, why was there a struggle within the royal family when Dysral was already dead?”

“Oh. Well, most of those who were killed in the massacre were Dysral’s direct descendants who’d been called into the throne room, but for some reason, a number of his relatives were either not asked to come or ignored the summons. That meant there were quite a few royals who weren’t present for one reason or another, and rumors saying that they must have known what was going to happen began to spread, along with other misunderstandings, which sparked a series of internal conflicts. Many of the royals didn’t get along, despite being related by blood, and the incident brought pent-up grievances and frustrations to the forefront.”

“...I see.”

Mea, who was sitting in a chair by the window, looked glum. This conversation must have reminded her of the princess she used to work for, who had been killed by her own brother, and Shizuku sat up in a fluster and patted the space next to her. Mea raised her head, startled, then hurried over to sit down.

Shizuku spoke to her demon friend in the kindest voice she could manage.

“Everybody’s different. Everyone has their own circumstances.”

The royal family of Farsas had a particularly strong tradition of intermarrying in order to preserve their magical abilities, and the massacre had only aggravated the love-hate relationships that came with this.

“That’s all in the past. Things are fine now. There are only two direct descendants of the throne, and they get along just fine.”

Perhaps it was lucky that Shizuku had come to this world during Lars’s reign. Still, when she thought back on the workouts she’d been forced to endure, she wasn’t so sure.

Shizuku lay back down and closed her eyes as she contemplated this idea.

Before she knew it, she’d drifted off to sleep.



She couldn’t turn the pages of the book.

Not here anyway. And even if she could, she wouldn't be able to take them out of the realm of dreams.

There was something that lay even deeper—something that she couldn't even question in a dream.

She wasn't allowed to notice. That imperative was constantly controlling her.

If she *did* notice, she wouldn't be protected any longer.

You should escape, it whispered. *If you stay here, all that awaits you is death.*

"I can't escape," she said back. "I have nowhere to escape to. I'm going to stay here and fight."

But... If she escaped... She had to escape... If she died... Then why...? She'd be chased... Forever... No matter where she went... And...

If she were to die, there'd be no point to her coming in the first place.

She would never escape. Not from its side.



Shizuku had probably been in her final years of elementary school when she first heard the term *witching hour*.

Back then, Shizuku had thought of it as the time when monsters were more likely to appear. Sometimes she'd wake up at two or three in the morning and hurriedly bury herself inside her futon.

In this world as well, there were twenty-four hours in a day, divided into two parts—twelve hours from midnight until noon, and another twelve hours thereafter. However, Shizuku couldn't be certain if an hour here was the same length, or if noon here coincided with noon in her own world.

Even in Shizuku's home world, the number of hours of daylight varied from country to country. Right from the beginning, she'd given up trying to accurately compare the time system here to that of her world and had instead decided to adapt to the customs of the continent she found herself in.

As the clock approached two in the morning, Shizuku was woken up by the breeze creeping in through the open window. The lukewarm air tickled her nose, prompting her to stir slightly, and after a short while, she lifted her head.

“...What?” she exclaimed, still half asleep.

The whole room was filled with the stench of blood.

Shizuku got out of bed and stepped down onto the wooden floor, barefoot. Then she peered out the open window. All she could see in the moonlit garden were the dark, obscured silhouettes of the trees.

The nighttime scene looked completely normal, and yet the nauseating smell of blood was much stronger outside. The air reeked of a combination of foul odors—a mixture of blood and rotten flesh—and Shizuku covered her mouth and nose and tried to close the window.

However, before she'd closed it all the way, Shizuku noticed a shining object move through the garden. She watched as something silver shimmered in the moonlight, bobbing up and down, and realizing what it was, Shizuku found herself dumbstruck.

There, making its way through the trees beneath the moonlight, was a skeleton dressed in white armor, a sword hanging from its waist.

“Th-that's the magic kingdom for you. The undead are walking.”

A skeleton moving beneath the moonlight—the sight shocked Shizuku more than it frightened her. She rubbed her eyes and gazed eagerly at it. She knew Erik would claim this could never happen if she were to tell him about it, but Shizuku felt almost enthralled as she followed the skeleton with her eyes.

“It can move armor using just its bones... Magic is fascinating...”

Shizuku had been leisurely observing the surreal spectacle when she suddenly noticed another source of light.

This one wasn't the moon but the red light from a torch carried by a soldier. “Who are you?” he shouted as he drew closer to the skeleton.

Shizuku, who was still a little sleepy, found this sight peculiar.

Yes, she'd seen a walking skeleton—but she'd convinced herself that it had been brought to life to guard the castle. If she was wrong, then the skeleton's presence was extremely unusual. There was no way it would have been left unattended.

But the skeleton's presence *was* unusual.

Its sword cut down the torch-carrying soldier, who let out a short scream, then collapsed onto the ground. Shizuku's eyes opened as wide as they would go.

"...Huh? W-wait! What?!"

The small bird who'd been sleeping in the corner of the room opened her eyes. Being a demon, she must have sensed the situation even sooner than her master, because she flew over to Shizuku's shoulder and let out a high-pitched chirp.

"Mea! The skeleton! The man!"

Shizuku herself didn't even understand the words that were coming out of her mouth, but talking made her feel calmer. She quickly put on her shoes and jacket and rushed out of the room. Some people might have noticed the strange goings-on, but it would be dangerous if others were still unaware, and the slain soldier might still be breathing.

Shizuku ran down the dark, candlelit corridor, but the smell of rotten blood seemed to spread throughout the castle, as if it were following her.



Before long, the news of the strange occurrence within the castle grounds reached the king's bedchamber. Lars armed himself with his sword as he listened to his aide's report.

"A dead body is walking around the castle garden and has attacked a living person..."

"...I see. So it's come to this," replied the king. "I'm still tired."

"Your Majesty?"

"Is Lettie not back?"

"She's spending the night in Candela," his aide clarified, disconcerted by the king's apparent lack of urgency.

"Should we...get in touch with her? Or maybe not? I'd feel bad waking her, so I guess we better not."

“U-uhh...”

As much as the man wanted Lars to contact his sister, he couldn't go against his master's wishes. Instead, he silently bowed his head.

As soon as the king and his aide stepped out into the hallway, a military officer came running toward them.

“Y-Your Majesty!”

“What is it? Don't tell me—the dead body came back to life?”

“No, it's just...I wanted to make sure we were allowed to fight back.”

“Why would you even need to ask? Don't waste my time.”

“Yes, but, well... Some people are claiming that our adversary might be a former king...”

This incoherent explanation prompted Lars to exchange glances with his aide—who looked just as baffled as he did—before the king voiced his honest thoughts on the matter.

“Ah. So they're trying to throw me off balance, are they?” he muttered, scratching his temple in annoyance.



Before running out into the garden, Shizuku explained the situation to the soldier on guard. The odor drifting through the air brought a questioning expression to his face, but he still turned a deaf ear to her claim.

“You must've been dreaming,” he told her.

Shizuku wished she could brush it off as nothing more than a dream, but someone had been hurt—she had no choice but to investigate.

She dashed outside and headed to the area she'd seen through the window, relying solely on the moonlight to illuminate her path.

Shizuku held her breath, feeling as if every inhalation of that awful odor was eating away at her mind. Next, she entered the grove and pushed her way through the trees.

The moonlight gave the glossy blades of grass a silver hue. Trusting these

numerous tiny glimmers of light to guide her, she located the fallen soldier, then hurried over to checked his pulse. He still had a faint heartbeat.

“H-he’s alive. Can you carry him, Mea?”

“If you don’t mind me dragging him.”

“Th-that’s probably not a good idea.”

The soldier was lying face down, so there was no way of telling what kinds of injuries he’d suffered. After agonizing over what to do, Shizuku asked Mea to fetch some help, and the demon girl vanished from the forest, leaving Shizuku to carefully roll the soldier onto his back.

He let out a small groan. It was difficult to gauge the extent of his injuries in the darkness of the night. She took off her jacket and gently held it against his open wound.

“Just wait a little while longer... I’m sure a mage will be here soon.”

At that moment, the moonlight dimmed, and Shizuku sensed a shadow looming over her. She looked up to see who it belonged to—only to spot a lone woman standing on the grass that led out of the forest, clad in a white dress.

The woman had loose black hair, and she stared intently at Shizuku. As beautiful as she was, there was something childish about her appearance. Shizuku had the feeling she looked familiar, but she didn’t have time to waste on such thoughts. Continuing to apply pressure to the soldier’s wound, she pleaded with the woman for assistance.

“Excuse me! If you’re a mage, then could you help heal this man’s wounds? He’s hurt, and...”

The woman started moving before Shizuku had finished speaking. She began to draw closer, one slow step at a time, moving as if she were walking on clouds. She stood in front of Shizuku and reached out.

She wore gloves over her pale, elegant hands. The sight of them made Shizuku feel at peace, and for an instant, she was captivated. But the next moment, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Huh?”

The woman looked down at Shizuku with her blue eyes, then placed her slender fingers around Shizuku's neck and squeezed.

“Wha...!”

That was the only sound Shizuku could manage. As the woman dug in her fingers, Shizuku tried to pry them away from her neck—but her grip was unexpectedly strong for a woman. As she applied pressure to Shizuku's windpipe, it became harder and harder for her to breathe.

I'm going to die if I don't do something.

As soon as this thought flashed through Shizuku's mind, she planted her hands on the ground. She stopped trying to free herself from the woman's suffocating grasp and kicked against the grass with all her might, as if she was preparing to make a run for it. Then, she aggressively rammed her body against her attacker.

It hadn't been a calculated move—Shizuku had just been trying to survive—but it worked slightly in her favor. They both fell to the ground, bodies intertwined, and the woman relinquished her chokehold, which had been preventing Shizuku from breathing. Shizuku put her hands to her neck, coughing violently, and her eyes blurred with tears.

In the meantime, however, the woman had risen expressionlessly to her feet and picked up a nearby rock. She lifted it and turned toward Shizuku, who was still on the ground. Seeing the woman standing over her, rock in hand, Shizuku immediately shielded her face with her arms, but her assailant hurled the rock directly at her face. Shizuku groaned, and the pain dulled her consciousness momentarily.

Undeterred, the woman threw another rock in Shizuku's direction. This time, however, Shizuku lunged toward the woman's hand.

“That hurt! Violence is not the answer!”

Shizuku grabbed the woman's wrists firmly so that she couldn't be punched, then pushed her to the ground. Shizuku attempted to straddle her, but the woman kicked her defiantly in the abdomen, and Shizuku fell onto her backside. Swallowing the bile in her throat, Shizuku staggered to her feet—but she must

have twisted her ankle when she fell, because she felt a stinging pain that forced her to crouch back down.

“Ow...”

Moonlight illuminated the garden. In a world tinged with eerie silence and a repulsive odor, the woman’s shadow swayed gently on the ground. She looked like a porcelain doll, devoid of all emotion, yet as disheveled as she was, she was still beautiful. She turned toward Shizuku, raising a rock overhead, and Shizuku covered her face with her hands, bracing herself for the incoming attack. She shut her eyes tight.

She didn’t want to be hurt—and she most definitely didn’t want to die.

In truth, Shizuku desperately wanted to run away, yet she’d managed to resist that urge so far. She gritted her teeth, waiting for what was to come.

She waited and waited, but the rock she expected to hit her never came. In its place, she heard a man’s voice behind her. He sounded annoyed.

“Mother, I understand how you feel, but killing this girl is *my* job.”

It was a voice Shizuku hadn’t expected to hear.

She raised her head and looked over her shoulder in shock. The king, along with several people who worked for him, had arrived from out of nowhere. They stood there, side by side, each and every one of them armed.

The woman seemed almost wary as she stood there, frozen, the rock raised above her head.

“Th-this is your mother?” asked Shizuku.

“That’s right.”

Lars grabbed Shizuku by the collar, pulled her over toward him, then confronted the woman in the white dress. It made sense now why she’d looked so familiar—she bore a strong resemblance to Leuticia—but strangely, she seemed to be around the same age.

Shizuku looked up at the king, who was still holding on to her collar.

“She’s very young to be your mother...”.

“That’s because she died when she was twenty-four. I’d be more surprised if the dead *did* age.”

“That’s a good point. Wait, what?!”

“What I’m saying is, she’s just a corpse.”

Lars gently shoved Shizuku behind him. Once again, she ended up tumbling to the ground, prompting one mage to run over to her. When she took a closer look, she realized it was Harve.

“Are you okay?” he asked as he healed her injuries. Two other mages crouched beside the fallen soldier.

“Harve, if that’s a corpse...I saw a skeleton earlier, too...,” said Shizuku.

“There are dead bodies walking all around the castle right now,” explained Harve. “It appears that several of the royal family mausoleums have been damaged.”

“Whoa! How did that happen?” Shizuku cried.

Everyone else ignored her as they slowly began to encircle the former queen. Lars, in the center of the crowd, stepped closer to his mother, the blade of Akashia gleaming beneath the moonlight. His voice rang out cold and clear on the night breeze.

“Now, it pains me somewhat to say this, but you can’t just go around killing people. You need to quietly return to your casket.”

The woman looked around, her movements sluggish. Then, seemingly realizing that she couldn’t get away, she turned toward Lars. There was nothing maternal in her eyes—even Shizuku could see that.

There was nothing at all in her eyes, in fact. The emptiness inside them made Shizuku a little afraid.

There was no such thing as ghosts. People’s souls didn’t stay behind once they died. If all of that were true, then this woman was nothing but a corpse, just as Lars had described. Yet even so, the sight of her body moving around, trying to take people’s lives, filled Shizuku with an unbearable sense of anguish.

This must all just be part of some horrible nightmare.

The weapon in Lars's hand made the night air feel so much colder, and Shizuku shivered. She heard the king exhale. Moonlight reflected off the royal sword—and then the point of its blade pierced the corpse's chest.

There was no blood. Shizuku watched as the woman fell into the king's arms. She knew she'd never be allowed to talk about what she'd seen that night, and she swallowed hard.

The former queen collapsed to the ground, and Lars put away his sword and picked up his mother's body. It wasn't blood that was oozing out of her chest but a thick, black fluid. The stench it gave off only intensified the odor that was already enveloping their surroundings.

The king glared at the liquid, frowning.

"Is this some kind of forbidden curse?"

"Probably. There has to be a core somewhere."

"I have people guarding the public cemetery in the city, but I never imagined they'd come to the castle itself. What kinds of abilities do these corpses have? If they're as powerful as they were when they were alive, we might be in serious trouble. And if a witch were to show up, there'd be no hope for us."

"Their magical powers seem to have disappeared, but their physical strength has improved to compensate—"

Shizuku only partially understood the men's conversation, but it made her eyes widen.

If the royal mausoleum had been desecrated, then all the walking corpses, including the skeleton Shizuku saw earlier, were former members of the royal family. That would undoubtedly make it more difficult for the soldiers to fight against them. Indeed, everyone at the scene looked conflicted.

Lars wrapped his mother's body in a sheet that had been brought for him, left her in the hands of his subjects, then rose to his feet.

"I can't be bothered to look for the core of the forbidden curse. Capture all of the deceased, and tomorrow we'll have Lettie look for it."

"Your Majesty, that doesn't sound like a—"

At that moment, a mage rushed over to the king and hurriedly whispered something in his ear. The king's expression quickly darkened as he listened to what the mage had to say; then he looked around at the scene.

"Get the soldiers and mages to retreat. Make sure everyone stays inside the buildings, and under no circumstances is anybody to set foot outside. Truce, Azulia, and I will take charge of exterminating the dead. And make use of the elders."

Only about half of those present seemed to understand the king's orders, but those who did blanched and began running off in different directions, while everyone else started making their way back inside with some confusion. Harve patted Shizuku lightly on the shoulder.

"Let's go. I'll walk you back," he said.

"Oh, okay," replied Shizuku.

She started walking back through the dark garden, Harve leading the way. Since Shizuku had left her jacket with the fallen soldier, Harve gave her his to wear over her pajamas. She thanked him and put it on, but her expression didn't brighten at all.

"The mausoleum is the one in the woods at the back of the castle, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but that's just one of three. The one at the back only contains the caskets of former kings and their wives, while the other members of the royal family are preserved in a separate one."

"That makes sense... Is the third one just a backup?"

"That's where the royals who committed crimes are kept. Its location isn't known."

Both Harve and Shizuku went quiet for a moment, seemingly envisaging the same unpleasant scenario. The fragments of information she had were beginning to take a detestable shape.

"...The king said there'd be no hope if a witch appeared, didn't he? Are there witches buried in the castle?"

"Yes. A long time ago, a witch was buried in the royal mausoleum. But it's fine

—even if her corpse is reanimated, she won't have any magical powers. Once your soul disappears, your power disappears with it. Within the realm system, the soul is—”

“Uh, I know mages like discussing that topic, but it's not what I'm worried about,” Shizuku said, hurriedly interrupting Harve's explanation. Then she lowered her voice.

“This must be what I overheard them discussing in the forest behind the castle: *'The core can only choose one person.'* *'I'm choosing the strongest king that Farsas ever had.'* *'There's no use having a witch around.'* In other words, they were deciding whose body to bring back to life.”

Shizuku had found the conversation baffling at the time, but when she pieced it together with the information she'd just heard, she began to make sense of it. However, her explanation made the color drain from Harve's face.

She was suggesting that those two men had used a forbidden curse to resurrect members of the royal family. It was an outrageous suggestion, and Harve immediately shook his head.

“No, but... That's a forbidden curse. You're implying that Dylguey might have something to do with it, aren't you? He's a royal mage, like me. He'd never do such a thing.”

“Wouldn't he be able to?”

“He probably has the power for something like that...but not the knowledge. In the castle, information regarding forbidden curses is strictly regulated. Only a select few people are able to view it.”

Those “select few” must have included Leuticia and Erik. Undeterred, Shizuku vehemently argued her case.

“Still, there's a chance that someone else shared that knowledge with him.”

There were two men in the grove that day. The one dressed entirely in black had said, *“It works the same as last time,”* apparently explaining how it was done. In other words...

“Harve, did you check the records to see which royal mages have been

outside the castle, like we discussed this afternoon?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, I did. Nothing about Dylguey’s movements seemed particularly unusual, though. He’s just been to the castle city a few times this month. The last time he went was the day before yesterday, if I remember right.”

Shizuku gulped. Her slight doubts were turning into serious suspicions.

Why had the silhouette of the black-robed man in the grove seemed familiar?

Because of the figure Shizuku had spotted from atop the tall bell tower. She had only seen that man from a distance, but could he be the same one who had been on the castle grounds?

“So actually, something strange happened in the castle city not too long ago,” Shizuku began to explain. “The custodian of the bell tower died suddenly, but his body was dug back up and left inside his house. At around that same time, the king and I went to that bell tower, but the inside was covered with dirt, almost like a corpse had been walking around in there after rising from the grave. I wonder if that has something to do with this.”

“...What?”

Harve’s voice was tense. His terror-stricken eyes darted around in the darkness, and Shizuku continued, repeating what she’d heard from Lars.

“The bell tower’s custodian died suddenly just before the king told him he was coming. What if someone was experimenting with resurrecting dead bodies before executing this plan—and wanted to see how the king would react?”

Why would he show Lars a snippet of his plan?

Most likely, it was a challenge for the king. Would he notice that something was off? And if he did, what action would he take?

It wasn’t Shizuku who the man in the square had been looking at, but Lars. The king had probably come up with a similar theory already. When Lars brought up the abandonment of the custodian’s dead body, he seemed far more skeptical about the ordeal than Shizuku was. That must also be why he’d gotten people to keep an eye on the public cemetery.

Harve's voice was raspy now. "When it comes to forbidden curses that control corpses, records indicate that unless you issue them specific behavioral commands, they tend to repeat what they used to do when they were alive. If your hypothesis about the caretaker is correct, then the corpse must have been carrying out his daily duties."

"Going to check on the bell tower, then returning home...? That sounds just like a ghost story."

They might be able to find some actual witnesses if they could do a thorough search, but for the moment, the most important thing was to get the situation under control. Shizuku thought back on some things she'd casually overlooked earlier.

"I keep thinking the figure watching the king and me when we were at the bell tower looked a lot like the man who was with Dylguey. I mean, we saw Dylguey walking into the grove at the back of the castle this afternoon, didn't we? Isn't that where the royal mausoleum is?"

After all of her grueling runs with Lars, Shizuku had a good grasp of where all the buildings in the castle grounds stood. The two men that she'd spotted in the grove had also walked in the direction of the mausoleum—the same direction that Dylguey had been heading in that afternoon.

"Still, the one thing that's bothering me is how they claimed they could only pick one person. I mean, there are tons of bodies roaming around at the moment. It just doesn't add up..."

If they *had* been talking about the mysterious events that were currently playing out, then it was strange that there was more than one reanimated corpse.

Harve's voice cracked as he responded to Shizuku's doubts.

"I think the degree of control must vary. The corpses we've seen so far, as well as the former queen you encountered earlier, have just been ordered to randomly attack living humans, but the corpse that's linked to the core must be different. Even if they're not exactly as they were when they were alive, maybe their actions are similar..."

His voice was hard, but he sounded more confident in what he was saying than before.

Shizuku shivered. “They can act like they did when they were alive...? That isn’t good, is it?”

The man she’d overheard had been planning to choose “the strongest king that Farsas ever had.” Shizuku wasn’t sure which king they were talking about, but no matter who it was, he had once possessed the royal sword. The resurrection of such a man could result in a huge number of casualties.

Harve covered his mouth, then looked back at Shizuku.

“Hold on... I’m going to tell His Majesty what we just discussed. I’m sorry, Shizuku, but can you make it back on your own?”

“I’ll be fine. We’re almost there anyway. Be careful, Harve.”

Shizuku could see the entrance to the building. She bowed her head and thanked Harve, then parted ways with him and jogged through the door. She greeted the soldier at the entrance as she went past.

She was walking along the same dark corridor she’d sprinted down on her way out, yet it felt much more unsettling now. It was as if the commotion that had unfolded outside had tainted the atmosphere inside here, as well. Shizuku hugged her shoulders, which was when she noticed that the jacket she was wearing wasn’t hers.

“Oh, I forgot to give this back.”

She still had the jacket she’d borrowed from Harve, but it was too late to run after him now. She could give it back the next day.

But then Shizuku remembered something much more important.

“Wait... Mea?”

Shizuku’s assistant demon, who’d supposedly gone to fetch help, had not yet returned. She’d initially assumed that it was Mea who’d called Lars and his group over, but if that were the case, then why hadn’t she come back? Had she returned to Shizuku’s room early so she wouldn’t draw attention to herself?

Shizuku hastened her pace, growing concerned. Once she reached her room,

she opened the unlocked door.

“Mea, are you here?”

There was no response. She walked over to the corner of the room where Mea slept, and unsurprisingly, there was no trace of the small bird. Shizuku scanned the room again as her anxiety rose.

“No way... What’s going on...?”

Where had Mea disappeared to? Shizuku dashed out the door before she had the chance to think. She went back to the soldier at the entrance and asked him for help.

“Excuse me! Did you see a girl with green hair come in?! She’s a demon girl.”

“Oh yeah, she came back a short while ago. She said she was looking for help, and just then a mage showed up and took her with him.”

“Where did they go?!”

“Uhh...the building next door, probably. I saw the lamp he was carrying go in there.”

“Thank you!” she shouted.

Shizuku rushed back outside. The neighboring building was just a few steps away, and she pushed its wooden door open. Shizuku had never been inside it before. It was pitch black, with no lights whatsoever.

“Mea! Where are you?!”

Her voice reverberated down the corridor, gradually fading into the distance. But there was no response. It didn’t seem like her shouting was waking anybody up, either—this couldn’t have been a residential building.

Once her eyes started adjusting to the dark, Shizuku slowly made her way farther in. She found the icy air a little eerie but hoped it was just her preconceived notions of a place like this. Her footsteps sounded unnervingly loud, which made her want to take off her shoes, but she was suddenly reminded of something.

Earlier, when she overheard that conversation in the grove, she’d heard two

voices—but only one set of footsteps.

The man in black robes hadn't made any noise as he was walking. It was likely that *he* was the one who'd taught his associate about the forbidden curse—and despite noticing Shizuku and Mea, had chosen to ignore them.

