

Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

UNI

Babel

The Bewitching Princess in the Birdcage



II

Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

Niké

A mage and aide to the
princess of Kisk.

Babel

The Bewitching Princess
in the Birdcage

“Hurry
up and
make your
decision.
There’s a
barrier in
place, so
no one’s
coming to
save you.”

Faneet

A soldier and aide to
the princess of Kisk.

**“Raise
your
head.”**

Shizuku obeyed her command and looked up. She met the princess's glistening amber gaze.

Ortea, the princess of Kisk, was a beautiful young woman who reminded Shizuku of a bewitching flower.

Shizuku knew that they were the same age, but it would have been hard to tell by looking at her. Ortea seemed to be simultaneously a young girl and a mature woman, like a jewel that changed color depending on what angle you looked at it from. “Enchantress” was perhaps the most fitting way to describe her.

**“So?
What
can you
do for
me? I
want to
hear it
from
your
own
lips.”**

Ortea

The princess of Kisk. People fear her more than the current king and say that she is secretly the one in charge.





Shizuku

Willett

Yura

Babel

IN

The Bewitching Princess in the Birdcage

Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa



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Babel III Kuji Furumiya

Translation by Amelia Imogen Cover art by Haruyuki Morisawa

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Babel

The Bewitching Princess
in the Birdcage



Kuji Furumiya

Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

1. The Unhatched Wish

2. A Flower Bud in the Shade

3. A Birdcage of Iron Chains

4. Gentle Fingers

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.

⟨ Farsas ⟩

Lars

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

Leuticia

Lars's younger sister. An exceptional mage.

⟨ Kisk ⟩

Ortea

The younger sister of King Beelhurse, the present ruler of Kisk. A powerful individual, she's considered to be the true leader of the country.

Niké

A mage and aide to Ortea. Works as a spy all over the continent, acting under Ortea's orders.

Faneet

A soldier and aide to Ortea. Has made a vow of allegiance to his master.

Beelhurse

The present king of Kisk. A gentle ruler, he's a far cry from Ortea and her stormy temperament.

Yura

A court lady who works for Kisk Castle. Becomes friends with Shizuku, who happens to be the same age as her.

Willett

A court lady who works for Kisk Castle. A fifteen-year-old etiquette apprentice.

The Lands of Babel

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



The Great Nation of Kisk lies at the center of the continent.

It is a land born out of a long war between three countries.

Its first queen, Tryphina, married the princes of the two other nations and bore five children. All of the secrets and troubles held by the beautiful, compassionate queen remained inside a birdcage that didn't open.

It stayed deep inside the castle for all those years.

That birdcage made of iron chains.

1. The Unhatched Wish



“Your soul is different from the souls of the people in my world.”

That was what Shizuku’s traveling companion, Erik, had told her.

He’d been by her side for the entirety of her journey, which must have been how he’d come to this realization.

Erik, a mage and researcher specializing in the magic script, had appointed himself as her chaperone after she’d found herself transported away from Japan and into this new world. In return, Shizuku had been teaching him new languages. Eventually, their journey brought them to the magic kingdom of Farsas.

Not even Farsas Castle could offer Shizuku a means of getting home; however, the royal family did share some secret lore with her. Thanks to that revelation, Erik and Shizuku had become aware of cursed artifacts capable of interfering from outside the world—and that some individuals could wield artifacts that could counter those mystical objects from beyond.

And so the pair’s next step had been to leave the country in pursuit of any relevant clues.

Just before they were supposed to depart, however, Shizuku and Erik realized something that set the two of them apart.

In this world where magic was commonplace, every person was born with inherent language skills, and children learned to use the most basic of words before the age of three without anyone having to teach them. This was completely different from what Shizuku knew; in a way, it was even more unfamiliar to her than the existence of magic.

However, this difference posed a grave threat to Shizuku, since an illness that deprived children of their innate language skills had begun to spread. If someone found out that Shizuku came from another world where innate language did not exist, they might suspect her as the cause of the illness—even though she knew nothing about it.

As such, the pair had decided to exercise even greater caution during their ensuing journey. Or at least, that was the plan...

※

“All right, give us an answer. We’re running out of time. You need to decide whether you’re coming with us or not.”

“...Huh?” squeaked Shizuku, so anxious that her throat had gone dry.

The man had made it sound like a question, but it was a threat.

Shizuku scanned the small room with her eyes. It was one of the rooms inside Farsas Castle. There shouldn’t have been any way for suspicious individuals to break in, yet these two men had paid Shizuku an unexpected visit.

One of them was the gray-haired mage Shizuku had seen twice before—once before reaching Farsas, and once within the castle grounds.

The other person, who was currently hurling questions her way, was a man called Faneet.

Faneet had suddenly stormed in and started demanding that Shizuku come with him, and his muscular arms held a bow and arrow at the ready. He was aiming at Erik’s back, out through the window and into the courtyard.

“That’s...not really a question, but a threat,” Shizuku managed to strain her voice enough to say.

“Hurry up and make your decision. There’s a barrier in place, so no one’s coming to save you,” the young mage said impatiently.

Standing in front of the door with his arms crossed, he made no effort to conceal his prickly attitude. Yet this actually made Shizuku feel somewhat calmer. She looked back at him and responded, refusing to hide her resentment.

“Hurry up?” There’s no way I can make a decision when you’re pressuring me like that. Besides, who even are you people?”

The two men hadn’t even introduced themselves yet. By threatening her into agreeing, they were just trying to make it look like Shizuku was going with them of her own accord.

The young mage sensed a faint hint of hostility from Shizuku.

“Ask Faneet,” he snapped. “This has nothing to do with me. I mean, what can an ordinary girl like you do for us?”

“An ordinary girl?”

“Enough, Niké,” Faneet said dismissively.

Niké snorted in response. Despite being on the same side, they didn’t seem to make a great team. And going by their brief exchange, although Faneet knew about Shizuku, he didn’t seem to have informed Niké that she was from another world.

Faneet nodded as if to confirm Shizuku’s assessment.

“I have no intention of needlessly publicizing your situation. What matters is your skills.”

“I don’t have any skills... Besides, where are you planning to take me?” asked Shizuku.

“We’re going to Kisk. The large nation east of here.”

“Kisk?”

Erik had mentioned that place before—a Great Nation where the younger sister of the king was famed for her cruelty.

Shizuku posed a question to Niké, who was in front of the door.

“Were you from Kisk all along? You were posing as a Farsasian mage.”

“I don’t remember ever claiming to be from Farsas,” Niké retorted. “I go anywhere my master commands.”

Was his master the notorious princess? The thought made Shizuku shudder. Then she turned her gaze toward Faneet.

“...Are you planning on examining me? They’ve done plenty of that already here in Farsas.”

“I am aware. It seems the king was persistent in his tests.”

“It’s true, but I’d rather not be reminded of it...”

After being seriously injured, everything from Shizuku’s organs to her blood had been analyzed. From then on, she had been subjected to regular physical and mental tests by the king. She lost her appetite whenever she recalled those intense, daily drills, but they had significantly improved her physical stamina. Shizuku realized she should be grateful for that—but she still had no intention of viewing the experience in a positive light.

Still, this wasn’t the time for sulking. Faneet’s hands remained steady holding the bow. It must have required considerable strength to keep the bowstring drawn, yet he seemed unperturbed. He must have been well trained.

“...If you want me to go to Kisk, then tell me why, and what I’ll get in exchange.”

“You are wanted as the princess’s playmate. As for your compensation...that’s up to you; however, I guarantee you’ll have everything you need.”

“Her ‘playmate’? Is the princess a little girl?”

“She’ll turn nineteen this year.”

“So she’s the same age as me...”

Was this princess the king’s younger sister?

If so, it was a dangerous proposition. Shizuku didn’t want her insides being opened up for examination again.

She pretended to think things over for a moment, then nodded calmly.

“Fine...I’ll go.”

“Then let us make our preparations. Niké will open a transit gate.”

“I’ve already packed my stuff.”

Slipping past Faneet, Shizuku reached for her bag. She shoved in some items that were sticking out and discreetly took out a small magic sphere. Then

Shizuku slung the bag over her shoulder and looked behind her.