"This is crazy."

She didn't know anything about him. There was a chance he was still hiding somewhere inside the castle.

Erik's advice about not pushing herself too hard came flooding back.

"I need to be careful...", Shizuku said to herself.

"Oh? And how are you going to do that?"

A man's voice suddenly echoed from behind her, making her jump. Shizuku automatically put some distance between them, then turned around.

There, she saw the man in the black robes. He possessed a chillingly handsome face, accentuated by his cruel smile.

Shizuku almost screamed, but in the moment that followed, she collapsed onto the floor. Having knocked her down with a snap of his fingers, the man picked her up with just one hand, making it look effortless.

"Now then, I doubt bringing a human back with me would make Aviella very happy. I guess I'll give you to *him* instead."

The man continued walking down the dark hallway, dragging Shizuku's body alongside him. She couldn't see where they were going, but the path ahead was filled with a murky miasma.



Katiliana had been a peculiar girl.

He thought she might have been cute. He could never really tell whether someone had a pretty face or not, but everyone claimed that Katiliana did.

She'd had a gentle smile—when she wasn't staring into space with a vacant look in her eyes, that was.

As a descendant of the Farsasian royal lineage, she possessed strong magical

powers. Yet she didn't seem to be very good at constructing spells, and even the most basic kinds of magic were beyond the realms of her capabilities. Eventually, she'd resigned herself to this fate.

That was why he'd helped her out a little. That was all it was.

His help, however, seemed to make Katiliana extremely happy.

She started regularly following him around. She hired him, and he began to accommodate her needs in whichever way he thought fit. He gained access to the castle, was introduced to the king's younger sister, and eventually received permission to view documents related to forbidden curses. Katiliana had imparted knowledge to him every step of the way, as if it were only natural.

Those who knew what was going on gossiped about how lucky he was. Some even envied him, wondering how someone with so little power had managed to receive such special treatment.

Still, if he really *was* lucky...then why had *he* been the one clutching her cold hands in her final moments?

Somewhere inside him, he already knew half of the answer to that question. But ultimately, he was still unsure whether he'd been able to help her or not.



Harve hurried through the dark garden, having been informed of Dylguey's suspicious behavior. Maybe there had been good reason to suspect him—despite being a mage, he'd never shown much opposition to forbidden curses.

Harve hadn't immediately pictured him as the culprit, though. As a specialist in Farsasian history, Dylguey held such reverence for the royal family that it bordered on obsession.

Would someone like him really violate the royal mausoleum? The incident that had transpired that night was equivalent to disgracing the royal family, and if summoning the “strongest king” led to something happening to Lars, the very existence of Farsas could be put in jeopardy.

Still... If Harve assumed that the perpetrator had deliberately activated the forbidden curse while the king's younger sister was away, it was highly likely that they were aware of the castle's inner goings-on. It made perfect sense for

them to be a royal mage.

Harve teetered between agreeing with Shizuku's conjecture and rejecting it. Every time he leaned toward agreeing with her, another reason to reject her suspicions would come to mind, and vice versa. He was nowhere near a solution.

"I give up...", he grumbled, the words softly tumbling from his lips—but they were drowned out by the sounds of someone wading through the grass.

For a moment, Harve readied himself to fight. He hated the idea of attacking the body of a member of the royal family, but if his life was threatened, he'd have no choice.

He started reciting an incantation, priming himself to use some simple fire magic. But as it happened, the young man who emerged out of the darkness, footsteps crunching through the grass, was someone Harve knew well. Surprised, he stared back at his friend.

"Erik?! I thought you were in Candela!"

"I came back. Someone called me about a forbidden curse."

"You were called back? By the king?"

"Nope."

Erik gave a monosyllabic answer and shook his head. He appeared to be acting somewhat different from usual, but Harve figured it was just the lack of light that was giving him that impression. He felt a little unsettled but didn't press Erik for an answer.

"Does this mean Leuticia's come back as well?"

"No. She's still in Candela."

Harve scowled after hearing his friend's reply.

Leuticia was currently acting as Erik's direct superior, and she wasn't the kind of person who'd choose not to return when she heard about a forbidden curse. Erik must have kept the news from her and come back without permission, something Harve was certain he'd be punished for at a later date.

“What are you doing? You’re just making things worse for yourself.”

“I know. I feel like it’s a long time coming, though.”

“Don’t be stupid. You never did anything wrong.”

Harve spoke with such conviction that even *he* found it suspicious, and Erik gave him a faint smile. In the darkness of the night, his deep-blue eyes looked black.

“Where’s Shizuku?” he asked.

“She should be in her room. I just walked her back.”

“Oh. Thanks for doing that.”

Nothing about that night felt real. Harve wasn’t cold, yet a chill ran down his spine. Everything that had happened, from walking corpses to the way Erik had showed up alone at this bizarre time and place, was unsettling and mysterious. Who could have summoned Erik, and what was he up to?

Just as he opened his mouth to ask his friend again, Erik began striding off back toward the dark grove.

“Where are you going?” Harve asked.

“To look for someone.”

“Huh? What do you mean? It’s dangerous out here right now.”

“I know.”

This curt response didn’t reassure Harve in the slightest. Unable to discern his friend’s true intentions, he gulped.

Why had the king sent all but a few of his subjects back inside?

Two out of the three mausoleums had already been broken into. The majority of the corpses that were under anti-deterioration spells, like that of the former queen, as well as those that the centuries had reduced to mere bones, had crawled out of their caskets. Did that mean that the third mausoleum, where all the criminal members of the royal family were entombed, was still intact?

Those wrongdoers were buried in a secret tomb, having received no funerals. The last person who’d been buried there was—

“You aren’t looking for Katiliana, are you?”

Erik, who had once been tasked with looking after documents related to forbidden curses, must have had a much better grasp on the situation than Harve.

If he’d come back without telling Leuticia anything, then that meant—

Harve turned around. The look that Erik gave him was colder than ice and tinged with sadness. Harve couldn’t move.

Erik’s response to his friend’s cautiously prying question, however, was a simple one.

“I am.”

Harve’s entire body tensed up, and the color drained from his face.

Erik continued. “I’m searching for Katiliana’s body, to be exact. The person who called me here was falsely using her name.”

“So they *did* break into the third mausoleum?!”

“It seems the corpses themselves forced it open. Few people know where it’s located. I spotted what looked like the body of the disgraced king, Dysral, a few moments ago.”

Erik had casually mentioned the former king’s name, but Harve was horror-struck by this news. As a mage specializing in history and a citizen of Farsas, he obviously knew about the mad king. The man had left a dark stain on the nation’s history, and now he was on the loose again, in a way. Harve shuddered with fear.

“Y-you...”

“It didn’t seem like he was fully aware of his surroundings, so I managed to get away. He was armed, but something seemed a little odd.”

“But that’s really dangerous... Shouldn’t we get His Majesty to safety?”

“The king will be okay, even if we’re not. At the end of the day, a dead body is just a corpse—it’s not as if he’d be fighting the real thing,” Erik said simply, ending the conversation and beginning to walk away.

Harve followed after him, flustered.

Erik made his way haphazardly through the grove, as if he didn't even know where he was heading. Every now and then, he looked around—presumably in search of the young girl he'd once lost. It almost felt as if they'd gone back in time, and seeing his friend like this made Harve anxious.

After absentmindedly following Erik for a while, Harve returned to his senses and shook his head emphatically.

"This has to stop. What are you planning on doing once you find Katiliana's body? Just hurry up and go back to Candela instead. What if someone...?"

Harve trailed off mid-sentence, his body frozen.

What if someone finds you?

He already knew the answer to that. Erik had had permission to view documents related to forbidden curses, and there were two things currently motivating him: knowledge, and how close he'd been to Katiliana. Not only that, but he was never officially a Farsasian mage. Even if he asserted his innocence, there was a chance he could be thrown straight into jail. Harve opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping for air on dry land.

Erik, however, didn't seem rattled in the slightest. His nonchalant manner of speaking made it sound like he wasn't talking about himself at all.

"Whoever called me here was probably trying to frame me. I have an existing record, which makes me the obvious suspect."

"Then why did you come back...?"

"It seemed like a good opportunity. I didn't attend her burial."

"It wasn't that you didn't attend. You *couldn't* attend! Why are you bringing that up now?!"

"You're right. At this point, it doesn't mean a thing, but at least I won't be ignorant any longer."

It was impossible to discern any emotion in Erik's words. That didn't mean that he was emotionless, though—Harve knew that better than anyone else. In the three years between when they first met and parted ways, the two friends

had spent a lot of time together.



Fifteen-year-old Erik stood out in a lot of different ways. His pretty, androgynous features were one reason, but his abrupt demeanor and reluctance to smile also added to his uniqueness.

The thing that made him stand out the most, however, was the girl who was permanently by his side.

Her name was Katiliana Til Rosa Farsas.

As the last part of her name suggested, she was a member of the Farsasian royal family.

This girl, who'd suddenly showed up at the castle one day, was the granddaughter of an extremely talented mage and Crestea, the younger sister of the king who'd reigned two generations earlier—which made Katiliana Lars's cousin.

Lars's father, who was the king at the time, had brought her back to the castle with him and given her a residence a short distance from the castle itself. Arrangements were made to ensure that the naive young girl was fully provided for.

Everyone who was distrustful upon hearing about Katiliana completely changed their mind as soon as they saw her. Not only did she possess incredible magical power like many other direct descendants of the Farsasian royal family, but she also bore a striking resemblance to Crestea herself.

Mentally, Katiliana was immature for her age. Perhaps that was why her skills as a mage were so inconsistent, and manipulating her own magical power, as well as constructing spells, proved challenging for her.

Somewhere along the line, however, she met a boy who was her total opposite in that respect. Hailing from a faraway nation in the east, he'd come to Farsas to study magic. He possessed an unparalleled academic intellect and an extraordinary aptitude for spells, but despite these talents, his innate magical powers were lacking. His inability to use anything more advanced than midlevel magic limited his effectiveness as a mage.

“Someone told me you’re not from Farsas. Is that true?”

Harve had approached the boy, who he’d found alone in the library, out of simple curiosity.

He wasn’t even a royal mage and had come from a foreign country, yet the boy had been granted a number of special privileges. This favoritism he received from the royal family made most people give him a wide berth, though that didn’t stop them from spreading spiteful rumors about him.

Harve, on the other hand, hated discussing information he didn’t know was true, which was why he’d decided to ask the boy directly. He didn’t have the courage to talk to him when the royal family were around, so running into him in the library was a lucky coincidence.

The boy looked up from his book and glanced at Harve with his deep-blue eyes. He didn’t appear to appreciate being interrupted, but he wasn’t offended by it, either.

“Yes. I’m not from Farsas. I’m from Natela.”

“Oh. That’s north of Tarys, right?”

“Yeah.”

The boy looked back down at his book, apparently assuming their conversation had come to an end. Flustered, Harve stopped him from resuming his reading.

“Hold on a minute. Are you allowed to view documents about forbidden curses?”

This was the question Harve had most wanted to ask him—he didn’t care what kind of relationship the boy had with the royals. No chief mage had ever been allowed into the forbidden curse records room without special permission, and he was curious whether this kid really had that freedom.

The boy tilted his head to one side slightly. As pretty as his face was, he wouldn’t be mistaken for a girl. He was too stony and taciturn for that.

The boy gave Harve, whose eyes were sparkling with curiosity, a casual nod.

“Yep. Only level five curses and below, though.”

“Seriously?! That’s incredible! I bet the spells are really complicated, right?”

“You’d be surprised. The spell formations are quite ordinary. With level five curses, for example, it’s just the catalysts that are the problem. Any royal mage would be able to implement such a spell.”

“Oh, right. Do they need human sacrifices to work?”

“Yeah. Or sometimes, it’s human blood.”

This simple answer only piqued Harve’s interest even more. He wanted to ask for more details, but then it occurred to him what other people would be most curious about.

“Hey, I don’t know if this is okay for me to ask, but how did you get permission for that?”

Some people would have done anything for that privilege—and yet it had been given to a foreign boy instead. Rumor had it that he’d gotten permission by winning the favor of a certain royal princess, but no matter how he looked at it, Harve found this hard to believe.

Harve’s blunt question brought a slight smile to the boy’s face for the first time.

“They wanted someone to organize the forbidden curse documents, and apparently I was the perfect person for the job.”

“How so?”

“I don’t have much magical power. Even if I know the spells, there’s no way I could cast them by myself. I have knowledge, but no skills, so I’m the ideal candidate for handling those troublesome documents.”

“But if you drew the spell diagrams...”

“Nobody seems to understand my spell diagrams—not even the most rudimentary ones.”

“ ... ”

Harve looked at the boy suspiciously, but when he eventually got to see the boy’s spell diagrams at a later date, they really were terrible. They were like a

little kid's drawings, but even less well thought out.

"Plus, it would be less of a blow for the country if a foreigner went missing, right? And I want to see the documents, so it's win-win."

"You talk about going missing... But what if they threaten you into silence?"

"That doesn't bother me. Everyone dies at some point."

Harve was taken aback by the boy's startlingly candid opinion.

After a while, Harve eventually realized that he hadn't told the boy his name, and he belatedly introduced himself.

"Oh, I'm Harve, an apprentice mage. What's your name?"

From then on, the boys forged something resembling a friendship.

At first, Harve would ask all the questions and Erik would just answer him, but gradually, Erik started to initiate conversations as well, albeit always with a strained smile. The more Harve found out about his new friend, the more it made sense that he'd been tasked with managing the forbidden curse documents, almost like a librarian.

He had barely any magical power, and his spell diagrams were devastatingly bad. Those weaknesses, coupled with his broad knowledge, incredible ability to understand the makeup of spells, single-minded inquisitiveness and rationalism, disinterest in gaining influence, and lack of ambition, made him the perfect person to watch over the documents related to forbidden curses.

Leuticia, who'd been at the top of the mage world from a young age, was good at identifying people's capabilities and dispositions, and her judgment was always spot on. For the three years Erik spent in Farsas, he never conformed to the rest of the mages—in fact, he was often isolated from them. And yet despite the skeptical glances that other people gave Erik, Leuticia placed her trust in him.

Which was why she'd never expected him to leave Farsas the way that he did.

When the unexpected news arrived one ordinary day four years prior, the people of the castle were shocked.

A forbidden curse had been unleashed in the castle city.

It was something that never should have happened.

Four people lost their lives in the incident, which happened in a residence outside the castle.

One of those victims was Katiliana...and the person who'd created the spell diagram for the forbidden curse was none other than Erik.

Their initial meeting had been a coincidence.

Having completed his studies in his home nation and moved to Farsas to expand his knowledge, Erik started out as a live-in employee and became a frequent visitor of the castle city's library, where he spent day after day absorbing a wide range of academic journals and research texts. One day, while he was choosing a book to read, a lone girl appeared in front of him.

She greeted him in a shy and self-conscious manner, then made him an offer.

"W-why don't you come and work for me?"

"Work for you? Why?"

"I want you to teach me magic..."

"Then you've got the wrong person. As far as mages go, I'm nearly powerless."

"But you helped me out the other day, didn't you...?"

That was when Erik finally realized that this wasn't the first time they'd met.

True enough, he'd come across this well-dressed young girl a few days earlier while strolling through the outskirts of the city. He could immediately tell by her appearance that she was a member of the upper classes, but unusually for someone of her status, she didn't have anyone accompanying her. She'd been desperately reaching up toward a tall tree.

It wasn't just her suspicious behavior that caught Erik's attention, but the magical energy emanating from her. It permeated their surroundings, showing that she hadn't been taught to fully control it yet.

At first, Erik just watched her out of the corner of his eye as he walked past. When he came back down the same street two hours later, however, she was

still there, extending her hand in the same manner. There was no way he could ignore her this time.

Still holding some books, he asked the troubled-looking girl a question.

“What are you doing?”

She seemed extremely surprised that someone had spoken to her. Her green eyes opened wide. She looked around, seemingly unsure how to respond, then finally began to speak.

“I can’t reach my veil...”

Now that she mentioned it, Erik noticed that there was a white veil hiding among the leaves, caught on one of the branches. It was well above her head, so it was unlikely she’d be able to reach it with her hand.

Still, Erik frowned slightly and answered right away. “Just use magic.”

“I don’t know how to.”

“It’s not difficult. You’ve just got to make the veil hover a little.”

Despite Erik’s advice, the girl still didn’t appear to understand, so he decided to teach her how to cast the spell, starting from the very basics.

She was a slow learner, but after about an hour, the young girl finally managed to make the veil hover in the air and brought it down to ground level. However, by that time, there was already a hole in the lace.

Erik, who’d discovered the damage upon picking it up, handed the veil to the girl.

“That’s a shame,” he said.

If she had been the daughter of nobility, she would have been furious that her veil was ruined, and she would have given up long before she managed to retrieve it. Yet the girl looked genuinely happy as she took the white lace from Erik and thanked him with a smile. Erik did find her quite odd, but since the problem had been solved, he thought no more of it.

“Do you remember now? I want you to teach me magic again, like you did back then.”

The girl, who was in a simpler dress than when he'd first met her, gave Erik a rosy-cheeked smile. Erik didn't even know her name yet, but he gave her a straightforward reply.

"Say what you like, but I'm no teacher. There are loads of mages around who are far better than me. If you're from a noble family, you should even be able to ask a royal mage for help."

"I've had them teach me before, but it was no use... I've never heard anyone explain things as simply as you do."

"Hmm... To be honest, I'd rather not associate with the nobility."

Nobles and commoners tended to be on two totally different wavelengths, which made it hard for them to understand one another. And most of the time, the nobility would get priority. Well aware of that fact, Erik was moments away from declining the girl's offer, until she suddenly gave him a radiant smile and shook her head.

"I'm not a member of the nobility. Does that make it better?"

Erik couldn't bring himself to say no. He could see her anxiety behind those green eyes, as if she were a lost child with nowhere to go. She seemed so clumsy and awkward. How many times had she been turned away before? It might have taken her a long time, but the experience of successfully using magic by herself must have been like a ray of hope for someone like her.

Erik let out a sigh, then said, "Fine."

He came to regret his decision the very next day.

The girl hadn't lied—she wasn't part of the nobility. She was of an even higher social standing: one of the four direct descendants of the royal family.

"Are you pleased?" Katiliana would often ask.

The first time he heard those words was when she formally hired him as her personal mage.

"Yeah, I am," Erik replied.

His voice sounded flat, but he was telling the truth.

Erik nodded as he read through the terms outlined in the document. Among them were the right to access the castle's library and the freedom to attend lectures. These were privileges that only royal mages and their apprentices were usually afforded. Erik had never expected to be blessed with such rare opportunities.

When Katiliana heard how surprised he was, she smiled so brightly that Erik's expression paled in comparison.

"Really? I hope this goes well, then."

"Yeah. I don't need this much money, though. I'd be fine with a third of it."

"How come? I just asked how much the royal mages get paid and went with that."

"But I'm not a royal mage."

"You're *my* mage, though."

Katiliana gave him the kind of mystified look that young children tended to make, but after numerous discussions, she agreed to lower his pay.

In truth, she'd been setting aside the remaining money each month as a reward for him. Erik found this out only after her death, when Leuticia gave him the enormous sum of money that Katiliana had spent three years saving.

Katiliana had followed him around like a baby chick.

Over three years had passed since their first encounter, and while Erik had grown into a proper young man, Katiliana's appearance remained mostly unchanged. Yet no matter what rumors circulated about them, their relationship never changed.

Once Erik started looking after the castle's forbidden curse records, he obtained both the knowledge he'd been dreaming of for three years, and some he wished he'd never had. When he'd looked back on it later, he felt like the power had gone to his head. Erik had developed a fascination for deciphering forbidden curse configurations, even if it wasn't his original field of research.

Those who use forbidden curses are destroyed by forbidden curses.

Gradually, Erik had begun to feel like forbidden curses were a natural part of

life, but not even he could escape this unwritten law—a fact that he was reminded of by Katiliana's death.



The man ended his story there and waited for her reaction. Shizuku gave him an icy look.

“Can you please tell me how long I’m going to have to endure this for? I don’t want to hear this stuff.”

“Don’t you? But it has to do with your companion. Isn’t it your fault that he’s ended up in this situation?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s yours... Stop trying to shift the blame,” Shizuku retorted.

Dylguey seemed visibly uncomfortable at that.

Having been apprehended by the black-robed man in the hallway, Shizuku had woken up to find herself restrained in Dylguey’s room.

Shizuku figured she was still inside the building she’d entered earlier, which appeared to be full of rooms for mages to conduct their research. Bound to a chair that had toppled over onto the floor, Shizuku surveyed the dimly lit room.

By the time Shizuku had woken up, there was no sign of the man in the black robes. She’d asked Dylguey about him the moment she opened her eyes, but the man had only replied, “His job here is done.”

Shizuku was somewhat relieved to find the mysterious man absent, but seeing Mea in the room made her feel even better—even if Mea was knocked out and trapped in a birdcage. As long as Shizuku could grab the cage and run off, that was good enough for her.

Dylguey’s smooth voice echoed around the room.

“The previous king acted as if Katiliana didn’t even exist, yet Leuticia took good care of her. The people of the castle treated that foolish young girl like a tumor, which only increased her attachment to the mage who paid attention to her. She tried to award him all the favors she could come up with, and eventually she turned her hand to a forbidden curse.”

Shizuku wondered why Dylguey was telling her about the past, but she

reasoned that this, just like the previous time she'd met him, was all a part of his "noble mission." She could complain all she liked, but he wasn't going to stop, so she just let the noise wash over her.

"Katiliana started coaxing forbidden curse formations out of her mage. He probably didn't expect her to be able to activate a forbidden curse, considering she could barely even cast a spell. Plus, he must have had some qualms about sharing the spell formations from the records, so he came up with one of his own to teach her. It was foolish of him, but he didn't realize what she was doing. Katiliana wanted to learn a spell that could summon immense magical power and give it to somebody else."

"Huh...?" Shizuku exclaimed before she could stop herself. She'd unfortunately figured out where Dylguy was going with this.

Here was a mage who was skilled at formulating spells, but lacking in power, so it only made sense that Katiliana would want to give that power to him. Shizuku recalled the words "destructive temptations" slipping out of Harve's mouth when he was talking about the imbalance between Erik's talent and his actual power.

There was a temptation to try to change the inevitable, even if it meant altering the way that things were supposed to be. Katiliana had succumbed to that temptation and lost her way, breaking that taboo for Erik's sake, only for her plan to fail.

The corners of Dylguy's mouth turned upward. He was pleased to have finally forced a reaction out of Shizuku.

"The scene of the crime was Katiliana's own residence. She killed her three servants to use them as the catalysts for the spell. Although it had been devised by that youngster, it was still a forbidden curse, and the spell was too much for Katiliana to handle. The spell failed, and the spellcaster died in the process. Katiliana was buried as a criminal, and the youngster who worked for her was exiled from Farsas."

"Exiled?"

As far as Shizuku knew, Erik had left Farsas of his own accord. She was sure Harve and Leuticia had said so, too. So why was Dylguy telling her a different

version of the story—and what was the significance of that discrepancy?

“The Farsasian royal family boasts the longest history on the continent, and they’ve maintained the legitimacy of their royal blood. That’s because they never grew complacent in their royal status and have spared no effort in their pursuit of power. However, for that same reason, it’s inevitable that some individuals will fall short, just like Katiliana did. It’s a pity that a descendant of Crestea was one such example, but it’s only thanks to those who fall short that others can rise to greater heights.”

“...How selfish,” Shizuku muttered softly, anger simmering away inside her.

It was rather reckless of Dylguy to be saying such things, considering he wasn’t even part of the royal family.

Dylguy, however, just snorted at Shizuku’s comment.

“It’s natural that royals are held to a higher standard when it comes to power and responsibility. That’s why I’m giving His Majesty this test. If he’s able to defeat the strongest king that ever ruled, he, too, will be able to reach greater heights.”

“And if he dies?”

“Then there’s always Leuticia. She can add a few more people to the bloodline.”

“This is beyond depraved, no matter how you look at it...,” Shizuku spat. Her words bounced off the cold floor. She felt as if she were lying in a puddle of vomit, and all the while, the man’s rapt voice continued to smear the place with filth.

“Nothing you say has any meaning to me. I’m simply challenging Farsas with my idea of what a king should be. As Lady Crestea once told me, *‘You’re free to test out any of my blood relatives whenever you like.’*”

Shizuku closed her eyes, focusing her attention on her hands bound against the back of the chair. Surrounded by Dylguy’s nauseating joy, she waited for a chance to strike back.



The male corpse that lunged toward the king had purple spots around its

eyes, and Lars deflected his opponent's sword, then swiftly severed the dead man's head in one stroke. The body fell to the ground with a loud thud, convulsing momentarily, but as black liquid spilled from its neck, the corpse's movements ceased altogether. The king picked up the severed head off the ground and tossed it to the mage behind him, who hurriedly caught it and placed it into a leather bag.

"How many left?" asked the king.

"Twenty-four, maybe twenty-five..."

"What a nuisance. At the very least, we need to retrieve all of the bodies from the third mausoleum."

That was where the bodies of lawbreaking royals were kept, and roughly half of them should not be seen by outsiders. Many of them had been involved in the internal conflict triggered by King Dysral's descent into madness. Some individuals had dabbled in forbidden curses that left visible traces on their bodies, while others had been purged with poison.

Records of such incidents were all documented in the royal family's sealed archives, but these occurrences had not been disclosed to the masses. To prevent unnecessary speculation and unease, it was wise to keep these abnormal corpses out of the public eye.

Lars gently wiped his blade with a cloth.

"Since they no longer have any magical power, the women's bodies are easier to capture. When the men flee, it's impossible to catch up with them."

"Yes, it does seem like their muscular strength and running abilities have been enhanced. Their capacity to make decisions has decreased, however. The spell that's been used to reanimate these corpses can't be a very complex one."

"They're like clay dolls, aren't they? Maybe I'll burn them all once this is over and pack their ashes into urns."

The mage accompanying the king raised an eyebrow at the word "urns," but Lars began striding ahead, undeterred. He carefully searched the dark garden for some trace of the corpses.

“Now then, hopefully I can find them myself.”

These were dead bodies that weren't supposed to be seen by anyone. Only a select few veteran officers and mages were aware of the history that had been concealed for decades, and it was this group that had stayed outside to carry out the cleanup.

Still, there was one corpse that Lars didn't want anyone but him and Leuticia to see—one member of the royal family whose crimes were far more severe anyone else's, who Lars felt should never be forgiven, and he wanted to be the one to retrieve it.

Lars tightened his grip on Akashia's handle.

“Where are you, Katiliana?”

He called out her name, but there was no reply. For a moment, a scornful smile played on the king's lips, but as he stepped out into the night, it was swiftly replaced by his usual expression of annoyance.



The pair walked through the grass, their footsteps echoing through the night air.

Harve felt more nervous than scared, but his concern won out over everything else; he was unable to stop following his friend. He had no idea how many times he had warned him, but he couldn't bring himself to stop.

“Come on, Erik, let's go back. It's a big forest, and it's so dark. Plus, you don't even know whether you'll be able to find Katiliana—someone else might have already found her.”

“If either of us should go back, it's you. Only senior subjects of the royal family are still outside, right? If anyone finds out that you're here, you'll be punished, too.”

“But what about you?”

“I'm fully aware of the risks.”

Erik's flippant response made Harve frown. Why had almost everyone been sent back inside the buildings? It must have something to do with the bodies in

the third mausoleum and the history that the royal family had sealed away.

Leuticia had instructed Erik to take a look at some sealed records just a few days earlier, so at least in terms of knowledge, he must have been on the same level as the king's longest-serving subjects. Harve, with his specialization in history, was more curious than most about the royal family he worked for, but he also knew his place. If he wasn't so concerned about leaving his friend alone outside, he would have stayed well clear of the area, and he wanted to avoid running into any dead bodies, if that was at all possible.

"Erik. If it's me you're worried about, then let's go back together. What would become of Shizuku if something happened to you?"

"She's tough. And anyway, I don't plan on dying."

"Then why are you so fixated on Katiliana? Get over her already."

"It's not like that."

Erik suddenly stopped in his tracks, and Harve stood still.

A short distance away, they spotted the skeleton of a young girl beneath the moonlight. She was walking slowly, her white dress fluttering in the wind, while at the same time, she gave off a loathsome, yet mystical aura.

The men waited with bated breath for her to go away. Once the hem of her dress vanished through the trees, Erik spoke again.

"I want you to go back inside. I don't want you to see Katiliana."

"Why not? Was she in that horrendous a state?"

"No. She looked beautiful. I'm the one who killed her, so I should know."

Erik wasn't being self-deprecating or tormenting himself, just stating the truth. Harve let out a deep sigh and shook his head, the exhaustion showing around his eyes.

"Stop saying stuff like that. Strange rumors will start going around again."

"But it's true. I just wish you'd listen to my warning. If you see Katiliana, it'll most likely put you in a really problematic position."

"...What are you talking about?"

Katiliana had died after failing to cast a forbidden curse. Wasn't that all there was to the matter? Everything that Harve thought he knew suddenly seemed to fade into the darkness of the night.

"Didn't you tell me the whole story?" he asked with a scowl.

"I did. At least, I told you everything I knew at the time."

Had viewing the royal family's sealed records revealed more about the case? It was true that many aspects of the incident had seemed peculiar when it had happened. For one, Erik hadn't been punished at all, and though Harve was pleased about that, he also found it strange. The thing that baffled him the most, however, was how Katiliana had managed to formulate such a difficult spell in the first place.

At the time, he hadn't felt like probing very deeply into that question, so he'd just written it off as a matter of happenstance.

"What are you talking about...?"

His friend had finally returned, yet unnecessary thoughts kept surfacing in Harve's mind. He pictured Katiliana walking alone in the moonlight and let out a deep sigh. Perhaps this would be the night that the truth about the incident four years earlier would be revealed. He was torn between not wanting to revisit the past and longing to uncover the true history behind the incident, but in the end, it wasn't either of those urges that won out—it was his friendship with Erik.

Harve patted his friend on the back, a strained expression on his face.

"All right. But I'm not going back, either. If I spot Katiliana, I'll just get Leuticia to wipe my memory."

"From what I hear, memory manipulation is incredibly difficult. She'll probably be reluctant to use it."

"She's not His Majesty, so I'm sure she'll help me. More to the point, you can use my magical power if we stumble upon a powerful corpse, so I'm relying on you to take care of things."

"I'll try and deal with it on my own first. If that fails, we can always make a run

for it.”

“I have a sneaking suspicion that I’m going to come out of this with a phobia of dead bodies...”

The two mages exchanged hushed words as they walked through the expansive castle garden. Their conversation never veered anywhere near the events of four years prior—instead, it stayed firmly rooted in the present.



Shizuku was tied to the chair with a perfectly ordinary thin rope. She had begun subtly moving her wrists, creating just enough space for her to slip her hands through. It stung where her skin rubbed against the rope, but she wasn’t in any position to complain about that. She was almost there. If only she had some soapy water, she could have slipped free—but then again, soapy water would make her grazes sting like crazy.

She didn’t know when Dylguey might try to dispose of her, so she had to work quickly. Meanwhile, she was buying herself some time by chatting to him.

“I understand your view of things, but what does that have to do with Mea? I want you to set her free,” she demanded.

Dylguey frowned, as if she was ruining his fun.

“Mid-ranking demons are valuable sources of magical power—power needed for forbidden curses.”

“What?”

The way he’d said that made it sound as if Mea were a battery. When Shizuku took a closer look, she noticed that the birdcage Mea was locked inside had a crystal ball about the size of Shizuku’s palm in the top of it. It gave off a faint red glow that wasn’t just the reflection of a candle flame, and it reminded Shizuku of something she’d seen in Candela Castle. She clenched her teeth.

“The core of a forbidden curse...”

“Very well observed. Unfortunately, however, you’re powerless to do anything. Your companion will be the prime suspect—and you’re going to be the one setting the stage for that.”

Dylguey walked over to Shizuku, who was still on the floor. He looked down at her from directly above.

“Do you know what psychological magic is, young girl?”

“I’ve never heard of it. The name feels self-explanatory, though.”

“As you’d imagine, it’s a form of magic that’s able to control people’s minds.”

Realizing what was about to happen, Shizuku shuddered. If he was going to control her mind using magic, she’d become his puppet, just like the walking corpses. She wasn’t sure what he’d make her do, but she would’ve rather been pelted with stones.

She twisted her grazed wrists around, trying not to let him see.

“You’re the perfect choice. If you act strangely, nobody’s going to be that suspicious. Plus, it’s easy to manipulate people when the underlying emotions are already there.”

“...Underlying emotions?” Shizuku repeated, but all she heard was an incantation coming from above her.

A chill went down Shizuku’s spine. Dylguey had crouched beside her, and she thrust her unbound right leg up in the air and kicked him as hard as she could in the ankle. She must have got him in a good spot, because he yelled and fell onto his side.

Shizuku used the opportunity to pull as hard as she could on her hands.

“Ouch...!”

Her skin pulled back, sending a searing pain through her wrists, but she disregarded it and tried to free her right hand from the rope.

The very next moment, however, Dylguey grabbed Shizuku by the hair.

“Behave yourself, you feral cat!”

“Shut up, small-time crook! If you’ve got a problem with the king, then take him on yourself!”

“You...”

If he was going to cast some kind of weird spell on her, then Shizuku figured it

was better to make him angry. However, Dylguey didn't respond to her attempt to provoke him. He didn't say anything else, nor did he resort to violence. He ground his teeth together so hard that Shizuku could almost hear it, glowered at her, then spoke in a trembling voice.

"...You're just an oblivious young girl. As if someone like you would understand Lady Crestea's intentions."

"So you're saying you can't do anything without digging up the dead?!"

Shizuku pulled her right hand free from the rope, swiping out and digging her nails into Dylguey's face. The man screamed and jerked backward. Shizuku used that moment to writhe around, trying to tear her body away from the chair.

Suddenly, she heard the man anxiously begin to recite an incantation. Shizuku turned toward the birdcage and shouted.

"Mea!"

"Don't waste your breath. Both you and your assistant demon are disposable tools."

He grabbed her by the hair, lifted her up, then peered into her eyes. Like two mirrors facing each other, they imitated one another's expressions—and suddenly, something *entered* Shizuku.

It almost felt like something warm was touching her brain, and Shizuku had the unpleasant feeling of fingers shoving themselves inside her mind. She felt nauseated, still being held up by her hair.

Her thoughts were being invaded.

Her consciousness was being distorted.

Tremors ran through her entire body, making it convulse.

"No! Let me go! Let go! Get out!"

"It'll only hurt if you resist."

She couldn't hear the man properly.

All she could hear was her heart beating violently.

She had no sense of time, no sense of which way was up or down.

Refusal and denial echoed inside her like a curse.

A power entered her.

Pervasive,

rough,

yet bringing about a crude

transformation

in her mind
and soul,
changing,
lurking,
words,
memories,
—not allowed to sense them.

Unable to withstand the burden, Shizuku lost consciousness.

The last thing she heard before her mind went dark was the man's scream echoing off the stone floor.



"I didn't think you'd make peace with what happened otherwise."

Erik could remember Leuticia saying something like that after showing him the royal family's sealed records. She must have assumed that Erik was still frustrated with the suspicious way in which things had been handled four years earlier. He'd come to the castle immediately after the incident and explained everything that had happened, begging to be punished.

Yet Erik didn't even receive a reprimand, let alone any kind of punishment. He wasn't even deprived of his rights within the castle. It was obvious that Leuticia had had some say in how he'd been treated, but in the end, he'd decided for himself to give up his privileges and leave Farsas behind.

He wasn't angry at those in the castle, nor disappointed.

He just felt like he'd had enough. There was no reason for him to stay in the country any longer.

Now that he'd uncovered one more truth about the situation, another question came to mind:

Was there *really* a way to make peace with what had happened?



A warm breeze made the leaves rustle.

The stench in the air seemed to be slowly fading away, but Lars's nose felt numb, making it hard to tell. He held up his left hand and looked at the sky.

"Our family was supposedly full of beautiful women, but it's impossible to tell when they all decayed and turned into nothing but bones. It's no fun at all."

"Your Majesty..." The mage responded to the king's tactless remark with an inscrutable expression.

He couldn't come up with anything else to say to chastise the king, though, so he just decided to keep quiet and avert his gaze.

Initially, around ten of Lars's men had been accompanying him on his cleanup operation, but one by one, they'd been tasked with carrying away the captured corpses, causing their numbers to dwindle. Even Lars himself admitted that he didn't need that much help. In the end, just the mage who'd worked with the king for the longest had stayed behind to act as a liaison.

"I'm getting tired. This is the perfect time for a change of pace. I know... How about we come up with a name for this incident?" said the king.

"Perhaps we should wait until it's over..." the mage replied.

"Don't you think the best names are the ones that immediately tell you what they're about?"

"If the name is too long, then that'll cause problems."

"Oh. It's pretty hard to cut the name down, though. I guess I should put the word *corpse* in it, at least."

The king came to a stop, lost in serious thought. The mage shot his master a glance, as if he wanted to say something, but everyone knew there was no changing the king's mind once he had an idea in his head.

As Lars contemplated whether to include the era in the name of the incident, the mage kept an eye on the surrounding area.

The investigations into the first mausoleum were already complete. The core of the forbidden curse hadn't been found, but as the king had been informed earlier, it was likely that the culprit worked for him. It was unclear whether the perpetrator was still in the castle, but the search had not yet commenced—

retrieving the corpses took priority. Two hours since the first reports had come in, 80 percent of the dead bodies that were enshrined in the first and second mausoleums had been successfully recovered.

“It doesn’t sound like the disgraced King Dysral has been sighted yet, though...”

“I don’t want to go up against him. Hopefully, he goes to Truce and Azulia.”

“...”

Everyone in Farsas knew the name of the man responsible for decades of internal strife. This was a king who’d gone mad on the throne, led his army to destroy an innocent town, then sown the seeds of death and suspicion among his own relatives.

The disgraced king, who’d personally executed his dissenting subjects and ultimately carried out a massacre in the throne room of the castle, was said to have been killed by his brother, Rodeus. Rodeus, who subsequently ascended to the throne, died under mysterious circumstances just one year later, signaling the onset of a dark era for the Farsasian royal family.

“I mean, Dysral killed sixty-three people in that tragedy. At that point, you’re not even human anymore,” Lars argued.

“But you’re the current wielder of Akashia, are you not, Your Majesty? I’m sure you’d find a way to defeat him.”

“Why don’t we just dig a pit for him to fall into instead?”

“Your Majesty...”

The mage looked worried, but he couldn’t blame the king for not wanting to deal with them—these *were* corpses they were up against. There must have been a way to capture them without tackling them head-on. Lars pondered to himself as he looked around.

It wasn’t the king who noticed the figures at the far end of the garden, though, but his subject.

At first, he could only see the silhouettes of the two figures, but as they emerged from the darkness and walked into the moonlight, he was able to

make out their faces.

“Hey, you! Wait!” yelled the mage sternly as he began running toward them.

“Huh?” said Lars, tilting his head to one side and following behind at a more leisurely pace.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” the mage asked.

The two figures exchanged glances, but there was no point in wondering who he’d been talking to—the royal mage had addressed them both. If anything, though, the mage appeared more interested in questioning the foreigner, and he marched right up to Erik.

“Why are *you* here?! What happened to Leuticia?”

“I think she’s still in Candela,” Erik replied.

“Why did you come back, then? It must have been you!”

This was a predictable turn of events, and Harve went pale. “Wait,” he said, hurriedly positioning himself between them.

Between the mage reaching out for Erik and Harve’s intervention, the quiet night seemed like it was about to take a tumultuous turn, but Erik suddenly glanced over his shoulder as if he’d noticed something.

Lars followed his deep-blue eyes and glanced at the moonlit garden.

A dress of black lace.

Long silver hair that gave off a dull shine.

In the shadows, the profile of her downward-tilted face was too difficult to make out. Yet the sight of the red ribbon wrapped around her slender neck, fluttering gently in the breeze, was extraordinarily striking in itself.

Lars reached out and placed his hand on the shoulder of the mage, who looked like he wanted to start yelling at Erik at any moment. The king fixed his gaze not on his flustered vassal but on the foreign mage, and he posed a question to him.

“Did you do this?”

“No,” replied Erik.

“I see.”

Harve hadn't expected the exchange to end there—so when Lars asked the mage who was accompanying him to go back inside, he blinked in shock. Although the mage was equally stupefied by the king's order, he followed it nonetheless and left the scene.

Next, the king looked at Harve. “You've gone against my orders, too. You'll be receiving a salary cut.”

“F-forgive me, Your Majesty.”

“Well, whatever. I'd hate to leave a man out, so you're welcome to join us.”



The king's decision made Erik frown, but he didn't argue with it. He turned back around and started walking over to the lone woman.

His gait showed no hint of emotion—no regret, no animosity, nothing at all. He didn't even appear to hesitate.

Still, there was no way he was going to stop.

A faint sound could be heard as he walked across the grass, and directly ahead of Erik in the shadowy, moonlit garden, the woman in black fixed her green eyes firmly on him.



"Does that kind of spell exist?" Katiliana asked one day out of the blue.

They were at her residence, and Erik was sorting through the books she'd borrowed. He'd listened to the young girl describe—rather clumsily—the kind of spell she was curious about, then cocked his head to one side.

"Yeah, but it's a kind of forbidden curse. Why do you want to know?" said Erik.

"I was just a little curious. I mean, magical power is something you're born with, right? I was wondering how someone could increase it."

It was, of course, a simple thing to wonder. Erik thought to himself for a moment, then answered her.

"As far as I know, the spell involves a process where the spellcaster's soul is transformed and its limits expanded. Magical power is summoned and infused into the spellcaster, and the infusion process forcibly increases the individual's capacity for magic. There's nothing in the records about how much it hurts, but I imagine it's pretty painful. You might be able to increase your power, but there are limits—and if the transformation fails, you could suffer a mental breakdown or even die. There are plenty of examples like that."

"You could die?!"

"Yeah. If the spell wasn't dangerous, there would have been even more powerful mages during the Dark Age."

However, there hadn't been. The Dark Age was a time when many people had

attempted to use all kinds of forbidden curses in their quest for power, yet all that had been left behind was the idea that forbidden curses were not to be trifled with. This warning was, as history had proven, worth heeding.

Katiliana turned things over in her mind, a troubled expression across her face. Then, a few moments later, she asked a favor of Erik.

“Tell me what the spell configuration’s like.”

Erik found it odd that she’d taken an interest in such an unusual subject, but at the end of the day, she was a member of the royal family. Perhaps there was an aspect of Farsas’s history that interested her.

“The actual spell configuration is more complex than this,” Erik warned her before describing a simple version of the spell configuration on the spot.

His self-drawn spell diagrams wouldn’t get the message across, and besides, he had no intention of communicating the details in earnest. He expected her to forget what he’d told her almost immediately.

Yet the sight that Erik was met with when he returned to her residence just a few days later left him flabbergasted.

There in the courtyard was an extremely complicated spell configuration drawn on the ground—with three dead bodies piled on top of it.

In front of the grisly scene stood a girl, smiling.



“Katiliana.”

Erik stood in front of the woman and called out to her. There was no soul inside her body, but he called her by the name she’d used when she was alive, nonetheless. She tilted her head slightly to one side, as if she found this odd, and the red ribbon—proof that she was a criminal—swayed around her neck.

Her green eyes were the sole vestige of her former self. Childlike and crystal-clear, they stared unblinking at Erik.

How many secrets had she hidden behind that gaze?

At this point, Erik would never find out. Her soul was gone.

He gazed into her eyes, a remnant of the past.

Speechless, just as he'd been on that fateful day, Erik let out a deep sigh.

Harve stood frozen behind his friend, mouth agape, incapable of comprehending what was happening in front of his eyes.

Erik didn't seem very approachable at that moment—the king happened to be nearby, so Harve looked up at him in confusion.

“Y-Your Majesty, is that really...?”

“Yes. That's Katiliana. She's wearing the same clothes, isn't she?”

“But she looks so different... Didn't she have an anti-deterioration spell placed on her?”

“She did. It's customary.”

So why, then, did Katiliana look the way she did?

Confused, Harve took another look at the woman's corpse. Her hair, which had been deep brown, was now a translucent shade of silver. Her pale, dewy skin was cracked and covered in wrinkles, and her cheeks had caved in. She held out one of her gaunt, bony hands toward Erik.

“I-it's almost like...she's grown old.”

“She hasn't. She's just returned to her original form.”

As the woman reached out for Erik's neck, Lars unsheathed Akashia. She noticed the movement, and her expression shifted. She glowered at the kind.

“Now then, I advise you to keep your hands off that man and return to your casket, Katiliana.”

The tip of Akashia was pointed toward the dead woman.

“Or should I say, Great-Aunt Crestea?”

As the criminal's true name passed his lips, Lars took a fighting stance.

Harve froze at this abrupt revelation.

Crestea.

That was the name of Dysral's niece, the younger sister of the king before last. Lauded as the greatest mage in Farsas's decades of history, she had been

Katiliana's grandmother.

...Or at least that was what Harve had believed up until then.

"Huh? Katiliana...is Crestea?"

"They're the same person. Crestea never had any children. My father only called her that for the sake of convenience," the king explained begrudgingly.

Harve was the only one who seemed surprised by this admission. Erik remained just as composed as ever, though it was normal for his emotions not to show on his face.

Holding his breath, Harve glanced toward his friend.

The girl looked exactly as she had before yet, at the same time, completely different.

If this was her true form, then why had she been "Katiliana"?

Harve put a hand against his neck, feeling as if something heavy was stuck in his throat. Lars glanced at him, then calmly carried on.

"Crestea adored Dysral. Even after his death, she continued to stoke the flames of suspicion and doubt among the royal family and their key vassals. That is to say, she was the one pulling the strings behind the family's twenty-five years of infighting."

"What?! I-is that true?"

"Yeah. She was a natural-born agitator, adept at controlling people's hearts and minds—and she was a powerful mage, too. She enjoyed watching her relatives fight each other to the death. Some of them tried to take matters into their own hands, but she didn't let them find any proof. But then, her older brother—my grandfather—grew suspicious of her. How do you think Crestea got away when she saw her brother coming to question her, Akashia in hand?"

"I—I couldn't even begin to guess...," replied Harve.

"Well, it's simple. She sacrificed herself before she could be driven to confess and executed. She locked away her memories and her personality and adopted a completely ignorant persona. She became a different person entirely, and Crestea was locked away. As close as she was to being guilty, she wasn't the

same person who'd incited all that unrest."

Erik hadn't moved a muscle as the king was explaining this to Harve. It was impossible to tell whether those deep-blue eyes were fixed on Katiliana or Crestea. The only thing that *was* clear was the fact that the person standing before them was no longer just the corpse of a girl but a part of the royal family's dark underbelly.

"People suspected that her old self might eventually resurface, so she was kept in confinement, but not only did her former self not reappear, she also started to look younger. In fact, she stopped aging altogether. Unsure how long she could live in such a state, my father gave her another name and brought her out of the dungeon. I insisted that she should be executed, but my father argued that we couldn't hold her responsible for her crimes when she had no recollection of what she'd done and had a completely different mind. That was incredibly naive. Whether she had her memories or not, she was still the same person."

That young girl, a member of a royal family, had shown up out of the blue. Leuticia took good care of her, but Lars had treated her like she didn't even exist.

"Then...Katiliana was able to cast the forbidden curse because..."

"That's obvious. Crestea had been a master of forbidden curses, which is why I always maintained that Erik shouldn't shoulder any of the blame. He might have been guilty of teaching her the spell, but she would have been able to use it with or without him. And on top of that, *I* got the credit for getting rid of her."

Feeling completely drained, Harve wanted to sink down to the ground. He'd been completely unaware of this, and Erik likely had, too. Katiliana might have been a member of the royal family, but he'd also seen her as a cute, clumsy, normal young girl. The childlike smile she'd worn on her face as she anxiously followed Erik around never looked the slightest bit fake.