Faneet had begun to lower his bow, and Niké was chanting an incantation to create a teleportation gate.

All Shizuku needed was a brief opening.

This was Farsas Castle—if there was a commotion, someone would be sure to notice it.

Shizuku ran as fast as she could, then hurled the magic sphere at Faneet's face.

“What the...?”

Faneet attempted to deflect it with his hand, but at that very moment, the room was engulfed in a flash of white light. The light was so powerful that it made the man's eyes burn, and he used an arm to shield himself.

Meanwhile, Shizuku had shut her eyes and was sprinting straight toward the exit.

Niké was still standing in front of the door, but it looked like he had also been blinded by the sudden light.

This was her opportunity to push him aside and flee into the corridor. As Shizuku was running, she opened her eyes slightly to see Niké covering his face with his hand, just as planned. She rammed into his shoulder, causing him to stumble, and reached for the door.

“I-it won’t open?!”

“...I told you there was a magic barrier in place, you stupid woman,” Niké responded in an irritated voice.

At the same time, someone grabbed Shizuku’s arm from behind and casually yanked her toward them—Faneet. Holding onto her arm and half-hoisting her into the air, he peered at her face.

“Don’t you think that this kind of behavior will undermine the trust we have for each other?”

“Nothing you’ve done so far has made me want to trust you.”

Shizuku was no longer trying to hide the animosity in her words.

Faneet chuckled self-deprecatingly and returned his bow to its original position on his back.

A wave of relief washed over Shizuku. Now he couldn't use Erik to blackmail her. Plus, if Shizuku was the person they wanted, she doubted they'd go so far as to take her life. All she needed to do was buy herself as much time as she could. When Mea came back, she would notice that the door wouldn't open and call for help.

"I'm not going anywhere," she told them. "You two can keep the princess company instead."

"There's always somebody keeping the princess company. If you don't come, a sick child will bear the brunt of it," Faneet said.

"...A child?"

Faneet let go of her arm, then reached for her again. Shizuku found his large hand a little creepy and instinctively recoiled.

The man spoke calmly, his hand still outstretched.

"If you fail to please the princess, the child will be killed. In three months, a baby will be born in the castle...however, their existence will be covered up if they are determined to be sick. What will you do? If you insist that the illness in question is not an illness at all, you should be able to meet the princess's expectations and raise that child."

"Huh...? A child's being born...? Whose child?"

"It will be the child of a particular noblewoman. Due to certain circumstances, the princess is taking care of the pregnant mother. However, how long she protects the woman will depend on the baby's condition. If it turns out that the child has been afflicted by the epidemic, they will be useless to the princess."

"Useless...? But they'll have barely left the womb."

Would the child be viewed that way because they didn't have innate language skills? Issues like that were totally fixable. Besides, no one should be deemed "useless" because they can't speak; they just need to be taught. That's all it

would take for them to grow up like anyone else.

Feeling a flicker of annoyance, Shizuku furrowed her brow. She cast a glance through the window.

“...Let me ask my companion about this. If I go, then he’ll have to join me.”

There was a chance that these men were tricking her—but the story they’d told her was too disturbing to ignore. That was why Shizuku wanted to tell Erik about it. However, Faneet shook his head in response to her request.

“I don’t recommend that. The princess knows that a certain mage was responsible for managing Farsas’s curses. If he were to come to Kisk, it would almost certainly spark a new conflict.”

“By that...do you mean she’d coax forbidden information about curses out of him and put it into action?”

Faneet nodded solemnly. When Shizuku turned around, she noticed that Niké was grimacing slightly from his position in front of the door.

Forbidden spells were taboo for mages.

Shizuku had witnessed their consequences throughout her journey. Moreover, she didn’t know what would happen if Farsas were to let other countries gain knowledge of their forbidden spells. The knowledge Erik possessed was just that dangerous. He’d refuse to disclose it, even if it meant putting his own life at risk.

Shizuku gasped as she imagined the worst-case scenario.

That was when Faneet courteously knelt in front of her. He extended his hand toward Shizuku, who was perfectly still.