The version of Katiliana that stood before him looked like an old woman, and Harve almost wondered if the real Katiliana were still sleeping in her casket somewhere. An indescribable sense of unease pervaded his thoughts, and he pressed his fingers to his temples. He couldn't even bring himself to breathe;

the air around him smelled too foul.

Lars shifted his focus from Harve and his distress to Crestea. Her lifeless body moved gracefully, almost as if she were in a pantomime, and she extended a withered arm toward the young man before her.



He'd often held the girl's small hand and pulled her along.

Even when she was inside the castle, she never stopped nervously surveying her surroundings, almost as if she could never get comfortable there.

In truth, she seemed restless no matter where she was—and sometimes, he'd spot her staring intently into space.

How did she see herself, when she was so thoroughly cut off from her past?

This girl, who didn't even remember that she had no memories, was drifting alone.



Erik stared at her.

Her green eyes looked the same as they always had. Just like when she was alive, her gaze held a certain emptiness, reflecting the world around her. She stayed frozen to the spot, stretching her pale hand out toward him, as if begging for salvation.

Instead, Erik grabbed her by the wrist. Even with her enhanced strength, the elderly woman wasn't strong enough to fight back. Crestea used her other hand to try and pull him off, but he wouldn't let her. Giving up, she attempted to claw at his eye with her nails, but he instantly evaded her grasp by twisting her arm upward. Partially immobilized, Crestea let out an eerie groan, and Erik glanced at the king.

"Am I allowed to hurt her? If I get rid of this miasma, she'll stop moving."

"Go ahead. I was considering burning that corpse anyway—I wouldn't want anyone catching a glimpse of it."

"You might be better off sticking to that plan, then. To the discerning eye, the traces of the forbidden curse are plain to see."

“Is that right? We may as well burn her now, then. Harve, do the honors.”

“Me?!” shrieked Harve, stunned by the pair’s nonchalant exchange and caught off guard when the conversation suddenly turned to him.

Criminal or not, he couldn’t bear the thought of setting fire to a royal lady’s body. Desperate for help, he scanned his surroundings and locked eyes with Erik, who was still restraining Crestea.

“I’ll do it,” said Erik. “Let me use your magical power.”

“...Are you crazy?”

“It’s fine. She’s already dead.”

A corpse was just an object. Every mage knew that. Yet Erik had returned tonight specifically to see this woman. Harve couldn’t comprehend how his friend—who was now planning to set fire to her body—could stay detached from the situation.

Harve wanted to say something to Erik, but he couldn’t find the right words. He wished he could tell him that *he’d* take on the task instead.

But perhaps this was how Erik had decided to say farewell.

Harve’s shoulders slumped wearily, and he went to stand beside his friend. As he quietly began to recite a spell, he placed his hand on Erik’s shoulder and channeled unstructured magical power into him.

Harve felt as sad as if they’d been transported back four years in time. He knew that Katiliana wasn’t *really* Katiliana, but that didn’t change a thing. As he stood there with his eyes closed, he heard his friend begin to chant in the same profoundly gentle tone he used to use back when he doted on Katiliana like a young sister.



Erik still didn’t know what Katiliana had wanted, or whether he’d been able to give it to her. Nevertheless, he’d never be able to forget her smile—that joyful smile when she’d appreciatively taken the veil off him during their first encounter, and the sad smile she’d given him in her final moments.

He knew that the vision of her in her current state would be impossible to

wipe from his mind, too.

It was a reminder of the truth that would always remain elusive—the vestiges of Katiliana that he'd never been able to reach.

Channeling Harve's magical power, Erik composed a spell with the inside of Crestea's body at its center.

Casting such a spell on a living mage often proved unsuccessful due to the innate magical resistance they possessed, but Crestea no longer had any power to speak of. Erik formed an incendiary sublimation spell aimed at the remnants of the forbidden curse that had settled within her.

As Crestea thrashed around, Erik grabbed on to her arms and shoulders to restrain her. He knew that exerting any more force might break them, which made him slightly uncomfortable.

Once he'd finished composing the spell, Erik took a short breath. All he needed to do was trigger it, and this would all be over.

He glanced at Lars. The king gave him his nod of approval.

But at that very moment, a new voice echoed around the garden.

"Huh? Erik?"

It was a voice that nobody in the area had expected to hear, and the three men all looked in the direction it was coming from. Not knowing where she'd come from or when she'd arrived, they saw Shizuku standing there holding Harve's jacket. Erik's eyes widened in surprise.

"Hey. What's wrong?" he said.

"You're back in Farsas?!" Shizuku exclaimed. "...Oh, it looks like I showed up at an awkward moment."

"Perhaps. But it's dangerous over here, so I'd rather you went back inside."

Shizuku must have realized that Crestea was a corpse. Her expression stiffened, and she muttered an apology, bowing her head.

"Uh, I just wanted to give Harve his jacket back."

"You could have done that anytime."

Shizuku was wearing a dark-green robe over her pajamas and carried a neatly folded men's jacket. The hem of her robe was frayed and slightly dirty, as if she'd fallen over at some point.

Hesitating slightly, she hurried over to Harve and stood beside Erik. Just as she was trying to hand him the jacket, however, someone grabbed her collar from behind.

"Don't get in their way. Stand back for a moment."

"Let me go, Your Majesty!"

"Don't make a scene, you disruptive young girl. Close your eyes and cover your ears. Or even better, just stop breathing altogether."

"Now, that's an unreasonable demand!"

As soon as Lars released her from his grip, Shizuku slipped a hand inside the folded jacket, and Erik happened to lock eyes with her.

Her dark, somber gaze didn't reflect the moonlight. It was lifeless, like that of a puppet. They were Shizuku's eyes, yet they didn't belong to her at all.

Instantly realizing what was going on, he let go of Crestea.

Erik watched as Shizuku pulled her small hand out of the jacket, clutching a dagger, which gleamed dimly in the moonlight.

She was out of Lars's line of sight, so he couldn't see what she was doing.

Gracefully, she spun around.

"Shizuku!"

What was her wish?

Had Erik fulfilled it or rejected it?

Which of them had chosen to sin?

Whatever the answers might have been, it was all over now.

She thrust the dagger toward the king.

Lars managed to shove it away just in the nick of time, and Shizuku staggered. The dagger fell to the ground. The king placed his hand on the sheath of his

royal sword. Erik grabbed Shizuku's shoulder, and Crestea started running in the opposite direction.

For a moment, chaos took over.

The king swung his sword down toward Shizuku's head, aiming to bring that chaos to an end. It was a merciless strike, but Erik managed to push Shizuku out of harm's way, putting himself beneath the naked blade instead.

Akashia, however, would not stop. Harve stepped toward the king, but it was too late.

He expected the commotion to culminate in an outpouring of fresh blood—but instead, all that echoed through the bright night sky was the sound of two swords clashing against one another.

"Not bad," said Lars succinctly, repositioning his sword.

He looked down at the mage, who'd deflected the royal sword using the rapier he carried for self-defense.

Erik momentarily cast his gaze down at his own sword. He adjusted his grip; he wasn't going to put it away now.

"I'll cut her down this time. Get out of my way," the king said, unsmiling.

"I refuse," replied Erik.

"Sacrificing yourself to protect a criminal again? Did you not learn your lesson the first time?"

"I never sacrificed myself, and I never thought I was innocent, either. Right now, she's being controlled. I'm going to heal her."

Crestea was already out of sight. It was anyone's guess where she'd escaped to.

Shizuku stood firmly planted on the grass. Her body swayed gently from side to side, like it was billowing in the wind. She put her hand inside the dark-green robe and pulled out a glowing, crimson crystal ball, then lifted it up into the sky, revealing the cuts and grazes all over her hands.

Her eyes vacant, Shizuku parted her small lips and began to speak in an

emotionless voice.

““You may test, deceive, and trample upon any member of the bloodline whenever you see fit.””

It sounded like a cursed incantation—or a whispered proclamation of love. Her monotonous words made the color drain from Lars’s face, and the corners of the young king’s mouth turned upward.

“Ahh, an adherent of Crestea? You’ve got guts, I’ll give you that.”

““Your Majesty, the time for bloody retribution has arrived.””

There was a crunching sound of feet on grass, and another figure emerged under the glow of the moonlight. All eyes turned toward the silhouette, each person’s reaction changing.

The figure was clad in a criminal’s loose black robe with a dull silver breastplate over the top. Dragging a hefty two-handed sword behind him, the imposing man drew nearer one step at a time.

Lars took one look at the deep sword scar on his cheek, then muttered softly.

“The disgraced King Dysral. Well, I guess I was expecting you to show up.”

“Huh?!” Harve nearly shrieked—but Erik stayed silent.

Shizuku stood as motionless as a statue, gazing fixedly ahead of her. Her right hand hung limply by her side...still clutching on to the crystal ball.

Suddenly, Dysral dashed toward them.

Lars reacted immediately as the former king wordlessly attacked, intercepting the aggressor’s blade just before it shattered Harve’s skull. With a loud clang, the royal sword fended off the first assault.

Stepping forward before his subjects, Lars tutted.

“Don’t just stand there in a daze. He’ll split you in two.”

“F-forgive me...”

“And back me up if you can. If you can’t keep up, then give me some space.”

The king had retained his usual casual demeanor, but his tone was colder than

ice.

Dysral swung his sword forward at a terrifying speed, seemingly unconcerned by its weight, but Lars calmly parried it aside. The impact was not insignificant, and Lars furrowed his brow slightly, yet he didn't make a sound.

Staring down at his trembling legs, Harve took three steps back and began reciting a defensive incantation.

The distinct sounds of swords colliding resonated beneath the moonlight. Dysral was the most infamous king in the Farsasian royal family's long history. He was notorious for his acts of violence, but at the end of the day, it was his own strength that had enabled him to carry out these crimes. If it wasn't for this, he wouldn't have been able to turn on and slaughter so many members of his own family, whether he had Akashia or not. After all, plenty of them had been skilled swordsmen and mages in their own right.

His sword's thick blade cut into the defensive barrier that Lars had put in place, creating white fissures on its surface. Harve went pale.

"Your Majesty...! If we stay here—" Harve began, trying to warn the king of the danger they were in.

Dysral moved in a way that was unmistakably different from any of the other corpses. The forbidden curse had most likely been used to resurrect the disgraced king, while the other corpses had only been caught up in the spell.

Harve couldn't just leave the reigning king to face such a dangerous threat. He needed to act as bait to facilitate Lars's escape—and just as he was mentally preparing himself to give Lars an opening, the king spoke.

"Nah. If I can't beat him, no one can."

With that, Lars parried the sword that was hurtling down toward him once again. There was a grating screech as the king deflected its thick blade. Aided by the protective barrier, he blocked blow after blow. He usually kept the extent of his skills under wraps, but he was an extraordinary talent with the blade. Regardless, he couldn't keep it up forever when his undead opponent had endless stamina.

Dysral stumbled slightly, and Lars took the opportunity to swing Akashia

through the air in one big sweep. As the former king stepped back to dodge the blow, Lars called out to Erik behind him.

“So what now? Can I crush that girl into pieces?”

“...She’s not a mage. Once all the magical energy stored in the core has been used up, this will all come to an end.”

“That plan has too many uncertainties. I can’t endorse that.”

“Well, it’s a good thing I’m prepared.”

Erik raised his hand so the king could see what he was holding. It was the dagger that had fallen out of Shizuku’s hand earlier, and he showed the king its blade.

“I embedded a spell into this dagger. It’s a makeshift solution, but if you pierce him all the way to the core, it’ll act as a catalyst to reverse the forbidden curse.”

“Got it. Hand it over, then,” the king swiftly responded, making Harve flinch.

As Lars extended his left hand to grab the dagger, Dysral’s sword thrust toward him. The king used Akashia to push it away, but with only one hand on the sword, he wasn’t able to evade the blow entirely. Dysral’s blade grazed his shoulder, tearing flesh and sending out a spray of blood. Yet Lars was unfazed, and he used this as a chance to grab hold of the dagger.

Erik tapped Harve on his shoulder. “The former king is able to overpower a regular defense spell with sheer force—but I think his sword contains silver to help it work in harmony with the forbidden curse. Can you put together a silver manipulation spell?”

“I—I think so.”

“Combine it with the protective barrier spell. That way, you can control his sword when he comes into contact with the barrier.”

Erik made this sound easy, but combining two completely different kinds of spells was an extremely difficult task. Still, this was no time to argue, and Harve cast aside his hesitation and began reciting the incantation.

Dysral’s expression remained unchanged. He didn’t even make a sound. His

soulless body was nothing more than a corpse.

Yet his blade swung down with unwavering aggression.

The king intercepted the sword, holding Akashia in both hands.

There was another grating metallic sound, and as the two kings' swords pushed against one another, Harve cried out to Lars.

"Your Majesty! Let me erode away his sword!"

The next thing Lars knew, his body was being enveloped by a protective barrier. The barrier stretched out at either end, avoiding Akashia to come into contact with Dysral's large sword. The outline of the sword became unstable, and in that instant, Lars thrust forward with the royal sword.

Dysral lifted his hands slightly, and Lars took his left hand off the handle of the royal sword.

Letting out a sharp breath, Lars stepped in.

A blade shimmered in the moonlight.

The former king slowly looked down at the base of his neck, where the spell-infused dagger had been plunged deep.

"Gahhh...!"

Dysral's body recoiled sharply, and Erik shouted the incantation that was key to his plan.

The power of the forbidden curse began to flow out of his body.

It left the dead king's corpse and flooded back into the crystal ball that Shizuku was holding. The gleaming red orb shattered with an explosive boom.

Shizuku collapsed—and before she could even hit the ground, Lars cut down Dysral.

Sitting down on the grass, she stared in astonishment at her right hand covered in blood.

"Oh..."

"Shizuku."

Erik had run over to her, and as he took her by the hand, she looked up at him in a daze.

There was no light behind her eyes.

“It’s okay. Just kill me,” she whispered hoarsely.

Those were the words of a girl who was being controlled—they’d been Katiliana’s last words, too.

Erik grimaced. Harve gulped, seeing the pain in his friend’s face. And the king stared at the pair, indifferent.

Back then, Katiliana had slipped away from him. Everything had come to an end, leaving Erik completely in the dark.

But this was different. They hadn’t reached the end yet—not in any sense of the word. The road ahead still held endless possibilities.

Shizuku pressed her trembling hands to her temples, almost as if her head were hurting, and Erik picked her up in his arms.

“Erik. I told you...to...kill me.”

“I’m not going to.”

The girl shook her head in apparent pain. Erik stroked his cheek against her small head.

“Everything’s going to be okay. Just sleep for a while.”

He still had a little of Harve’s magical power left, so he used it to put together a sleep spell. Shizuku’s eyelids slowly lowered.

“I don’t want to die,” she whispered softly before drifting off to sleep.

Erik knew that was the truth—she didn’t need to tell him, and he repositioned her in his arms.

“I know,” he murmured.

He could hear people shouting in the distance. Something must have happened.

Lars momentarily glanced in the direction the noise was coming from, his eyes

darting around—but he soon brought his attention back to Erik and the unconscious girl in his arms. The mage shot the king an icy look.

With the royal sword still raised, the king took a step forward.

“Either you let me kill her, or you die together. It’s your choice.”

“I reject both of those options. You made me a promise the other day. You assured me that if you failed to justify your actions in a way that satisfied me, you wouldn’t have her killed.”



That was the compromise that Lars had offered Erik, who'd blamed him for allowing Shizuku to jump off the tower. More accurately, Leuticia had *forced* the king to offer a compromise.

Once the king had agreed to his side of the deal, Erik left Shizuku at the castle and focused on examining the documents and other jobs he'd been assigned. Farsas Castle might have been a dangerous place for Shizuku, but it was also where the biggest repository of magical knowledge could be found. If Shizuku wanted to return to her old world, Farsas was an important place that they couldn't afford to bypass.

However, even after thoroughly examining all the documents he could, Erik hadn't been able to uncover the truth behind the events of two hundred and forty years ago—and there were no other clues, either.

Just as Erik had begun to consider moving on from Farsas, the incident they were currently involved in occurred.

"She tried to kill me," the king said coolly, responding to Erik's clear refusal. "Do I need any more justification than that?"

"That's rich of you to say, considering you're constantly trying to make her resent you. Even so, she'd never try and kill someone just because they were winding her up. Just look at her wrists—you can tell that she was bound earlier. It's clear as day that she was a victim of mind control magic."

"Victim or not, she poses a high risk. I'd rest easier if she were disposed of."

"If you kill her now, you'll never find out who was behind tonight's incident."

At that, the king's desire to kill Shizuku weakened for the first time. Tilting his head to one side, he glanced at Erik.

"Are you implying I can obtain evidence from her?"

"From the outset, she was probably a pawn being manipulated to target you. If she presented herself as an assassin, you wouldn't hesitate to dispose of her. She was placed under direct mind control so that they wouldn't need to silence her. If we break the spell, she can tell you how they did it."

"I see. So they're sacrificing her to frame you as the mastermind behind the

forbidden curse.”

“Exactly.”

Erik looked at the girl in his arms.

If this was how things were going to end up, he should have left her behind and come to the castle by himself. At least then she wouldn’t have been used as someone’s pawn. The more authority someone had, the more intertwined and muddled their intentions became. He should have known that—both from history and from his own experiences.

Still, even if he’d suggested going at it alone, Shizuku wouldn’t have let him. She was the kind of person who hated burdening others with her own problems. It wasn’t her fault that she’d ended up in Erik’s world, and yet she carried the weight of her predicament on her own shoulders. She was lost and had no outlet for her frustrations—but she would still carry on searching for the next possible solution. That was just how Shizuku was.

Lars deftly turned his sword in his hand, its blade gleaming in the moonlight. As he inspected the sharpness of its blade, he asked Erik a question.

“What you’re saying is just a theory. There’s still the possibility that you and she are the ringleaders. Wouldn’t I be saving myself a lot of trouble if I just got rid of all those ‘what-ifs’ right now?”

“Are you planning to purge any possible threat now?”

Erik’s austere response made Lars snort with laughter as he raised his arm, pointing his sword in the pair’s direction.

“What do you think you’re doing, you idiot?!” exclaimed a new voice.

Just then someone emerged from behind Lars, pushing him and making him lose his balance. He stumbled a few steps backward, struggling to keep upright.

Thanks to a bit of teleportation magic, Leuticia now stood among them.

“...Lettie.”

“What do you think you’re doing? You’re supposed to be retrieving all the bodies! Why are you tormenting Shizuku again?!”

“It’s her fault,” the king replied petulantly. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

His younger sister puffed out her cheeks in anger, and Lars casually raised his hands.

“Why are you even here, Lettie?” he asked. “Staying up late is bad for your skin.”

“Azulia came to me, distraught that you’d disappeared when there were still so many corpses around! And on top of that, Erik was suddenly nowhere to be found, so I hurried back... I thought you said you were done with that girl!”

“More like you *made* me say that.”

“Just get back to work!”

Leuticia’s lecture had Lars on the back foot. He sheathed his sword and waved his hand in Erik’s direction.

“Whatever. I’ll leave it there for today. Just make sure you deal with Crestea properly. That’s my condition for letting you off the hook.”

“Fine.”

Erik gave Shizuku’s body to Harve. Leuticia used teleportation to summon a blanket to cover Dysral’s body, and her brother lifted the former king up onto his shoulder before the two royals teleported away.

Silence descended once more, and Erik picked up the dagger, still lying on the grass. Harve, who’d been quietly watching the situation play out, turned to his friend with concern.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. You should head back without me.”

Erik slipped away into the shadows of the garden, following after the woman’s corpse.

Harve kept looking over his shoulder as he made his way back to the castle. Fifteen minutes later, he spotted flames rising in the garden through the hallway window. Unable to bear the sight, he closed his eyes.



In the dream, she was asleep.

She slept with a book as her pillow.

No books would open now. She wouldn't get a glimpse into that secret history.

She slept inside the dream—for it was a locked cage, which urged her to let go forever of the memories she had lost.



When Shizuku woke up, she saw Erik reading a book by her bedside. Mea, back in her bird form, was perched on his knee. After thoroughly rubbing her eyes to make sure it was really him, she hastily sat up.

"Erik! You're back!"

"...I knew you wouldn't remember."

"Remember what?"

Shizuku cocked her head to one side in confusion, but Erik just gave her a wry smile and said, "Nice to see you back."

His expression was a reassuringly familiar one.

All this time, Shizuku had constantly been on edge to some extent, desperate not to show weakness or arouse suspicion—but now that Erik was around, it felt like a distant memory. Shizuku smiled with relief.

"Are you finished with your work? Hang on, where am I? Was all that a dream?"

"I'm not sure what you mean by 'all that,' but this is the healing room in the castle."

"Healing?"

"Yep. You were a victim of psychological magic. Do you remember who used it on you?"

It sounded more like Erik was simply asking for confirmation rather than genuinely seeking an answer.

Shizuku frowned at the unfamiliar term. Her thoughts weren't entirely clear,

but if Erik was claiming that something had happened, that must have been the truth. She closed her eyes, desperately trying to dredge up her memories from the previous night.

“Oh... There was...a skeleton walking in the garden.”

“Good.”

“Then...I met the king’s mother and returned to my room... Aaaaaarghhh! That small-time crook!”

Having recovered her memories, Shizuku tightened her fists with such force that she was ready to jump up on the bed. Now that her memory had been jogged, she recalled Dylguey telling her he was going to use psychological magic on her, and her anger was so strong, it made her body temperature rise.

“Th-that makes me so mad! I’m so angry! Where is he now? Dylguey!”

“If it’s Dylguey you’re after, he’s already been imprisoned. It sounds like they’re having trouble getting a statement from him, though.”

Erik placed a piece of paper on top of his book and wrote something on it. He’d scrawled down the text in something resembling cursive handwriting, so Shizuku couldn’t even make out the words. Yet that didn’t really bother her. She was mostly just angry at the mage who’d tried to control her mind. She hurled her duvet to the side in rage.

“Dodging their questions, is he?! I’m going to go and give him a piece of my mind!”

“You can try, but he won’t hear you. Dylguey’s in a state of mental collapse.”

“Did he do that to himself?! ...Why would he do that?”

Erik seemed as unruffled as ever, yet his explanation made Shizuku—about to take off at a run—stop in her tracks. When she eventually calmed down, she turned back toward Erik, who was leaning tiredly back in his chair. What had happened that Shizuku was having trouble remembering? It was already broad daylight outside.

“Dylguey probably made a mistake when he cast that spell on you, causing his own mind to collapse. He’s the prime suspect for this incident, but it’s

impossible to get any kind of testimony out of him, so they wanted you to give a statement instead, once you woke up.”

Shizuku stared at Erik, but he just shrugged his shoulders and scratched at his temples with the end of a pen.

By the time all the corpses in the castle had been recovered, it was already starting to get light.

While the king was busy dealing with the aftermath of the incident, Leuticia had healed Shizuku’s wounds and sent people to look for Dylguy, who they eventually found sitting on the floor of his research lab. By that point, Dylguy had already suffered a mental breakdown. He was mumbling something to himself, but none of the words made any sense. Regardless, the way that Shizuku’s assistant demon had been lying unconscious in the room and the unique way in which the spell on Shizuku had been configured led Leuticia to conclude that Dylguy was indeed the man behind Shizuku’s abduction, at the very least.

Leuticia had arrived after hearing Shizuku had woken up, and she let out a soft sigh.

“I don’t believe that Dylguy acted alone in casting the forbidden curse that animated the corpses, though,” she said. “He didn’t have permission to view those spell documents, and besides, he’s never even left the castle city.”

The king’s younger sister gracefully tilted her head to one side. Having come to check on Shizuku, Leuticia was now questioning her about the incident.

“Shizuku, did you see anyone with Dylguy inside the castle grounds?”

“Only from behind. He was a young man, tall, dressed entirely in black. I think...I might have seen him in the castle city once before. He was watching me and the king from the square when we went to inspect at the bell tower.”

“What did his face look like?”

“At the time, he was too far away for me to make out anything... But for some reason, I felt like we made eye contact.”

It was rather unsettling that she’d felt that way, considering she hadn’t even

been able to discern his face from that distance.

As Leuticia was mulling over this with a puzzled expression on her face, she looked over her shoulder at the mage behind her, who'd been jotting down the evidence. This man was a total stranger to Shizuku, and he offered the king's younger sister his notes. She reviewed what he'd written, then nodded.

"Thanks. I might come and ask you some more questions another time. I feel bad bothering you so much..."

"Don't be ridiculous! I appreciate everything that you've done for me! I'm just sorry I can't remember more of what happened... I can't even remember how I got out of that room..."

"It's understandable. That's just the way that psychological magic is. No—I'm the one who should apologize for my stupid brother's stubborn behavior. I'm truly sorry about that."

"...It's fine."

Lars's own sister might have called him stupid, but that still didn't give Shizuku an excuse to join in with the insults. Although Shizuku had plenty of opinions on Lars's behavior, she averted her gaze and changed the subject. After all, she couldn't even remember what had happened the night before.

"Is your work in Candela finished?" Shizuku asked.

"More or less. I'm going to be able to spend more time over here now, so if you need anything, all you need to do is ask."

Leuticia flashed Shizuku a brilliant smile, then left the room, accompanied by her subordinate. Still somewhat dazed, Shizuku shook her head as she watched the woman walk away.

Erik returned shortly after the king's younger sister had left, almost as if it were coordinated. He was no longer holding the book he'd left with; instead, he carried a pot of tea and a bag of pastries.

"You done?"

"For now," Shizuku replied. "She said she might come back to ask me some more questions."

“Things are going to be chaotic for a while. It’ll take a lot of work, putting all the bodies back in their proper places and whatnot.”

They quickly tidied up the table and started drinking the tea that Erik had brought. Shizuku didn’t have much of an appetite, but the warm tea made her feel human again. She bowed her head at him.

“I hardly know what to say... I’m sorry for dragging you into all this trouble after you made the effort to bring me here.”

Shizuku wasn’t totally sure what had happened the previous night, but she’d heard that Erik had been scolded for acting without permission. Since she’d dragged Erik to Farsas, not only had he been forced to work, but he’d even come close to being framed for Dylguy’s crimes, and Shizuku felt extremely guilty for everything that had happened.

She bowed so deeply that her forehead met the table, but Erik simply gave her an awkward smile. He offered her a pastry, trying to get her to look up.

“Coming to Farsas was partly my decision, so I don’t really have anything to complain about. And besides, I’m grateful you gave me a reason to come back here. If it wasn’t for you, I probably never would have returned.”

“R...really?”

“Yeah. Did anyone tell you about my past?”

Shizuku made a noise—that was a difficult question to answer, and any words got stuck in her throat. Still, that response was still an obvious yes, though Erik didn’t seem surprised in the slightest.

“Don’t feel bad about it. My story’s common knowledge. If anything, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“N-no need to apologize. I mean, it’s not like I’ve told you everything about my past, either.”

No matter how interested she was, that didn’t give Shizuku the right to pry too deeply into his past. She’d ended up hearing much of his story already, but she had no intention of dragging any more information out of him.

As Shizuku nibbled on one of the pastries Erik had brought her, she gazed at

the young mage, her expression filled with restless unease. His face, however, made her feel as if four years really had gone by.

It had been a while since Shizuku had last seen Erik. In a sense, he was just the same as always, but something was different about him, too. Unable to identify what that was, Shizuku stared at his profile, her head cocked to one side.

He must have noticed, because he stopped staring out of the window and turned to her. When their eyes met, Shizuku felt so uncomfortable that she almost choked.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing.”

It wasn’t as if Shizuku could say, “Something seemed odd, so I was staring at you.” She coughed in an attempt to smooth over the awkwardness, but Erik sighed, then tapped his fingers on the table in an effort to lighten the mood.

Once he’d got her attention, he gave her a bittersweet smile.

“Hey...do you want to hear the true story?”

“About what?”

“About the girl I used to work for.”

Shizuku already knew her name—Katiliana—and that she was no longer around. Shizuku looked back into Erik’s deep-blue eyes, then silently nodded. A subtle smile spread over his face.

“If I had to describe her in one word, it would be *faltering*. She was clumsy and was unable to truly rely on other people. She always seemed fidgety and anxious. And she was so eager to know how other people felt that it just made everyone suspicious of her.”

Shizuku felt like she could relate to about half of what Erik was saying. Still, she kept quiet and listened carefully to his story.

“I think it was just a coincidence that she chose to hire me. We were about the same age at the time, so that must have put her at ease. Thanks to her, I was able to widen my field of study—and being the kind of person I am, I was grateful for that. Plus, she was like the younger sister I never had.”

Allegedly, various vulgar rumors about Erik and Katiliana's relationship had circulated at the time. When Dylguey had mentioned that, she'd found it hard to reconcile with the mental image she had of Erik.

"I studied in Farsas for a little over three years. It was good for me and helped me build some confidence, but over time, I stopped paying her any extra attention. Since she didn't have many other people who she was close to, she was lonely—though back then, I didn't realize how she felt. She hadn't been up front about it, either."

That was something that often happened among family members. People took the ones close to them for granted and neglected to pay them enough attention. Only after those neglected people were gone did their families remember how precious they had been.

"Katiliana...gradually stopped coming to the castle and started shutting herself away inside her residence instead. She told me she'd disturb my research by asking stupid questions and having me act as her bodyguard."

"Her bodyguard?" Shizuku repeated. This notion struck her as a little odd, and Erik awkwardly nodded.

"Katiliana was a member of the royal family—and she was shy, too. Since I was constantly by her side, I had to double as her bodyguard. Most combat magic is beyond my capabilities, so I learned how to use a sword. At the time, that was my only pursuit that wasn't magic-related."

"Whoa. Does that mean you're a good swordsman?"

"I'm pretty bad, actually. About all I can do is defend myself."

"Huh... I had no idea."

It was true that Erik rarely carried a sword with him. Perhaps he was as bad at using it as he claimed.

Now that Shizuku's questions about that particular tangent were resolved, she urged him to continue.

"Sorry. Please, go on."

Erik obliged, gazing into his teacup. The pink liquid inside it was perfectly still.

“The incident occurred shortly after three years had gone by. One day, Katiliana asked me if there was a spell that could increase how much magical power someone had. There was, but it was a forbidden curse—so I explained that to her. I even told her that, in some cases, it could kill the spellcaster, but then she asked me specifically how the spell was structured.”

Shizuku felt nervous and gulped. If Dylguey’s version of the story was correct, that had been the question that triggered the tragedy.

“I did wonder why she was asking me that, but I was so earnest. I came up with a simple spell that even she’d be able to handle and taught it to her.”

“You did?!”

“Yeah. I taught her a spell for growing medicinal plants.”

“...Huh?”

Shizuku’s stupid-sounding exclamation made Erik smile—but it was the kind of wistful smile that evoked a sense of loss in those who saw it. He turned his deep-blue eyes toward the window and gazed outside. Faint clouds drifted slowly across the pale-blue sky.

“I pretended it was a forbidden curse, but it was really a spell to grow flowers. My plan was to give her a firm scolding if she tried it out, then praise her for what she’d achieved afterward. Even if she was angry initially, I thought the flowers would cheer her up once they bloomed. But things didn’t work out that way...”

Shizuku knew how the tragedy ended, and she bit her lip at the thought of what came next.

“But the spell that she assembled was the *real* forbidden curse. I’d been returning from the castle when I decided to wander over and see how she was doing, and what I found was horrific. Certainly no flowers blooming in the garden. And then she smiled at me and asked if I was pleased.”

“...”

“At that stage, I was confident in the knowledge I’d acquired, and I felt like I could do everything by myself. So when I saw the vast amount of magic that

was pouring into the garden from the forbidden curse, I thought I could find a way of dealing with it, but I was naive to think that magic brought about by human sacrifice would be so easy to control. I stupidly interfered with the spell and almost got dragged into it myself.”

Erik was telling Shizuku what he’d seen with his own eyes. Four years after the events had unfolded, she was getting to hear the truth.

Erik reflected on his past actions with a lasting sense of bitterness. Every now and then, he found himself glancing back at the dark shadow that constantly lingered behind him.

“It was Katiliana who stopped me from being swallowed up by the forbidden curse. She gathered together the magical power she’d created and asked me one more time whether I was pleased. So I told her that I wasn’t. As soon as she heard my answer, she absorbed the magic into herself...then, with a smile, asked me to kill her.”

Erik let out a thin sigh.

Shizuku sensed that there were some emotions lurking beneath the surface that Erik hadn’t voiced, and her heart silently ached. There were feelings swirling beneath the surface of his dispassionate account that went beyond regret. They’d showed themselves intermittently throughout the conversation before fading away again.

“After she absorbed the forbidden curse, I killed her and stopped the curse from spreading, then went to the castle to report what happened. When I told them I’d killed Katiliana, they asked me whether I was the one who taught her the forbidden curse—and I said yes.”

Shizuku hadn’t heard that part of the story. Taken aback, she asked Erik a question.

“You didn’t tell them the truth?”

“No. To be honest, I was disappointed in myself at the time. From an outsider’s perspective, I’d murdered a member of the royal family. I thought execution would be an appropriate punishment.”

“But, Erik...”

“No—I wasn’t held accountable for the crime. That was only because it was convenient for the castle, though. I was still guilty. She was the one who’d hired me, so it felt wrong for me to turn my back on her and stay behind. That’s why I left Farsas and returned to my previous studies. As I said earlier, if it weren’t for you, I probably wouldn’t have come here at all.”

Erik picked up his teacup. It was still more than half full, but it must have already gone cold. He took a sip anyway.

“That’s where the story ends. This is the first time I’ve told anyone the truth, so it feels kind of weird.”

Then he laughed. Erik didn’t look the least bit happy, but Shizuku did get the impression that he felt a little lighter.

Erik had confessed to killing someone, and yet Shizuku wasn’t scared or disgusted by his admission—likely because she had no way of knowing how either of them had felt at the time. She probably never would. She’d never feel their sorrow or anger. Now that the wounds had somewhat healed, she could only rely on the sentiments that remained now—along with the accounts she’d heard from others—to help her piece the past together.

Just like the number of footprints scattered across the world, there were as many versions of the truth as there were individuals.

Shizuku, having grazed the surface of the story, saw Erik moving forward, so she began walking ahead, too.

The silence felt long, yet Shizuku directed her clear gaze toward the young man, as if there’d been no pause at all.

“Um... Thank you for telling me that,” she said.

“No worries. I realize it’s a lot, but I thought you deserved to know. I’m a criminal, and there’ll be no erasing that fact for the rest of my life. I’m entirely responsible for the way things ended up. Other people in this country would probably speak about Katiliana in a different way, but from my perspective, she’s the reason I am the person I am today. I’ll always be grateful for that.”

“Yeah.”

Shizuku could tell that this was how he truly felt. It was over now—so all Erik could do was reflect, hold on to his memories, and remain grateful.

Erik glanced at Shizuku, who gave him a slight nod, and he smiled.

“Also...try not to push yourself too hard,” he said. “If things get tough for you, I’d appreciate it if you told me.”

Shizuku’s eyes widened slightly. She wasn’t sure what to say, so she just laughed instead. Her reaction, however, simply brought a wry smile to Erik’s face, and he didn’t say anything else.

The subtle aroma of the tea and Shizuku’s laughter drifted out through the gap in the window. They were carried away by the breeze, where they dispersed beneath the sunlight and gently drifted down onto the flowers blooming in the garden.



The spacious room was filled with the scent of burning incense, which made one’s mind hazier with every breath. Both the furniture—all matching in crimson—and the decorations that adorned the pillars and walls were elegant, but they gave off a menacing feel at the same time. All the decor was tailored to the tastes of the woman who lived there, and it suited her aura perfectly.

The woman reclined on her bed, fine silk wrapped around her arms and legs. Once she’d finished listening to the story, she yawned behind her folding fan and glanced at the kneeling man out of the corner of her eye.

“Oh. The corpses of the royal family were walking around the castle grounds, you say? That must have been a sight to behold. I’m inclined to grant a reward to these zealots for stirring up trouble in Farsas.”

“It seems the mage responsible for the affair made a mistake casting a spell and suffered a mental breakdown... However, the forbidden curse itself was conveyed by a different individual altogether—likely the same person who was involved in the Candela Castle incident.”

“*That* incident, huh? So there’s an interesting individual roaming around teaching people forbidden curses. Regardless, both of these incidents are mere brushes with fire. Real fun takes time.”

She was in a good mood today. The belly of the woman she was looking after was growing steadily rounder, and being unfamiliar with pregnancy herself, she celebrated with childlike excitement whenever she got an update on the woman's progress.

"When that child is born, Farsas will be thrown into a panic," she said, her voice filled with delight. "We're talking about a direct descendant of the royal family that's not supposed to exist."

The gray-haired man kept his head bowed as she spoke.

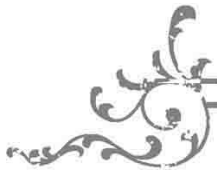
The princess smiled and closed her fan.

"There's still time, but we also need to discuss that epidemic. Let me know if Farsas is close to finding a cure... Yet you're the dullard who couldn't even find the princess of Anneli. I'll get Faneet to accompany you."

"Understood."

There, in that room, the woman's beautiful, poison-tinged voice marked the beginning of a silly little game. Once again, the curtains slowly drew back on a playground stage, for an act that would never make it into the history books.

4. Hidden Hands



“How about we leave this castle?” Erik asked Shizuku.

It had been one week since the incident, and they’d finally finished compiling their written testimonies. Shizuku, who’d been cleaning around the place to fill the time, stared back at him.

“You want to leave?”

“Yeah. I’ve more or less finished going through the records, but there hasn’t been any useful information. Besides, it’s dangerous here. I’m sorry for bringing you all this way. Let’s try Gandona next.”

Gandona was a large nation that bordered Farsas. Erik explained that the region in which the incidents had occurred two hundred and forty years earlier was currently part of Gandona, and that Gandona was on par with Farsas in terms of age. It was also home to advanced magical technologies and an abundance of records.

“Okay.” Shizuku nodded. “...But will we be able to leave the country? Leuticia might give us the okay, but I’m not so sure about the king.”

“I’m sure we’ll work something out. I doubt he has that much time on his hands right now anyway.”

Hoping that Erik was right, Shizuku packed her things that very night. It didn’t take her long; since arriving in this new world, she’d had to make numerous hasty departures, so she always kept her luggage to a minimum.

However, despite being ready to go, the pair did not leave the castle the following day. Before they had the chance, they were unexpectedly summoned by Lars and Leuticia.

The pair were guided into one of the halls deep within the castle, where the royal siblings were already waiting for them. They were seated apart from one another, and Leuticia encouraged Erik and Shizuku to take a seat, too.

“I’m sorry for calling you here on such short notice. To be honest, we had planned on doing this at an earlier date, but then...well, everything happened,” the king’s younger sister said with a strained smile.

Shizuku remembered back to the day of the incident, when Lars had told her there was something he wanted to discuss the following day. After that, it seemed like the matter had been brushed to the side, but now that the incident had been dealt with, the opportunity to discuss it had finally come back around.

Leuticia glanced toward Lars, and the king turned his gaze on Erik and Shizuku. There was no warmth in his eyes, just like during their initial meeting.

“I don’t want to drag this conversation out, so I’ll start by sharing my conclusion. Regarding those cases from two hundred and forty years ago that you’re both so interested in, it would be impossible for you to return home using that same method.”

“Huh?” Shizuku replied, unintentionally raising her voice.

She turned toward Erik, who was seated beside her. He, too, was visibly surprised.

The king had been wanting to do away with Shizuku ever since she’d arrived in Farsas. She was astonished, and he was staring at her intensely. She felt uncomfortable, as if she was being monitored, and it was plain to see that she had yet to gain his trust.

Erik replied to the king’s statement with a question of his own.

“What do you mean, impossible? How much does Farsas know about the case?”

“Almost everything. That’s why I know it would be impossible.”

Lars took his eyes off Shizuku for a moment, and his usual annoyed expression returned as he recrossed his legs.

“The string of cases in question was brought about by a powerful cursed

artifact, which was destroyed at that time.”

“Is that why it came to a sudden halt?”

“Yes. There’s only one cursed artifact like it in the world, but it’s no longer usable.”

Shizuku leaned back in her chair, feeling discouraged by this straightforward conclusion. Her arrival in this world had been unprecedented—and her only clue as to how she could return was this similarly unprecedented series of events. Yet the king now claimed that the cursed artifact behind it no longer existed. Unsure where to go or what to do next, Shizuku felt the darkness closing in around her.

Her companion, however, was far more coolheaded than she was, and he posed another question.

“Do you know where that cursed artifact came from?”

“I do—but it wasn’t Farsas that made it.”

“Are there any other artifacts like it?”

“Apparently, there are. I don’t know where to find them or what kind of effects they have, though.”

Shizuku felt like they were clutching at straws. She glanced at Erik’s face from beside him and gulped.

Could she dare to hope that another cursed artifact might help her, even if its whereabouts were unknown? There was no kind of magic that could transport someone from one world to another—Erik had told her that from the very beginning—so she’d had no choice but to pin her hopes on this unexplained phenomenon.

As the mystery began to unravel, Shizuku couldn’t determine whether she should continue to hold on to that hope or accept that they’d reached a dead end.

Erik glanced at her troubled expression, then continued his exchange with the king.

“Could you tell us where that cursed artifact came from?”

Lars's blue eyes narrowed. He didn't respond right away—most likely because he didn't actually want to. Erik must have suspected that was the case, so he changed his line of inquiry.

“Why was the information about the witch in the book altered?”

“You don't hold back, do you?”

“No less than you.”

The blatant disdain in Erik's words elicited a smile from the king. Still, it didn't look like Erik had hurt his feelings.

Erik showed no signs of backing off, either, instead voicing the suspicion he'd once shared with Shizuku.

“Was that witch, Fystoria, the older sister of the king at the time?”

“No. If that were the case, we wouldn't have altered the text afterward—we never would've written about it in the first place.”

Lars made a good point, but the question of why the text had been altered remained unanswered.

Still suspicious, Shizuku furrowed her brow, and the king gave her another intent stare. She didn't know why, but there was something else that scared her more than her concern about not knowing the truth. She wanted to jump to her feet and run away, but she didn't even know what she should be running from.

Shizuku suppressed her trembling nerves and locked eyes with the king, relying solely on her willpower to keep herself from faltering. Lars raised his eyebrows slightly, then directed a question at her.

“Remember that question I asked you before? ‘What would you do if something was controlling you and watching your life without your knowledge?’”

“...Yeah.”

He'd asked Shizuku that just before the forbidden curse incident. She'd found it a strange question but still told him that it would anger her.

“If I told you that something just like that was currently happening here on

the continent, would you believe me?”

“Huh?”

“Not just right now, in fact—it’s been going on for a long time.”

Lars interlocked his fingers and rested them on his knee. Shizuku thought she saw him let out a noiseless sigh.

“Simply put, what I alluded to is actually happening. Someone is using this continent as a testing ground for their own experiments. The beings from outside our world who toy with our people and keep records of them are collectively referred to as ‘interlopers.’”

The king’s words were delivered in a casual tone of voice, yet they made such an impact on Erik and Shizuku that they couldn’t bring themselves to reply right away. A paralyzing silence ensued.

After a considerable number of seconds had gone by, Erik followed up with a question.

“Beings from outside of this world? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s exactly how it sounds. They’re not from our world. And I have proof—their cursed artifacts wield powers that defy our established conventions.”

“They do?”

“They have the power to create replicas of humans, to separate the mind from the body, to interfere with time, and to bring human memories to life. All of those abilities violate the laws of magic and are impossible for humans to achieve.”

To Shizuku, all of those just sounded like examples of magic; however, judging by the stony expression on Erik’s face, they were evidently abnormal powers. It was impossible for magic to turn back time, let alone turn a person’s past into reality.

Lars said that these interlopers had the power to bring human memories to life, so did that mean—?

“So were these otherworldly beings involved in what happened two hundred and forty years ago?”

“Yes. Now that the cursed artifact is gone, there’s nothing we can do. Magic used by humans is supposed to adhere to certain laws, right?”

“Correct,” said Leuticia, now that she was a part of the conversation. If one of the best mages in the world agreed, then these otherworldly beings’ powers must be truly abnormal.

Shizuku was half satisfied with his explanation, but she’d realized something else at the same time.

She already knew why Lars was suspicious of her and had tried to kill her. Leuticia had explained it to her.

“You’re not the only one who’s come from elsewhere. There are meddlers who’ve come here from outside this world—and there’s a legend that says that the royal family of Farsas must be the ones to eliminate them.”

It must have been those “meddlers” who were watching them.

These were observers who’d trampled over humanity’s pride and turned the world into their own personal playground—abnormal foreign entities who had snuck their way in.

“So you think...that I’ve come from another world to experiment on the people here using strange powers?” Shizuku asked, her voice quivering.

Three sets of eyes were directed toward her, but the quiet, unbridled fire in the king’s eyes was the only answer Shizuku needed to tell her she was right.

When Shizuku had had her first audience with Lars, he’d asked her whether she’d come to see if “that” really was broken. At the time, she hadn’t known what he meant, but now she realized that he’d been asking if she was there to make sure the cursed artifact had been destroyed.

She wanted to tell him that he was making an incredible mistake, but she knew that she was in a difficult position. It was far more difficult to prove that she *wasn’t* a meddling outsider than the other way around.

Shizuku might have been a human with no special powers, but if they accused her of simply *pretending* to be a powerless human, there wasn’t a lot she could do about it. That must have been why Lars had been trying to test her both

mentally and physically.

She'd shown that there was nothing strange about her, but it was clear that Lars still wasn't satisfied with the results. How would she be able to get through to him?

As Shizuku puzzled over this, Erik tapped her lightly on the shoulder. He gave Lars a cold look.

"This is ludicrous. You must know that she possesses no such powers. First of all, she'd have no reason to visit this castle if she were one of them. She'd be able to get home using her own abilities."

"I tried to tell him that, too," said Leuticia.

"She might have come here to steal Akashia. This sword is the only weapon capable of countering the cursed artifacts that these outsiders bring in."

"...If that were the case, I would have tried to grab the sword *before* you pushed me into the moat," Shizuku muttered softly.

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet, and the atmosphere between the two siblings seemed particularly frosty. Erik silently began to rise to his feet, but Shizuku hurriedly stopped him. Meanwhile, Leuticia shouted fiercely at her brother.

"You idiot! What were you thinking?!"

"I made sure to help her out. I mean, she's still alive, isn't she?"

"You aren't absolved just because she survived! Don't you have any respect for other people's lives?"

"I do—but I don't believe they're of equal importance."

Lars casually waved it off, trying to get his sister to back down. She knew her brother wasn't joking or trying to avoid the question, which was probably the only reason she went quiet.

Lars didn't look at his sister's distrustful gaze or meet Erik's icy glare. Instead, he turned toward Shizuku, who had already inhaled for a deep sigh, and began to speak.

“My family are more important to me than anyone else. I can’t declare that publicly, nor do my actions always adhere to that principle, but that’s still my personal view. And as a king...I prioritize my own countrymen over outsiders, even if they have the same skills or nature.”

As an older brother, and as a king, he didn’t view people as equals. He didn’t treat them as equals, either.

Shizuku understood full well what Lars was trying to say. Rather than letting out a sigh, she surmised what he was attempting to express.

“People from your own world are more important to you than a suspicious outsider. That’s what you’re trying to say, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Am I wrong for feeling that way?”

“No.”

Shizuku couldn’t say that he was wrong. It was natural for a king—someone whose job was to “eliminate anomalies”—to take such a stance. He had a role to play.

That meant that he had people to protect and enemies he couldn’t leave at large.

However, Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to surrender, either. She might have seemed suspicious, but that didn’t mean she should be killed for something she had no knowledge of.

All this meant that Shizuku and Lars would remain at a constant stalemate. Shizuku had had a sneaking suspicion they would end up like this, and she tiredly scrunched up her forehead. With no further clues that could help her return home, she’d reached a dead end—and there was nothing she could do about it.

Shizuku’s shoulders slumped.

Why had she ended up in this world? That initial question resurfaced in her mind once again.

The silence was eventually broken by Erik’s voice, which was even icier than before. He turned to the two members of the royal family and brought the

conversation back on track.

“So why was the information about the incidents two hundred and forty years ago—when the cursed artifact was destroyed—and the very existence of these beings you call ‘interlopers’ concealed? Also, you still haven’t answered my previous question about why the record of the witch was removed.”

“You really are persistent, aren’t you? I’ve just disclosed one of the Farsasian royal family’s most important secrets—give me permission to gloss over a few details, won’t you? I feel bad for whatever woman ends up marrying you.”

“I pity your future wife even more, Your Majesty.”

Leuticia dropped her head into her hands, and Shizuku found herself speechless. Like Shizuku, Erik didn’t seem like he was going to get along with Lars—although their dynamic was different again. *I should have known they’d butt heads*, Shizuku thought to herself as Lars waved his hand casually from side to side, pretending not to have heard Erik’s comeback.

“I don’t trust that girl, but I appreciate she didn’t run away, so I’ll tell you an extra snippet of information... There are *two* things in this world that can counter the interlopers’ cursed artifacts.”

“Two? Does that include the Farsasian royal family?”

“Yes. Number one is Akashia. And the second is a *cursed artifact from this world*.”

Yet again, this was new information. Out of habit, Shizuku got the urge to take notes, but unfortunately, she didn’t have a pen and paper with her. She reminded herself to write everything down when she and Erik discussed the situation later on, and she concentrated on listening instead.

Erik’s expression hardened upon hearing this new term from the king.

“‘A cursed artifact from this world’? What do you mean by that?”

“It’s a cursed artifact that was created in this world for use against outsiders, one that’s capable of rejecting outside interference. Its powers surpass the laws of this world, and it’s what was used to destroy the interlopers’ cursed artifact two hundred and forty years ago. The erasure of the records related to the

witch took place after the wielder of our cursed artifact came to the castle and explained the situation. The castle erased all mention of the object's wielder."

"So the person who wielded the cursed artifact was mistaken for a witch? That must mean she was a woman."

"Pretty much."

"Did the man who was involved in the twenty-five-year-long royal feud also wield a cursed artifact?"

While Erik was going through the royal family's sealed records, the mention of a certain individual had aroused his suspicions. This was the man who Erik was now referring to.

Leuticia had implied that he had some connection with the events of two hundred and forty years ago, meaning he must have wielded that same cursed artifact.

This question brought a slight smile to Leuticia's face. The king appeared momentarily surprised, but his face soon turned bitter.

"You...you really *are* annoying. You're never going to find a wife."

"I don't care. More importantly, is my assumption correct? If Akashia is passed down within the royal family, it stands to reason that the cursed artifact would also be used by people closely associated with the royal family. That also explains why they'd show up at the castle, doesn't it?"

"Who knows? I've never met such a person. I don't know where they are, nor how to get in touch with them. But—"

Lars looked at Shizuku.

For a fleeting moment, any trace of hostility vanished from his blue eyes.

Shizuku stared at him in amazement, then the king shut his eyes.

"The wielder of that cursed artifact can use powers that go beyond the laws of this world. I don't know where you're from, but they might be able to send you back there."

"Huh...?"

All of a sudden, the focus had shifted back to Shizuku, catching her off guard. She opened her mouth, about to ask the king a question.

Did that mean she still had a chance? That she wouldn't have to give up?

The king's words seemed both understandable and incomprehensible at the same time. Her mind was in such a state of confusion that she simply couldn't decide what to feel.

Lars rose from his seat and stood in front of the bewildered Shizuku. He checked the clock that was sitting on top of an ornamental cupboard, suggesting that perhaps it was time for him to get back to work.

"Still... Even if we do manage to find them, I think there's a high chance that they'll assume you're an interloper and kill you."

Shizuku had already felt restless, but these quiet words sent a shiver down her spine. She felt as if a bottomless abyss had silently opened up before her.

Unable to say a word, she looked down at her clenched hands. They were far too small to be able to grab the very few chances offered to her by this huge continent.



The pair had been reminded by Leuticia not to tell anyone about their conversation, and they looked at each other across a table in a private room in the castle. They were both frowning—which was understandable, considering what they'd just heard. Shizuku had brewed some tea, and she broke the ice as she offered Erik a cup.

"I wonder if that was really true..."

"It's hard to believe. It's preposterous."

Erik smoothed his furrowed brow with his fingertips as he took a sip of his tea.

"When I started investigating that case, I suspected that it might involve some rules of magic we were yet to discover, but I never thought they would go *beyond* our established laws. And what was all that about beings from outside our world?!"

"Yeah, exactly. If someone suddenly told me that aliens were the culprits for

some unsolved crime, I'd be pretty surprised, too."

Erik seemed baffled by Shizuku's analogy, but he didn't press further.

Shizuku sighed as she tore part of her pastry off for Mea, who was sitting on the table.

"That said, Leuticia didn't look like she was lying."

"Well, no. If it is a lie, then it's likely the story that the royal family has been told is false, too."

"Whoa, really?"

"It's only natural for me to be skeptical. Plus, I haven't seen any evidence of extraordinary powers, so it's hard to fully believe their side of the story. But then again..."

The two exchanged glances, their faces blank. Of course, Shizuku understood what he was implying.

"Then again, there's me."

"Exactly. There's you, an otherworldly being who actually exists."

"Aha-ha-ha-ha."

Shizuku pressed her temples as she let out a strained laugh. It was just so rare for Erik to let his worries show on the surface. Still, as unusual as it was, Shizuku realized she wasn't in any sort of position to laugh, so she pulled herself together and took a notebook out of her bag.

"Let's take a moment to sort things out. We can start by discussing whether I really am one of those otherworldly beings or not."

"I didn't expect *you* to bring that question up, though I've briefly considered that possibility myself."

"Well, considering my memories are so hazy, the most obvious conclusion is that I'm simply imagining my entire past, isn't it? So let's start from there."

If Shizuku couldn't convince people that she was telling the truth, then her only option was to eliminate any doubts. She began jotting down notes about herself.

However, there was one major flaw in this hypothesis—her belongings. Erik must have realized it as well, because he pointed it out while he was looking at her notebook.

“Your memories could have been tampered with, but the things you brought with you all originate from a different culture—from a place with different technology. Plus, all your books are printed ones.”

“That’s true. Even if we assumed that the books were written in a unique script I’d made up, there’s still no explanation for my smartphone and music player. There’s no way I could have made those myself.”

Both of these complex devices, which currently sat on the table, were switched off. Shizuku tapped her music player, which had nothing but piano music on it.

Erik asked her a question, just to make sure.

“You could make those devices in this world if you tried, couldn’t you? Or would they go against the rules of our world?”

“I probably could, if I had the right skills and materials. They’re just machines.”

However, at this point in time, no such devices could be found anywhere on the continent. The technology wasn’t just more advanced than that in Erik’s world—it was light-years ahead. If the idea that she’d come from another world was all in her head, this part didn’t add up at all.

Erik picked up a pastry.

“Another possibility is that you’re actually from a different continent,” he suggested.

“Whoa, nice one. That could be interesting. Maybe there’s another continent with more advanced science and technology, and they altered my memories and sent me to investigate this continent.”

“That sounds rather preposterous to me.”

“Just enjoy the fantastical aspect of it,” she urged, her voice monotonous.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Erik asked with a grin.

Shizuku's eyes had glazed over for a little while now, but Erik decided not to mention it, instead pointing out the flaws in her hypothesis.

"There are far too many strange aspects to that scenario for it to hold true. Your memories don't seem like the kind you'd implant in someone you were sending to this continent. And even if you ended up here by accident, it's unclear what they'd be trying to achieve by making you think you were from another world."

"Maybe my memories weren't implanted by someone else at all. I could have convinced myself of these things by myself—like a whole new world inside my head."

"I suppose so, but if that were true, I feel like it would be pretty hard to make your belongings, memories, and knowledge all remain consistent with one another."

"Oh... Yeah, that's true."

As one would expect, Shizuku's English dictionary contained many terms relating to science and technology, and there was information about history and geography in there, too. This made it implausible that the dictionary simply had originated from another continent. For their current hypothesis to be true, everything from her memories and belongings would have to have been deliberately fabricated—otherwise, inconsistencies would arise.

Still, what would be the point in fabricating her backstory in such a way? Shizuku agonized over why anyone would go to all the trouble of turning her into a "girl from another world." Eventually, she began to feel dizzy.

"You know...I feel like I'm going to lose my mind if I think too hard about this," said Shizuku.

"Well, it is mentally draining to doubt everything you think you know about yourself. So let me disprove that theory. This hypothesis is probably wrong."

"Why?"

"You weren't affected by the Negativity in Candela, were you? Even if you were from another continent, you'd still be connected to the same realm structure. We live in the same world, and our people are the same, too. If you

saw the indigenous people from the continent to the east, you'd realize that. Even if the continent you originated from had a vastly different culture and civilization—and even if it lacked magic—it would still be impossible for you not to be affected by the Negativity. In this world, our connection to different realms is part of what makes us human.”

“Oh...”

“That is to say, I truly believe you're from another world. For the time being, I think you should trust that your memories are reliable.”

Erik's words had finally reminded Shizuku of something.

When she'd confronted the forbidden curse in Candela, the Negativity—which existed on the lowest stratum of the world—had referred to her as an “outsider” and a “lost thorn” who'd wandered into this world. Those words were undisputable proof of her otherworldly nature. After all, in this world, the Negativity was a pervasive force that underpinned all else.

Shizuku exhaled the stale air from her lungs, brushed her bangs back with both hands, then looked up at the ceiling.

“I can rest assured that I'm actually from another world, then.”

“Probably. Next, let's examine the possibility that you and these interlopers come from the same world.”

“Arrrrrrrgh.”

The issues kept coming, one after another.

Ultimately, the pair determined that it would be difficult to create a cursed artifact in Shizuku's world at this point in time—the technology just wasn't there yet. It took yet another hour of debate, however, for them to finally conclude that Shizuku and the interlopers were likely from different worlds.

“My head hurts...”

“Then let's take a short break.”

Mea, back in her girl form, made them some more tea, since their first pot had gone cold. Shizuku decided to add two sugar balls to hers, which was rare for her. As she dropped them into her tea, she let out a sigh.

“If what they say about these interlopers is true...what do you make of it? Turning people into experimental guinea pigs without their knowledge...”

“It would be unthinkable. The very idea of it makes me feel sick to my stomach. My opinion of King Lars is far from favorable, but I can understand the legends passed down by the royal family that he has to eliminate them,” said Erik forcefully. He almost never let his feelings come to the surface.

“I-I’m not one of them, though!” claimed Shizuku, waving her hands in front of her face.

“What are you talking about? Shall we go over everything one more time?”

Shizuku graciously declined.

Erik had hated the idea of technology being introduced into his world from an outside source when it had come up before, so from his perspective, the idea that these interlopers were interfering in a crueler sense must have been simply intolerable. Looking annoyed, he gathered his hair in his hands. It had grown a little long.

“It’s unthinkable, but if these interlopers are indeed actively interfering from another world, this could work in your favor.”

“Huh? Could it?”

“I mean, they’re able to traverse worlds as they see fit. If they’re alleged to have sent a cursed artifact here for experimental purposes, then they must have the necessary technology. Maybe you could use it to return to your old world.”

“Oh, right.”

“That said, there’s a chance that they could take you to *their* world instead.”

“Noooooooooooo!”

Shizuku almost wanted to cry. She slumped across the table, and Mea glanced at her master with worry.

Ignoring Shizuku’s exhaustion, Erik checked his notes.

“For now...if we’re to believe what we just heard, we have two choices.”

“Two?”

“Yeah. Either we search for another cursed artifact that the interlopers created, or we search for the wielder of the cursed artifact that can counter the interlopers.”

It was a difficult choice. They didn’t know where to find either, nor how to recognize them. On top of that, they had no idea what kind of effects the former would have, and the latter would potentially kill them.

We’re between a rock and a hard place, thought Shizuku, but she stopped herself before she could give voice to this thought. It didn’t quite seem to fit their predicament.

“I’m not sure which approach to take. If we find one of the interlopers’ cursed artifacts and it turns out to have a totally different effect, we’re stuck. Have the interlopers visited this world themselves?”

“We don’t know—but the story we just heard gave me the impression that they’ve just sent their cursed artifacts here.”

“Hmm...”

Shizuku twirled her pen around in her fingers. Suddenly, a simple question came to mind, and she looked up at the young man sitting across from her.

“How does a cursed artifact differ from a magic implement?”

“Cursed artifacts aren’t created using magic. The ‘cursed’ just part stems from the fact that spellcasters can place their own unique definition of a curse on them, but in reality, it’s just a description of tools that work in a way that people don’t fully understand. Most so-called ‘cursed artifacts’ are simply powerless fakes, though.”

“They’re even more confusing than magical items, then. That’s impressive.”

“Well, magic has rules to it.”

At the end of the day, Shizuku was in a situation she didn’t really understand—so she had no choice but to rely on equally confusing information.

She crossed her arms and frowned in thought.

“We’re at a bit of a loss here...”

Was it okay for her to keep flailing about, trying to escape her situation? That doubt crossed her mind.

If she had been the only person involved, it wouldn’t have bothered her, but her refusal to give in made life harder for Erik, too. Wouldn’t it be better to abandon the idea of going home and look for somewhere else she could live in peace? She was sure she could carve out a life for herself in this world. After all the traveling she’d done, she’d gradually grown accustomed to the different environment, and the trials and tribulations she’d undergone had helped her gain confidence. Before she realized it, the idea of being the “lesser sister”—something that had constantly haunted her in the past—had faded from her thoughts.

Although being continuously compared to others was painful, it was equally distressing to be so different that she couldn’t even be compared to those around her.

The situation she found herself in now was the total opposite of her situation at home. Sometimes, she’d wished that weren’t the case, but she’d persevered nonetheless, and that experience had definitely helped her find some inner strength.

Her arms crossed, Shizuku puzzled over things in her mind, but no matter how hard she thought, she couldn’t come up with an answer by herself. In times like this, she was grateful—and relieved—that she had someone else on her side. At other times, though, being part of a pair could be a hindrance for them both. Their concern for one another stopped them from being able to say, “Let’s give just up already.”

“Do you want to give up?” asked Erik.

“Ack!” exclaimed Shizuku.

Erik’s question had made her jump. The timing was just too bizarre—it was as if he’d read her mind. She looked at him in a flustered attempt to hide her surprise.

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“I was just wondering if you wanted to throw in the towel. That’s another viable option. You’ve already put more than enough effort into this.”

Shizuku’s eyes widened.

Erik never indulged her just for the sake of it. He always told the truth.

This wasn’t an expression of frustration or concern—he was simply asking whether or not they should stop.

Some people might have found that question to be cruel, but to Shizuku, it was an unmistakable show of kindness.

Even when the situation made it difficult for Shizuku to move forward, Erik would always take one step ahead for her.

“If we stop...what will you do?”

“I have no particular plans. I’ll probably just go back to my research.”

This was a pursuit he’d earnestly invest his time in. Step by step, he’d continue striding toward the knowledge he sought, and when Shizuku imagined him immersed in his books, it made her feel warm inside.

Their journey was about to become even more unpredictable.

Shizuku had expected things to come together once they reached Farsas, but she’d been wrong. Now they were right back where they started—and to make matters worse, they were directionless this time around. Shizuku honestly felt bad for dragging Erik along with her.

The person she’d been at the beginning of their journey wouldn’t have allowed herself to rely on him any longer. Half of her still felt that way.

Yet now...she wished that he’d stay by her side, because of who he was.

During their journey so far, he’d been her support. She trusted in him and admired his way of thinking. With Erik by her side, Shizuku was sure she’d find answers that she couldn’t uncover on her own.

She was still hesitant about a lot of things, but she would overcome them. She lifted her head and gazed into Erik’s deep-blue eyes.

“In that case...can you accompany me a little while longer?” she asked.

“Sure. That was always my plan anyway,” he replied.

This simple response came as such a relief that all the energy drained from Shizuku’s body. Erik’s eyes widened with astonishment as her head fell forward onto the table.

“What’s wrong? Are you having some kind of fit?”

“I’m just relieved... All the tension left my body...”

“It’s funny how you experience these highs and lows that I don’t quite understand.”

“I’m a regular person... Of *course* I experience emotional highs and lows. Life has its ups and downs,” Shizuku grumbled, peering up at him.

Erik cracked an amused smile. “It’s very you. I think it’s a good thing.”

His words and voice held a kindness that hadn’t been there at the beginning of their journey.

Uplifted by Erik’s response, Shizuku came to a decision.

“One year from now, if we’ve still haven’t achieved any results, we should give up on this.”



In a corner of Farsas’s sprawling castle city was a research institute where general papers on the history of the entire continent were kept.

While the majority of the most talented scholars who specialized in history served in the castle, around half of all historical scholars did not, either due to their abilities or to their own personal inclinations.

The Continental Institute for Historical and Cultural Studies compiled papers contributed by a large number of scholars, including those unaffiliated with any institution, and published them in a journal. A branch had been founded in the castle city of every large nation across the continent.

Inside the institute, in a room too small to be called a lounge, Harve listened to his mentor and sipped his tea. The middle-aged man had returned from traveling around the world the month before, after stepping down from his government post, and he let out a warm breath toward the ceiling.

“And then the woman says, ‘Don’t you want to hear about some history that no longer exists?’”

“‘History that no longer exists?’” Harve reiterated. “Was she talking about a dark period that there’s no record of anymore?”

“That was what I assumed, too, but that didn’t seem to be the case. She said she was talking about ‘a history that no longer transpired.’”

It all sounded pretty far-fetched. The young mage furrowed his brow. It sounded as if that woman was playing a childish prank.

“History that hasn’t happened isn’t really history, though, is it? What if she was just imagining it or making it up?”

“That’s what I said, but she just laughed and said, ‘This continent is a testing ground, and I possess the book that contains all the records about it.’ That was when she claimed to have records of experiments that were erased—ones that have been wiped from the passage of time. I laughed it off as absurd, but once the alcohol wore off, I started to get scared. She was aware of the history surrounding several great nations—even confidential, forbidden curse-related parts of history. What if it wasn’t mere fantasy? What if that suspicious book really exists?”

Harve’s mentor handed him a piece of scrap paper. It was covered with unique, scrawling handwriting, with the words *dispose of afterwards* written at the bottom. Having been under his mentor’s tutelage for a decade, Harve had no problem deciphering his script.

On the piece of paper, he’d divulged various details regarding forbidden curse incidents from history. His hastily written notes delved into cases from the distant past—ones that not even those who worked for the royal court would know about.

While the series of accounts were not implausible, Harve wasn’t in a position to verify their authenticity by himself.

“I’ll ask a friend about this,” he said, putting the piece of scrap paper in his pocket. “Have you seen the book in question?”

“Only the outside of it. She wouldn’t show me what it said inside. It was a

deep-crimson leather-bound book with gold edging. It looked ancient, but at the same time, it didn't *feel* old. When I touched the cover, it felt strangely alive, which was...extremely unsettling," his mentor said, picking up his teacup again.

Casually glancing at the man's hand, Harve noticed for the first time that his bold and fearless mentor's fingers were trembling slightly. That was when his deep interest in this mysterious book began.



They could pursue either the interlopers' cursed artifacts or the wielder of the cursed artifact that could thwart the interlopers. After discussing which one to search for, they opted to defer making a decision. They had no clues, and the continent was vast, which made it an impossible choice.

Erik and Shizuku had ended up postponing their departure and were having dinner together in Shizuku's room. Having finished the tasks they'd each been assigned, they'd chosen to dine there instead of heading to the large dining hall that the court ladies and soldiers frequented. Their conversation was of a sensitive nature, after all.

Erik cut off a piece of his well-cooked pork.

"You know what? I think there's probably more than one person who can wield an interloper-repelling cursed artifact."

"More than one? Does that mean that there are several of those cursed artifacts, too?"

"I don't know that much, but do you remember our conversation with the king? He referred to the wielders of the cursed artifact in the plural. I referred to the wielders of the cursed artifact as 'them,' but that was just because I was grouping together the one from the incidents two hundred and forty years ago and the one who was involved in the Farsasian royal family's internal conflict. But then, the king said that 'they' might be able to help you get home. Doesn't that seem odd?"

"I don't know... Does it? What if he just said that because you did?"

"Maybe. If the cursed artifact were passed down from person to person like

Akashia, he wouldn't have used the plural to talk about sending you home *now*, in the present. That implies he knows there are multiple people who are capable of using that cursed artifact—or cursed artifacts.”

Shizuku lifted a crisp baked carrot to her mouth with an expression of admiration.

“Now that you mention it, yeah...I'm impressed that you pick up on these things.”

“It just struck me as odd. This relates to a legend that's been passed down through the royal family, so there's likely a lot he can't tell us. Also, I assume the people who wield cursed artifacts possess significant magical power. The woman involved in the incidents two hundred and forty years ago was mistaken for a witch, and that man would have needed a fair amount of magical power to use the royal family's mystical spirits, whether they were in a period of internal strife or not.”

“Are you saying that he wasn't a member of the royal family himself, even though he used their mystical spirits?”

“Usually only direct descendants of the royal family who are also mages can command spirits—but at that time, there were no individuals who met those criteria. There's no mention of him in the official documents nor in the sealed records. There were dozens of royal family members who died during the infighting, so there's a chance that he could have been one of them, but it's unusual for a name to be kept hidden. Perhaps, due to the abnormality of the situation, he was given control over the spirits indirectly, using a direct descendant as an intermediary.”

“...This stuff is complicated.”

No longer able to keep track of what Erik was telling her, Shizuku had stopped cutting her meat.

Erik had tried hard to explain things in a way that was easy to understand, but there were times when he went into too much detail. If the discussion progressed slowly, Shizuku could manage to keep up, but when she was suddenly bombarded with details about a topic that she had little knowledge of, she was overwhelmed by the deluge of information, struggling to absorb any of

it.

Shizuku's reaction made Erik smile awkwardly.

"This person seems to have a link to the royal family, but it would be hard to use the royal family as a starting point for our research," he surmised.

This was a disappointing take on the situation, but it was a fact that couldn't be changed. Regardless of what the past records said, Lars and Leuticia claimed that they'd never met the wielder of the cursed artifact in question.

As Shizuku drank her warm soup, she thought through everything she'd found out. Then she put down the cup and tilted her head slightly to the side.

"So there's a high probability that the wielder of the cursed artifact is a remarkable mage. Are you suggesting that we start by looking for someone who fits that description?"

"Exactly."

That might be easier than seeking out the cursed artifact itself, especially considering they didn't even know what it was.

"How do you tell whether someone's a powerful mage?" Shizuku asked Erik. "Can you see their stats or something?"

"What are you on about? Mages can gauge a fellow mage's power to some extent, but after a certain level, it gets hard for me to tell. And if their power's sealed off, then there's nothing you can do about it."

"I see. Wouldn't a mage that powerful be working for a castle, though?"

"I think that's highly likely."

As Shizuku listened to Erik's response, Lydia and Lyshien's faces came to mind. A short while ago, she'd begun to feel a sort of unsettling anxiety, but she wasn't sure what exactly it was.

Noticing her reaction, Erik stopped eating his dinner. "What's wrong?"

"It's just, I kind of..."

Just at that moment, someone knocked on the door.

They called out and immediately entered the room. It was Harve, evidently

with something on his mind.

As Shizuku stood up to make some tea, Harve repeatedly apologized for intruding, then offered Erik a piece of scrap paper. Erik took one look at it and frowned.

“What’s this? This handwriting’s so messy. I can barely read it.”

“It would be a problem if it were *too* legible. I’m sorry to come to you with a bit of an odd request, but could you tell me if what’s written here actually happened?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to read it for me. I have no chance of making it out.”

It sounded like Harve had a complicated issue to discuss, and Shizuku couldn’t shake her sense of unease as she stepped outside to fetch some hot water.

The hot water room, where you could fetch magically heated water at any time of day, was located on the far side of the dormitory building. There were several options, but she chose the water that was closest to boiling temperature and transferred it to her pot. Mea, who’d accompanied her, added some extra water from the tap to make up for what Shizuku had taken.

When she reentered the room five minutes later, Harve wasn’t the only one looking concerned—Erik seemed to have been infected by the same worry.

“I think you should report this all the way to the top.”

“The top? To the royal chief mage?”

“No—higher up than that. You need to tell the king or his sister.”

“Gah... Is this sealed information?”

Harve’s expression grew extremely tense. Shizuku didn’t know why that was, but some sort of trouble must have arisen.

She silently served them the tea, and when the two pale-faced mages noticed she was there, they thanked her.

Erik gave the scrap paper back to Harve.

“I can’t say for certain whether this is sealed information or not—but I advise you to report it. That’s all I’m going to say.”

Erik wasn't in a position to confirm or deny whether the information was true, but the fact that he was advising his friend to report it said it all.

Harve looked at the scrap paper again, his face the picture of disbelief. He started to fold it back up, but then, the last paragraph caught his attention. He opened the note back up and showed the part in question to Erik.

"But this bit can't be true, can it? Farsas and Sezal have never gone to war. Plus, it even says the Negativity materialized due to a forbidden curse. When the Negativity materialized in Candela, it was big enough to fill the castle hallways, wasn't it? If a gigantic serpent of Negativity really emerged in the wilderness and started controlling an army of corpses, that would be impossible to conceal."

Shizuku didn't know the context of this story, but she shuddered at the memory of the serpent she'd encountered in Candela. She glanced at Erik and met his gaze. His expression was full of pain.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Noticing an incomprehensible uncertainty in his dark-blue eyes, Shizuku blinked in confusion. Suddenly, Erik averted his gaze, leaving Shizuku none the wiser.

"As far as I know, nothing like that ever happened—but, well, there's more information there. It wouldn't hurt to report it."

"Oh... Yeah, you're right. Sorry for troubling you."

"It's fine. I'd like you to tell me how things go, as long as there's nothing to prevent you from doing so."

"Got it."

Harve drank the rest of his tea and stood up. He thanked and apologized to Shizuku again, then went to leave. With his hand on the door, he looked over his shoulder at Shizuku and Erik.

"Keep this a secret until we get some answers. I don't want to cause any problems for my mentor."

"Don't worry. I don't have anyone to share it with anyway."

“Sorry. Still, it’s really no laughing matter. According to that woman, this continent is all one big testing ground, right?”

Harve stepped into the hallway, letting out a light chuckle, and Shizuku and Erik exchanged glances as they processed what he had just said. The color drained from both their faces. The parallels with what the king had told them the other day didn’t even bear discussing.

“W-wait, Harve!”

“Huh?”

Harve was already about ten paces down the hallway when Erik caught up with him. Erik grabbed him by the shoulder and stopped Harve in his tracks. Without giving him a chance to object, Erik forcefully dragged him back into the room, where Harve ended up explaining in detail where his mentor had encountered the woman in question.



According to Harve, the woman had first approached his mentor in the small country of Piazza, which was located north of Farsas and south of the northern superpower, Medial. She must have recognized him, because she immediately concluded that he was a renowned scholar, and after spending an hour asking him questions and debating with him in the tavern where they’d met, she broached the subject of the book. This had all happened approximately two months earlier.

“It will be a problem if a book like that really does exist.”

After listening to the story, Leuticia let out a deep sigh. Her melancholic blue eyes passed over Harve, Erik, and Shizuku in succession. She already seemed to have disregarded her brother, who was sorting through some documents at his desk. The king didn’t look up or pause what he was doing at all.

Leuticia brushed her long hair aside and let out yet another sigh, then instructed Harve to summon his mentor to the castle. Once Harve had meekly exited the room, she turned her attention to the pair who were left behind.

“So what are you two going to do now?” she asked.

“I wanted to ask your opinion before making a decision. Do you think that

book could be one of the interlopers' cursed artifacts?" Erik asked.

Leuticia's expression turned bitter. She glanced briefly at her brother behind her—but seeing no reaction from him, she gave up and voiced her own opinion.

"I can't say for certain, but I think it's very likely. It's often said that interlopers' cursed artifacts tend to have properties related to experimentation or record-keeping, but since I haven't personally encountered such items before, I probably wouldn't be able to tell simply by looking at it. If that turns out not to be the case, however, the leaking of sealed records is a major issue. I hope we can get our hands on that book."

The scrap of paper Harve had brought to the castle contained several pieces of information concerning both sealed and forbidden curse-related documents. If there had been only one piece of information, Leuticia might have just frowned and disregarded the issue; however, apart from the final item—which hadn't happened—everything else was classified as top secret. That was concerning. The information relayed by the mysterious woman, which included details about forbidden curses, was too dangerous to simply ignore.

Erik narrowed his eyes slightly at Leuticia's answer, and Shizuku caught a glimpse of a sharpness that he never usually let her see.

"It sounds like events outside of Farsas are documented in the book as well. What are you planning on doing once you get your hands on it?"

"There's no point in me saying I won't misuse it. What constitutes misuse can vary, after all. But if it appears to be a cursed artifact from the interlopers, I'll destroy it. Also...I wish to speak to that woman about something else."

"You do?"

Leuticia nodded as she leaned on the desk. She suggested all three of them take a seat, then cast a glance toward Erik.

"As for the forbidden curse incident in Candela...I only asked you to compile a report on the spell structure that was used—so you wouldn't know this—but the mastermind behind that incident was accompanied by a woman. For some peculiar reason, she always carried a crimson book with her. Do you think that's a coincidence?"

Leuticia's probing look made Shizuku catch her breath. If the same woman was involved in both incidents, Farsas wouldn't be able to overlook it. Unable to grasp what that woman's intentions could have been, Shizuku scowled. She didn't even know her name or what she looked like.

Erik, who was by Shizuku's side, answered. "But there are no curses in the forbidden curse documents that have the same spell configuration as the one used in Candela. Some are similar, though."

"If these two women are the same person—and if the nature of the book is anything to go by—the spell configuration in question might have its roots in another country's forbidden curse documents, or documents that have been lost... Maybe she even used a curse from one of those 'erased experiments,'" Leuticia explained.

She seemed uncomfortable as she said the phrase "erased experiments," and Erik had the same reaction upon hearing it. If such experiments had really been carried out, it would cause nothing but humiliation for those who lived on the continent.

"The nation of Farsas shall capture that woman *and* her book," Leuticia declared. "You're welcome to wait in the castle until we succeed."

"It's okay. We'll go and look for them ourselves," Erik responded.

Shizuku wasn't sure whether he didn't trust Farsas, or didn't want to rely on it, but she agreed with his decision. Waiting behind might have been a wise idea, but there was nothing they could do until the problematic book arrived at the castle. There'd be no use in protesting or expressing their discontent after the book had already been brought back—or worse, damaged in some far-off location. Taking matters into their own hands seemed like the logical course of action.

When Leuticia spotted Shizuku nodding, she gave them a weak smile. "In that case, maybe I should make you two Farsasian emissaries and give you special privileges."

"That won't be necessary. We're not from Farsas. All we need is permission to leave the country."

“Understood. I’ll make the appropriate preparations,” replied Leuticia. “Your memories regarding the sealed records will remain yours until this search is over. Once everything is finished, you must return to the castle.”

There was a distinct haughtiness in Leuticia’s voice that Shizuku usually didn’t sense, which surprised her. She frowned. It all felt a little odd.

Leuticia was the one who’d asked Erik to sort through those classified documents, but now she was acting like he would have his memories manipulated as a matter of course, which didn’t sit right with Shizuku. Ensuring the confidentiality of the royal family’s information might have been of utmost importance, but this seemed like an excessive display of superiority.

The expression on Shizuku’s face showed that she was questioning the gravity of the royal family’s secrets, and Erik tapped her lightly on the knee, causing her to hastily look away.

“I’m still sorting through the ordinary documents, so I need to finish that first... We’ll leave the castle the day after tomorrow,” said Erik.

“Your conscientiousness always shines through at the strangest times. Very well, then,” Leuticia responded.

Shizuku and Erik bowed, then turned to leave the office. As they did, the king, who hadn’t spoken to them all day, called out from behind.

“If you find it, tell me where the book is. I’ll come and destroy it.”

“Okay—but only when Shizuku no longer needs it to get back home.”

“That’s fine by me. Just hurry up and leave. If I catch up with you and find that you’re dawdling, I’ll kill you.”

Erik just gave the king an icy look, refusing to dignify the threat with words as he gently pushed Shizuku out into the hallway. Just before she closed the door, Shizuku heard the king say one last thing.

“I’ll give that man your wages. Don’t waste it.”

I’ve never wasted anything in my life, Shizuku retorted internally—but in the end, she never got a chance to voice that sentiment.



“What’s Piazza like? If it’s in the north, does that mean it’s chilly?”

“I think it’s cooler than Farsas, at least. I’ve never been there.”

After leaving the office, the pair had sat down on the grass in the courtyard and were looking at a spread-out map, planning the journey they would be making a few days later. Realizing that they’d finally be able to escape the heat, Shizuku subtly punched the air. Erik pretended not to notice and pointed to a spot on the map.

“I think we’ll be able to get permission to use the transit ring this time, so we can go directly to Piazza. We’ll confirm the exact location once Harve gets back.”

“Okay.”

Shizuku untied the scarf that was keeping her hair up; it had grown a considerable amount and was almost long enough to reach the middle of her back. This was to be expected—she’d been in her new world for almost six months and hadn’t cut her hair once. Shizuku used a ribbon to tie her hair up again, then started to put the scarf back in place.

Before she could do so, however, there was a strong gust of wind, causing the thin piece of fabric to flutter from her grasp. Shizuku frantically attempted to catch it, but the scarf slipped through her fingers and blew away, disappearing behind some shrubbery. A few seconds later, she heard a cry, almost as if her runaway scarf had provoked it.

“Huh?”

“I wonder what’s going on. That sounded like a kid.”

The pair folded up their map, rose to their feet, and peered over the shrubbery. There, on the grass, was a little girl around three years old who’d fallen over and was sobbing. She was thrashing around as Shizuku’s scarf clung to her face.

Alarmed, the color drained from Shizuku’s face. She leaped over the shrubbery, swiftly removing the scarf and lifting the child up into her arms.

“I-I’m so sorry. That was my fault,” Shizuku told the girl, but her apology didn’t seem to soothe the child. In fact, her wailing got even louder, leaving

Shizuku at a total loss. She rummaged around in her pockets, but all she could find was a pen and a blank notepad.

Shizuku put the distraught child down.

“Hey, look at this,” she said, ripping off a square of paper and starting to fold it.

She folded the paper a few times with her fingers, and by the time she’d made a small crane, the girl’s sobbing had finally stopped. Instead, a look of great interest had filled her eyes, and the girl reached out for it.

Shizuku placed the paper crane in the girl’s small hand, then wiped her tearstained face with a handkerchief.

“That’s fascinating, what you just made,” Erik murmured. “You created a replica bird out of paper?”

“It’s a paper crane. Don’t you have cranes here?”

“Cranes? I don’t know what they are. Is that the name of a bird?”

It seemed like cranes didn’t exist in this world. As Shizuku confirmed Erik’s assumption, she sat down in front of the little girl, who was urging her to make another. Shizuku didn’t know too many origami patterns, though, so she started drawing pictures on her notepad instead.

“Come to think of it, do you have zebras and giraffes here?”

Shizuku had begun questioning this after playing with children on their journey. Erik, who’d sat down next to her, cocked his head.

“What are those? Are they birds as well?”

“No. Zebras are horses with stripes, and giraffes are spotty animals with long necks.”

“Horses with stripes? That’s amazing. I’d love to see one.”

“They look a bit like this,” said Shizuku, drawing stripes on the horse she’d just drawn.

Erik and the young girl both looked at her picture with wide-eyed amazement. After a short pause, the girl shouted, “Kitty!”

“Oh. I guess it looks like a tiger. It’s not, though—it’s a zebra.”

Shizuku had wondered whether it was okay to teach the child about animals that didn’t exist, but she seemed to like the picture either way. “Kitty, kitty!” the girl exclaimed enthusiastically when Shizuku pointed to the zebra.

Smiling, Shizuku drew a horse with no stripes to see how she would answer.

“What’s this?” Shizuku asked.

“Cat!” the child predictably replied.

Shizuku had half expected her to say that, but hearing the little girl’s mistake, she couldn’t contain herself. Holding her side as she laughed, Shizuku glanced at Erik.

“Aha-ha-ha. She’s so cute.”

“I don’t see what’s so funny.”

“It’s just adorable how genuine she is. Oh...I’m sorry. This is what a cat looks like.”

Shizuku drew a picture of a cat for the girl, who tilted her head to one side.

“Cat?” she asked questioningly.

Shizuku smiled and nodded.

“This is a horse, and this is a kitty-cat,” she explained.

“Cat?”

“A horse and a cat. Horses have longer necks, see?”

“Horse!”

“That’s right. Good job!”

Satisfied that she’d solved the girl’s misunderstanding, Shizuku stretched her arms. She took another look around, checking to see whether the girl’s parents were in the vicinity, but there was no sign of any other people.

“She must be lost. Do you think she’s the kid of someone who works here?”

“Probably not. My guess is that she’s one of the children who was brought to the castle so they could research her illness.”

“You think?”

At first glance, there didn't seem to be anything wrong with her. What illness could she have been suffering from?

Erik noticed the frown on Shizuku's face and filled in the blanks for her.

“I told you about it before, didn't I? The infectious disease that kids are catching. They don't know what causes it.”

“Oh yeah. The one that causes a language impediment... Does that mean this girl has trouble speaking, too?”

“Can't you tell just by watching her?” said Erik, sounding exasperated.

Shizuku shifted her attention back to the young girl. She appeared to be at a healthy weight, and her physical appearance and limited verbal skills seemed typical for a child of her age. Shizuku couldn't see what the problem was.

She made eye contact with the cheery little girl, who was clutching the paper crane and the animal pictures in her hands. Shizuku tilted her head to one side. The child copied her and did the same.

“Uhh... What's wrong with her?” Shizuku asked, totally clueless.

Erik's eyes widened slightly—but when he saw the skeptical look on Shizuku's face, his expression grew more stern than alarmed.

“You just drew a picture of a cat and a horse for her, didn't you?”

“Yeah. I drew them in a slightly cutesy style, but that still works.”

“Right. They looked like a cat and a horse to me, too. But when you pointed to the horse, that girl said ‘cat.’”

“Yeah, she did.”

“Strange, right?”

“I don't think so.”

They both went quiet. The lines in Shizuku's brow got deeper.

Erik had explained what was strange, but Shizuku was still struggling to understand. Wasn't it normal for a child her age to get a cat and a horse

muddled up?

Shizuku gave Erik a skeptical look, wondering if he just had exceptionally high expectations when it came to children's knowledge. He seemed to be pondering something, his expression serious, and a short while later, he picked up where he'd left off.

"This infectious disease has been gradually spreading from the east of the continent. It mainly occurs in children aged from one to two and causes language impediments."

"Yes."

"And this girl is one such child. You can tell she has trouble speaking, can't you?"

Shizuku took another look at the girl but couldn't seem to spot anything strange about her. What was Erik talking about?

Becoming slightly agitated, Shizuku argued back.

"I don't understand. Isn't it normal for kids to learn the wrong names for things?"

"No, it's not. Language skills are generally innate, aren't they?"

"Huh?"

Shizuku felt like she'd heard something she couldn't ignore, and she stared at the young man in front of her.

Something was "innate" if you were born with it. Humans were born with the necessary components for acquiring language skills, of course, but considering the context, that wasn't what Erik was talking about. Something seemed incredibly strange about it all. Unaware of the anxiety she was feeling, Shizuku asked Erik a question.

"Uhh, language is something you learn as a child, right? Isn't it our ability to listen and form sounds that's innate?"

"Something you *learn*? No. Knowledge of basic vocabulary and grammar has to be something people are born with. There's nothing to learn or memorize. It's just a matter of whether you remember it or not, don't you think?"

“Uh, what? Don’t be ridiculous.”

There seemed to be a significant misunderstanding going on. Both of them were taken aback when they realized this, and Shizuku slowly lifted her tense hand into the air, keeping her eyes fixed on Erik.

“Uhh, can I ask you a question first?”

“...Sure.”

“What reaction would this girl have had to my picture if she didn’t have a language impediment?”

“If she recognized it as a horse, she’d call it a horse. She’d never call it a cat by mistake.”

“But don’t children learn words by observing how adults respond to things—for example, by calling a horse a horse?”

This is how children learn languages from their surroundings—the reason that a child’s native language varies depending on the environment they’re raised in. Shizuku didn’t see why it should be any different here, just because everyone on the continent spoke the same language.

When Erik heard this, however, he shook his head sternly.

“As I told you before, no. If they recognize something, they’ll automatically call it by its name, even if they’ve never seen it before. Nobody needs to teach them anything for that to happen. Babies aren’t taught how to cry, are they? It’s the same thing.”

For a moment, Shizuku felt dizzy, and she tilted her head to one side.

Shizuku had never noticed this disparity between the two worlds. Unlike other ideas she’d had a hard time getting her head around, like magic, it lay in something far more familiar—something intrinsic to being human.

She felt as if the ground were moving beneath her feet. Darkness pulled at the edges of her vision, and she pressed a hand to her forehead. It was Erik’s voice that brought her back to reality. He’d crouched down to stroke the young girl’s head, then turned to speak to Shizuku in a serious tone of voice.

“Let me clarify. In your world, language is something you learn through

education, right?" he said.

"Yes... That's right. That's why there are so many languages. We learn words when we're young by listening to what people are saying around us."

"I thought it was genetic."

Now that he mentioned it, a while ago, when the topic of whether spoken languages varied or not had come up, Erik had asked Shizuku whether it was her genes that stopped her from understanding foreign languages. At the time, Shizuku hadn't thought much of his question—after all, it was the kind of thing Erik tended to say—but thinking about it now, that was a strange comment.

In Erik's world, knowledge of verbal language was something you were supposed to be born with. That was why the entire vast continent all spoke the same language, and it didn't evolve across generations.

Shizuku felt a little jealous—but once she caught herself losing sight of reality, she snapped out of it and focused on the situation that was playing out in front of her.

"Uhh, does that mean you're born knowing *all* spoken words? Could a kid this young understand a word like *lugubrious*, for example?"

"No. That's not basic vocabulary. When a human is born, they know approximately twenty-six hundred words, if you include all parts of speech. All other words are formed by combining basic pieces of vocabulary."

"Do you learn those combinations?"

"Yes. Don't you have basic vocabulary where you come from?"

"Yeah, but I think it means something different... There's no such thing as innate vocabulary in my world."

In Shizuku's world, "basic vocabulary" just referred to commonly used words. There were no words that people knew without learning them in some way.

Her head throbbing, Shizuku asked Erik about something that made her curious.

"If it's innate knowledge, what happens when a child knows the word for something they haven't encountered yet? Would a child who has never seen or

heard of a cat still inherently know what a cat is?”

“If you don’t know about something, then you won’t just suddenly learn about it. We have innate knowledge of the words themselves, not the objects they represent, so if you don’t recognize an object, no words will come to mind. It’s like when you know something, but can’t remember it. The word comes to mind when you see the subject or something related to it...for example, a picture of a cat.”

In other words, the word *cat* was basic vocabulary, something that all people were born with. If someone grew up in a place where there were no cats around and had no knowledge of their existence, that word would stay dormant inside them.

Understanding Erik’s explanation, Shizuku moved on to her next question.

“Then what happens if you describe an unknown subject to someone verbally? If I were to explain what a cat was to a child who didn’t know about cats, would they remember the word and go, ‘Oh, a cat!’?”

“It’s not so much about how it’s explained, rather than whether you can ultimately get them to clearly recognize the subject. If someone’s good at drawing, for example, they could get a child to recognize a subject they’re not familiar with. In that case, the word comes naturally to their mind. Describing an unfamiliar subject verbally can be hard, but smart children might be able to immediately associate the words with an object. In the worst-case scenario, they end up remembering the sequence of sounds that represent that concept instead. As they grow older and experience more, the connection between words and objects tends to fall into place seamlessly.”

“Hold on a minute. That part about the worst-case scenario—that’s the *normal* way of learning languages. You teach kids what a word means.”

“That’s absurd.”

“That’s *my* line!” Shizuku found herself shouting.

The little girl startled, and Shizuku gave her a smile. On a new piece of paper, she drew a fairly realistic picture of an octopus.

First, she showed it to Erik to check that he recognized the creature. Next, she

showed it to the expectant little girl—but the child just stared at it in silence, seemingly unsure what the picture was of.

“It’s an octopus,” explained Shizuku.

“Oc’opus!” the girl repeated, smiling happily.

“Is *octopus* a word you’re born knowing?”

“Usually, yes. This is how we know she’s suffering from that illness.”

“But she’s extremely normal, I assure you. She’s the picture of health.”

The difference in their perceptions of normality infuriated Shizuku. Erik, meanwhile, crossed his arms and thought to himself.

“If language skills can only be obtained through learning, what happens if someone isn’t taught them?”

“They can’t speak. They have to express their emotions through grunts and gestures instead. There are several real-life examples of this. Also...there are stories of an experiment like that being carried out in ancient times. There was a king who wanted to know what the oldest language in the world was, so he ordered people not to speak in front of children.”

“Oh. What happened?”

Erik leaned in slightly, seeming interested. Perhaps no such experiment had been conducted in his world. Shizuku smiled awkwardly and continued.

“After a while, the children began to use some words, which the king concluded must be the world’s oldest language. But in modern times, it’s thought that those words weren’t innate at all—instead, the kids must have heard them somewhere or been taught them by somebody else. Either that, or the children invented the language by themselves.”

“They invented a language? From scratch?”

“More or less. Humans can do that in my world—that’s why languages vary depending on the region or time period.”

From Shizuku’s perspective, that was a given. Language was something that humans created, not something they had at birth. While humans possessed the

ability to create new languages from scratch, they were not equipped with a common language that most people could understand from the moment they were born.

Shizuku's explanation made Erik frown even more. He openly looked her up and down.

"Hmm... You do look like a human, but what if you're just from a species that resembles us?"

"Gah! That was savage! I was going to be the one to raise that question!"

"Were you now?"

The pair felt like everything they thought they knew had been turned on its head. Suddenly, a court lady emerged from behind the trees. She appeared to be searching for the missing girl, and once she'd hurried over, she noticed the various objects the child was clutching. Bowing to Shizuku and Erik repeatedly, she led the girl away.

Shizuku felt an inexplicable sense of restlessness as she waved good-bye to the child. What seemed ordinary to her was considered an illness in this world and viewed as unusual. She felt like leaping to her feet and shouting, "It's not an illness!" but she restrained herself and turned back to Erik.

"Are there innate words that *aren't* names of objects, then?" she asked, pressing her knees together. "Like words for abstract concepts or things that cannot be confirmed to exist?"

"Yes, there are. There are also adjectives and verbs, as well as conjunctions and auxiliary verbs."

"So how do you recall the words for things that don't exist, or abstract concepts? Some things can't be drawn, so you'd have to teach them methodically, right?"

"Hmm. Well, you can teach those concepts to people, but usually, they'll recall the word as long as they grasp the concept behind it. Typically, by around age three, a child has acquired most of the words needed for everyday life, and by age ten, they've recalled about sixty percent of the vocabulary they were born with. Everything beyond that varies from person to person."

Still kneeling down, Shizuku was unable to process this information, and she couldn't keep her disapproval out of her voice.

"Huh... Can words and meanings really be matched up like that?"

"They match up well enough for people not to notice any problems. Ultimately, when you get down to the core of it, we associate vocabulary with the corresponding concepts more than the things themselves. Even with abstract words, if you can define the concept or understand the meaning, the word follows. It doesn't matter whether the object actually exists or whether you believe in its existence. If you think something is cute, the word *cute* comes to mind. When a child is in pain, they cry, don't they?"

"Th-that's different."

"We don't see it that way. Take Lyshien, for example. Nobody spoke to her until she was freed from her captivity relatively recently, but she didn't have any problems speaking, did she? That's because she had her innate language skills to fall back on."

"...Oh."

Now that he mentioned it, Lyshien had claimed that she'd never spoken to anyone—in other words, nobody had taught her how to use language. Yet despite this, she'd been able to converse normally. It was the orthographic side of things—reading and writing—that she'd had to learn.

"I didn't realize there was an example in such close proximity to me... I'm shocked."

"I'm feeling pretty shocked, too."

As Erik spoke, he appeared to be deep in thought about something. His eyes wandered around aimlessly, but it was obvious that he wasn't just taking in the scenery.

The intense sunlight of Farsas wasn't bothering Shizuku anymore, either. There was so much on her mind that it was a struggle to keep her thoughts from spinning out of control.

In this world, people were inherently equipped with language skills.

It made no sense to her. As Shizuku pondered the absurdity of it all, she recalled something that had tugged at the corner of her mind. It was something that Erik himself had said to her.

“Once, you told me that you we couldn’t be sure that everyone interpreted *white* to be the same color. But if that’s the case, doesn’t the possibility that people understand words differently contradict the notion that language is innate? If it’s something innate, wouldn’t all people understand things the same way?”

“No. That hypothetical was extreme. When I mentioned that possibility, I was just talking about how the meaning of words can vary from person to person. There’s also the question of whether we perceive things differently, but that doesn’t affect the fundamental principle that language is innate. It’s hard to prove that everyone is completely on the same page when it comes to the meaning of each word, even when conversations seem to flow smoothly. We all have different ways of recalling the same word. It’s best to think of their meanings as a matter of probability.”

Erik paused there and looked at Shizuku.

“You shouldn’t assume that everyone experiences things the same way, just because something’s innate. For example, we were both born with the ability to see—but you can’t be certain that we perceive things identically, can you?”

“Don’t we?”

“Probably not. I mean, I can see magic.”

“...Oh yeah.”

There it was. The existence of magic was something that decisively separated the two worlds. Maybe if Shizuku chose to view these linguistic differences as something similar to that, they’d make more sense to her.

If only this infectious disease with no known cause didn’t exist.

Shizuku fell silent, and Erik gazed at her, his expression one of undeniably intense concentration. She gazed back, somewhat absentmindedly, as a shadow of gloom veiled his deep-blue eyes.

According to the book of Genesis, there was once a time where people all spoke the same language and used the same words.

It was a tale from a distant past. A fable.

Was language the work of the divine or an example of human ingenuity?

Was it a tool for thought or a means of communication?

The narratives and historical accounts continued to pile up.

These unknown, hidden answers were all—

Shizuku held her head in her hands, confused.

She was trying to make sense of what she'd learned, but all she could think of was how crazy it sounded. The idea that humans were born knowing certain words was unbelievable. First and foremost, she wanted to see the list of these twenty-six hundred innate words. Maybe people were mistakenly assuming that this knowledge was innate when, actually, kids were learning through exposure.

She could question this all she wanted—but whenever she remembered how children who seemed ordinary to her were considered sick, she reached a mental dead end.

How had it come to this? Shizuku's expression was contorted with anguish, as if she'd swallowed something incredibly sour. She looked at Erik and frowned. He was lost in thought, his expression drawn tighter than usual. After a short while, he let out a small sigh.

"The truth is, there's something I've been skeptical about since I first met you... Or since I first heard you talk about language, at least."

"Is it whether or not I'm human?"

"No. You're starting to sound like King Lars. He's been a bad influence on you."

"Argh."

It seemed like she'd grown accustomed to interacting with tyrants over the previous month. Sensing her legs going numb, Shizuku stopped kneeling and

shifted to a more comfortable sitting position, then asked Erik another question.

“What are you skeptical about? Are you questioning whether language is really innate or not?”

“I’ve never doubted that. There have been plenty of experiments conducted in this world that prove that to be the case... It’s something else. I’ve been wondering where our innate language abilities originate from.”

Erik’s train of thought had likely advanced far beyond this simple question by the time he voiced it; he was just a little slow in expressing his ideas to Shizuku. She took in what he was saying and examined it against her own thoughts, paying more attention to his words than to his handsomely chiseled features.

“The first records concerning innate vocabulary trace back to around fourteen hundred years ago, where it was described as a ‘gift from the gods.’ However, all records from before that era have been lost—and not just those concerning language. All that remains from the distant past are stories that were passed down orally.”

“Oh right. I remember you saying that about myths as well.”

“Yeah. For a long time, innate vocabulary was believed to be a god-given gift to humans. A big reason for that belief is the fact that many words for man-made items are included within that vocabulary, like *clock*, *ship*, and *lock*, for example. These are objects made by humans, yet we’re born knowing the words for them.”

Shizuku followed Erik’s explanation, though something felt very off about the whole thing. If innate language skills had their roots solely in human physiology, it was odd for them to include words for man-made objects. Shizuku didn’t know if there were primitive humans in Erik’s world, but humans must have made some technological advancements since ancient times—not all man-made objects could have existed that far back. So did the word *clock* lie dormant in the human psyche before clocks were invented, or was the word planted within them afterward?

Which came first—a word or its meaning?

Things fitted together almost too well, which must have been why people thought a divine force was at play.

“So the idea is that when tools were invented, gods gave people the words to describe them?”

“Yeah. Some legends even suggest that the inventions themselves were gifts from the gods.”

“I see. But nowadays, there are lots of people who don’t believe in a god, aren’t there? How would they interpret it?”

Apparently, most mages were atheists. Erik himself claimed not to believe in the god Aetea. How did people like him make sense of the unnatural aspects of innate language?

Erik looked at Shizuku’s serious expression and smiled faintly.

“Nowadays, most scholars—including mages—believe in a plane of existence called the common language realm. They think it’s connected to the human soul, and that’s why we’re born with language skills. The existence of that realm hasn’t been proven, and there’s still a lot of debate about what it actually is, but as with the concept of the Negativity, we’ve come to accept that words themselves are a fundamental part of what constitutes a human being... A part of our soul.”

“Whoa...”

Shizuku had been ready to point out any potential contradictions, so she felt stuck when one didn’t immediately present itself. Their concept of the soul was something she couldn’t easily grasp, being from another world, and the realm structure itself seemed to completely set their two worlds apart.

“So you’re saying that grammar and those twenty-six hundred pieces of vocabulary exist in that realm?”

“The number might be higher, but that’s all we know about. However, shortly before I met you...I started to question whether that realm was *really* what provided us with our innate vocabulary.” He had lowered his voice, which made Shizuku vaguely nervous.

Where was the limit to human thought?

After you attempted to shatter deeply ingrained preconceptions, would you uncover the truth or merely end up trapped in another prison of ideas? For some reason, Shizuku's heart began to race, and she pressed a hand against her chest. Maintaining her outward composure, she asked, "What made you question it?"

Erik raised a finger. If he'd had a whiteboard, this would have been the point where he turned around to write on it.

"If the vocabulary we're born with really originated from the soul, why would there be an illness that prevented you from retrieving those words? This has never happened before. According to records, there's never been a widespread occurrence of people being born with damaged souls."

"Oh..."

Shizuku couldn't bring herself to call that little girl a person with a "damaged soul"—if anything, she thought she was the epitome of normalcy. However, cases like hers were an anomaly that this world couldn't ignore. As Shizuku held back a sigh, Erik waved his hand in the air.

"So I came up with a hypothesis. What if the language we're born with is passed down through genes, rather than by the soul? If you think about it that way, this infectious disease isn't an abnormality in the soul but a genetic one. We still wouldn't know the cause, but I think a genetic abnormality is far more likely to occur than the former."

"Oh. Is that why you asked me about genes, too?"

"Yeah. After hearing that people in your world used different spoken languages, I became more and more skeptical of this possibility. It never occurred to me that you weren't born with innate vocabulary. You said it had nothing to do with genes, but the structure of your world is different, too, so I assumed that a different factor must have influenced your language skills there."

Shizuku had heard that being able to roll your tongue was genetic. That could affect your pronunciation, so perhaps genes and language weren't totally

unrelated after all.

Still, genes probably had less to do with language than Erik had expected—and there was no way that words could be inherited through genetics. While Shizuku pondered this seemingly outrageous hypothesis, Erik continued.

“Let’s talk about the continent to the east, for example. Due to the war, there are no records about what language was used there before it was colonized—yet after a massive influx of immigrants from our continent settled there, everyone started speaking the same language, proving that language is innate to everybody, regardless of their race. That said, there are many regions over there where their accents are stronger than here... I thought that might be due to genetic influences.”

“Oh. So mixing people from different races accelerated the spread of the language, but there are still some areas where it hasn’t spread completely?”

“Exactly. Still, there’s a lot that genetics alone can’t explain. Let’s keep using the continent to the east as an example. Shortly after people began migrating from our continent, people here started speaking with a slight accent—even though they didn’t have mixed heritage. People have conducted research into that, but we still don’t know why it happened.”

“Hmm. That *is* a mystery. Perhaps this stuff is genetic, after all.”

“I can’t say for certain. Genes might have something to do with it, but I doubt they’re the only reason for people’s innate language skills. After all, there’s you.”

“Me?”

Shizuku pointed to herself, cocking her head in confusion, and a cold sweat trickled down her back for no apparent reason.

The young mage—who’d once earned himself a unique position within the magic kingdom thanks to his highly regarded knowledge and spell configuration skills—stopped speaking abruptly and looked up at the castle behind him. After checking there was nobody else around, he kept going.

“Have you told anybody about how language works in your world? I know you’ve basically been banned from speaking about those things.”

“Oh. No, I haven’t. I did show the king and Leuticia some of my books, though.”

“Okay. I advise you not to tell anybody that there are different spoken languages in your world or that innate vocabulary doesn’t exist. Depending on the scenario, this could cost you your life.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku’s eyes widened. Their conversation had suddenly taken a strange turn. Shizuku wondered if Erik was joking, but it didn’t seem that he was.

In a quiet voice, Erik expanded on his advice.

“That infectious disease broke out shortly before you arrived from your world. What do you think would happen if someone turned up claiming that these symptoms were normal where they came from, while the whole continent is desperately searching for a cause and a cure?”

“Gah... They wouldn’t think I caused it, would they?”

“They probably would. At the very least, you’re a human from a world with a totally different understanding of how language works. I’m sure they’d do a thorough investigation of you.”

“Argh.”

Lars’s smile came to mind. If he were to find out about this, he wouldn’t waste time with an investigation—he’d come and kill her before anyone else got the chance, all the while telling people, “Once she’s dead, we’ll see the truth.”

Shizuku was turning paler and paler. Seemingly aware of what she was thinking, Erik winced with sympathy.

“Well, I’ve been curious about this issue for a long time, so I’ll do a little more research into it. Hopefully, I can effectively prove that it has nothing to do with you... I’m far from confident about that, though.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate it.”

It was hard to imagine Erik making empty promises, and Shizuku bowed her head to express her sincere gratitude. Why, then, couldn’t she shake that

strange sense of unease?

Erik stood up, and seeing Shizuku look around anxiously, he reached out a hand to reassure her.

“Don’t be too scared. Your presence might become a means to combat the illness.”

“Huh? *My* presence? How come? Are we going to open a kindergarten?”

She didn’t even know how language was taught here in this world, so how did he expect her to teach children about it? Shizuku imagined herself wearing a kindergarten teacher’s apron, talking to the children.

However, Erik just chuckled and cleared up this misunderstanding.

“No, we’re not. You’re receiving the benefits of our innate vocabulary, aren’t you? If we find out the reason why, we might be able to use that to help the children.”

Shizuku was scared.

She didn’t want to acknowledge it. She couldn’t.

But why? she asked herself.

If she were to notice, or if it were to be noticed, then surely—

“Innate vocabulary? I don’t have that. If anything, I was slow to develop my language skills as a kid.”

As she spoke, Shizuku felt a hollow emptiness, as if her words were merely sliding across the surface of something. It was something that she knew—something that was already inside her—but she couldn’t remember it. She got the feeling that she didn’t want to remember, and a chill went down her spine.

Erik seemed worried. As he helped Shizuku to her feet, he looked her in the face.

“Haven’t you realized? I couldn’t help finding it strange, but I didn’t point it out because I thought it might make you uneasy. During our journey together, I’ve had to disregard the idea that innate vocabulary is dependent on the soul.”

He was right in front of her, and for some reason, it felt like he was miles

away.

Shizuku shivered, feeling alienated and restless.

“In your world, people speak different languages, don’t they? If there’s also no such thing as an innate vocabulary, then this is the only way it can make sense. Words don’t originate from the soul.”

Shizuku didn’t know what was normal.

She didn’t know whether she was abnormal, or this world was.

She felt the urge to touch him.

She wanted him to hold her hand. She was just that frightened.

—Please don’t notice.

Don’t say it.

Don’t make me an anomaly.

Forget about it.

Don’t look.

I don’t want you to tell me.

“You weren’t affected by the Negativity. Your soul is different from the souls of the people in my world. So...why are we able to talk to one another?”

Shizuku was grateful that they could communicate.

How would she have made any progress in this unknown world if it wasn’t for that? In pivotal moments fraught with uncertainty, it was words and the people who were willing to listen that had saved her.

It was extremely lucky that she could talk to people—yet she’d never wondered why that was the case.

Why?

Why didn’t she find it strange?

“Wh-why? I-I’m not sure...”

“Right. Initially, I didn’t think anything of it, because an inability to

communicate wasn't a concept that existed for me. When I heard that there were different spoken languages in your world, I thought that was a little odd. Up until this point, I just assumed that our innate languages happened to be the same."

Erik gazed into Shizuku's eyes. He looked like he was trying to see behind them, which made her breath catch in her throat.

"But if there's nothing innate about language in your world, that doesn't add up. You say that languages vary depending on the region or the time period, right? This world is completely different from yours, both culturally and in terms of its history. There's no way that our people would speak a language that was constructed in your world."

Their languages couldn't be the same.

After all, when people in Erik's world spoke about names or places, the pronunciation sounded foreign to her.

Shizuku had realized that—but she'd never wondered why it was.

"You haven't been influenced by innate language in any way since coming to this world, have you? Do you remember when you started being able to communicate? Do you have any ideas?"

Shizuku's head hurt. It felt as if her insides were being hit with a hammer. She pressed her fingers against her temples and staggered, but Erik held her up by her arm. She felt like she was going to collapse, so he caught her and made her sit back down on the grass. When he spotted the beads of sweat on her forehead beneath her black bangs, his expression changed.

"You don't look well. Let's go inside. Maybe the sun's gotten to you."

"No, I'm fine. Just...feeling a little queasy."

"Come inside. You struggle with the heat. I'm sorry I didn't notice before."

Erik effortlessly picked her up in his arms. Under normal circumstances, Shizuku would have asserted that she could walk by herself, but she had no strength in her limbs. She let herself take advantage of his good nature and closed her eyes.

Why did she feel so bad? She remembered when she'd fainted from heatstroke in elementary school during morning assembly. Everything had suddenly become distorted, and before she knew it, she was being lifted up by her teacher. After that incident, she'd always been careful when she went out in the summer.

When had she stopped wearing the hat she always wore on walks? It must've been when she first saw her sister walking with a parasol. The sight had left her mesmerized. With the large brim of her hat covering her face, Shizuku felt like the one person that the world had left behind, and she'd walked behind her sister with her head hung low.

The emotion she'd felt was more akin to loneliness than inferiority, though she'd never spoken to her family about it.

Despite all the time that had passed, that memory had reemerged.

Shizuku wiped her dripping sweat with her hand. As she exhaled, it seemed like mist dispersing. She let out what looked like a hazy breath, then without looking up at Erik, she began to move her parched lips.

"I have no recollection of it... I found myself in the desert, and the next thing I knew, I was able to talk to people."

"I see. Well, there's no need to dwell on it. Your ability to communicate has been a great help."

"Yeah."

The pair entered the shade of the castle, but Erik still didn't put her down. It seemed like he wanted to take her somewhere she could rest. She weakly pressed her hand against her forehead, trying to stop her vision from spinning. Just as she felt like she was about to lose consciousness, a question escaped her lips.

"Why do you think we can understand each other, Erik?"

He'd been the only one to notice.

If anyone could figure it out, he would.

That was why she was asking.

The young man answered with serenity in his eyes.

“There might be something in this world that makes language innate to us, which has been here ever since the age of myths. Alternatively...it may be something that infects people, and it propagates language in that manner.”

His voice was gentle, his arms warm.

Erik’s words made Shizuku breathe a sigh of relief. In the few seconds before drifting off into a deep sleep, she dreamed of something infiltrating her lungs and settling deep within her body, along with the sand of that desert.



Sleep washes everything away.

Distorting worlds, shattering memories—everything is swept away by the waves, leaving only tranquility in its place. Sleep strips away all but what is most essential, enabling everyone to live peaceful lives.

Perhaps the reason that people couldn’t remember everything was because sleep was silently curating their memories for them.

The physical body perishes and is renewed every single day.

In the end, only a tiny fraction of a person’s memories remains within the grip of their small hands.

By the time Shizuku regained consciousness, around two hours had gone by.

When she woke up, she found herself in her own room. Mea was next to her, wringing a wet white cloth.

“Master, are you okay?” she asked, her green eyes wide with surprise.

“Oh, but my work...”

“You’re taking half a day off. It seems there’s still some heat trapped within your body, so you need to rest.”

“Ngh, thank you...”

Shizuku had failed to notice how strong the sun was, and she had ended up collapsing like a little kid. She took the damp cloth from Mea and pressed it against her face. The cool sensation was soothing and made it feel like the

lethargy that had been weighing down her sluggish mind was draining away.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Shizuku looked around the room. There were hardly any of her things there—after all, she’d already packed her belongings and was scheduled to depart for a country to the north two days later.

She started to tell Mea of their plans, but her assistant demon confirmed that Erik had already told her. Things always felt so hectic. Shizuku wanted to apologize for all the chaos she’d put Mea through, but she knew Mea would take it very seriously. Instead, she offered a simple “Sorry.”

After drinking a whole glass of water, Shizuku attempted to climb out of bed—but Mea promptly intervened.

“You can’t get up, Master. You’re suffering from exhaustion.”

“It’s okay, honestly. I’m fine now.”

“No, it’s not. You ended up bedridden with exhaustion once before, remember? I’m going to fetch a magic remedy. Just wait here.”

Shizuku didn’t feel that weak, but as Mea pointed out, she *had* pushed herself too hard once before, so she smiled awkwardly and nodded. The green-haired girl bowed and left the room.

The sun was still high in the sky. Shizuku, now alone, took the water jug from her bedside and filled her glass—but before she had the chance to take a sip, there was a sudden knock on the door.

“Yes?” Shizuku answered, expecting it to be Harve or Erik. It was too soon for Mea to have returned.

The person who came in, however, was neither of those two.

It was a young man with gray hair and a cynical scowl on his face. Shizuku had seen him twice before, and the sight of him made her go as white as a sheet.

“Ah...!”

It was the man who’d tried to take Lyshien away but had retreated; the man who she’d met at the back of the castle. This time, though, he wasn’t wearing a dark-blue mage’s uniform. Harve had conducted some further investigations

into him since their previous encounter and claimed that there was no royal mage that fit his description.

In which case, who *was* this man? Before Shizuku could ask, he began to speak.

“Don’t make a racket.”

The young man casually raised his right hand, warning her that he’d use magic if she raised her voice, and Shizuku bit her lip. Just then, another man entered through the open door. He was tall and muscular, and he looked like a soldier. The man stared at her with masklike impassivity, and the intensity of his eyes put Shizuku on edge. Keeping her voice low, she asked them a question.

“What...are you two doing?”

“We’ve come to fetch you.”

“Huh?”

They must have got the wrong person—but just as she was about to tell them that, the man who looked like a soldier covered her mouth with his hand. Shizuku was so shocked by the whole situation that it took a while for the horror to sink in.

A moment ago, that man had been standing by the door. He’d closed the two-meter gap between them in just two strides. Intense alarm bells were ringing for Shizuku, and she immediately started trying to find something to defend herself with, but the man stopped her from moving her head, his hand still over her mouth.

“We aren’t going to hurt you, but we know what you said earlier today. This disease that’s infecting children seems normal to you, doesn’t it?”

They’d heard her.

All the remaining heat drained from her body. She thought they’d been alone earlier. In fact, she hadn’t seen anyone anywhere near them. Yet somehow, this man had overheard her.

Erik’s words, “*This could cost you your life,*” started replaying over the top of the alarm bells in her head.

“Hurry up, Faneet,” said the mage with the dark-gray hair. He sounded annoyed.

Meanwhile, the man called Faneet glared sternly down at Shizuku.

“If you stay in this country any longer, your safety will be at risk. The king may capture and kill you. We’ve come to fetch you before that happens.”

Shizuku tried to shake her head violently. She didn’t need to be “fetched” by them. She was leaving soon anyway. But with the man’s grip on her head so firm, she couldn’t even do that.

The man looked down into her large eyes, which were filled with fear and denial, and sneered. Then he suddenly pushed her light body onto the bed and brought out the small bow he was carrying on his back.

“You’re going to leave this country and come to mine. That’s a done deal, and it’s what you want, too. Isn’t it?”

“Th-that’s not what I...”

There was no way that Shizuku would want that. Was he threatening her? As Shizuku saw him set an arrow to the bowstring, she glanced toward the door in a panic, but the man’s monotonous voice continued heedless of her distress.



“You will come willingly,” the man told her, readying his bow and fixing it on his target.

Yet it wasn’t Shizuku he was aiming at—but someone standing in the courtyard.

“Wait...!”

His target was a mage, who was talking to a soldier outside. Even from a distance, Shizuku could tell who it was. She’d recognize him anywhere. There was no mistaking it.

Shizuku covered her mouth with both hands. She almost shouted his name, but the man’s glare kept her quiet.

She glanced briefly at the door, where the gray-haired mage was standing with his arms crossed, and he issued Shizuku a frosty warning.

“I’ve cast a barrier on the door. No one can get in, so just give up.”

There was a hint of boredom to the mage’s voice. He didn’t sound like he had when he let Lyshien go.

Shizuku was already trapped inside a cage. Faneet addressed Shizuku directly, his voice merciless and uncompromising.

“Now, let’s hear your answer. Time is running out. Are you coming with me or not...? Decide quickly.”

Shizuku felt a sense of despair as she gazed at Erik’s back, where the man’s sharp arrow was aimed.

How had it come to this? She bit hard on her quivering lip, and it occurred to her how sudden and anticlimactic farewells could really be.



Carrying a magic remedy and a pot of tea on her tray, Mea knocked on the door, but there was no response from inside. Finding this peculiar, she opened it herself.

“Master? Are you there?”

There was no sign of anybody inside the room. Not only that, but her master’s

belongings were gone, too. Mea put down her tray and looked around.

On the small table was a jug of water, a glass, and a torn-off piece of loose-leaf paper. She picked it up. On it were two words, written in the language of this world.

Thank you.

“Master?”

Outside, the sun had started to set.

As the night crept in, so, too, did stillness and quiet.

Mea surveyed the room, which was growing darker by the minute, but no matter how long she waited, Shizuku never opened the door and came back.

END OF BABEL ACT TWO

Afterword



Kuji Furumiya here. Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *Babel*, Volume 2. At long last, Erik and Shizuku have made it to Farsas. Around three hundred years after the period in which *Unnamed Memory* is set, Farsas has become the magic kingdom. The Farsasian royal family can be a bit of a handful, though, so stay tuned to see how Shizuku deals with them and find out what happens next.

Please allow me a moment to express my thanks to a few people.

Thank you to my editors for their continued support. I am truly grateful to both of you for accompanying me through the publication of this unconventional fantasy tale. It's a unique format, with one single story spread over four volumes, but I hope I can make it to the end without causing you any difficulties. I'll try my very best.

Thank you to Haruyuki Morisawa for creating such wonderful illustrations for this volume as well! I apologize for introducing so many new characters! It's truly moving to see all these different characters being brought to life through your artwork!

Lastly, I want to thank my readers for their continued support! I hope that you all enjoy this story, which is revisiting the issue of language—something that has become commonplace and less of a concern in fantasy literature over the past twelve years.

I hope to see you again in some era of the magic kingdom. Thank you very much!

Kuji Furumiya

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