“I know I’m asking a lot of you. I apologize if you’re unsatisfied doing things this way, but please, give it some consideration. Are you willing to stand in front of the princess—and use your skills to save that child?”

Shizuku looked down at the man’s hand as if it were some sort of foreign object. Suddenly, her memories of the past six months came flooding back.

Why had she ended up in this world?

She had so few clues. Once again, she pondered what she was there for.

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It only took a moment to teleport through the transit gate.

Shizuku could see the castle garden through the window. It didn't look much different from the one in Farsas.

When Shizuku pulled her face away from the glass, she noticed that she'd left some fingerprints behind. Frowning, she took her handkerchief out of her pocket to wipe them off. As she absentmindedly cleaned up the smudges, the door opened and Faneet stepped inside.

"Why are you polishing the window?" he asked, looking puzzled.

"It was bothering me. Doesn't it bother you when only part of something is clean?"

Faneet seemed to give up trying to understand and continued as if she hadn't said a word.

"How are your preparations going? The princess isn't strict about time, but we need to go sooner rather than later."

"Punctuality is important, no matter who you're dealing with."

"You're right about that—but the princess doesn't even have a clock in her room."

"People actually live like that...? Well, she *is* royalty."

Shizuku couldn't help but judge them for how freely they lived, but she also found that sense of freedom slightly intriguing. Royals seemed to be impossible for ordinary folk to understand. Lars was a perfect example of that.

As she left the room, Shizuku found herself unconsciously glancing at her shoulder, but Mea was nowhere to be seen. She had wanted to bring her assistant demon with her and had asked the two men for permission, but her request was denied. They probably didn't want to let her have any power. That was unsurprising, but for the first time since arriving in her new world, Shizuku felt like she was truly alone. It made her feel sad and helpless.

Even so, it might have been fortunate that she didn't go and meet this

woman, nicknamed the “Bewitching Princess,” with Mea by her side.

Shizuku clenched her fists tightly as she entered the antechamber.

“You’re late.”

Those were the first words out of Niké’s mouth. He’d been waiting for them, and Shizuku glared back at the man in the black robe.

While Faneet was curt yet respectful, Niké’s attitude left a lot to be desired. His initial encounter with Shizuku had been terrible, so that was hardly surprising. At this point, it was evident that they wouldn’t get along.

Shizuku remembered when she’d seen him dressed as a Farsasian royal mage.

“Are you always getting up to this sort of trouble? Is spying your main job?” she asked him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know. More to the point, I’m shocked that you still have a baby face—even in that outfit.”

In preparation to meet the princess, Shizuku had changed into a long-sleeved blouse with a raised collar and a long skirt. She looked like a classic teacher, but her face was still the same.

“Shut up, Samothrace,” Shizuku quipped back in a cold tone of voice.

“Huh? What are you talking about? Are you stupid or something?”

“Don’t look down on me just because I said something you don’t understand. That won’t get you anywhere,” responded Shizuku.

“Why should I care about something irrelevant?”

“Mind your manners, Niké. She’s the princess’s guest,” said Faneet, quashing any attempt for the pair to continue their unproductive exchange.

“Her guest? You must be confused—she’s more like a toy. Know your place and stop being rude,” Niké told her.

“That’s my line,” snapped Shizuku, the hostility clear in her voice.

Niké tutted softly. “I shall inform the princess. In the meantime, you should come to grips with the position you find yourself in.”

With that, Niké started walking toward the room. Once he'd disappeared, Shizuku found herself edging closer to the open door. She could hear Niké's voice coming from inside.

"Excuse me for intruding, Princess. I come with some news for you."

Not only were his words uncharacteristically servile, but his tone of voice sounded meek, too. A woman's voice followed soon after.

"So what's the news? If it's something trivial, I won't hesitate to remove your head from your shoulders," she said in an amused tone.

"...Is she the Queen of Hearts?" Shizuku couldn't help but murmur.

Once the words passed her lips, Shizuku became dismayed by the ridiculousness of her own remark. She might have been living in a magical world, but that was a nonsensical fairy tale; characters like that couldn't exist in real life. In fact, she wished the king of Farsas wasn't a real person—but he was, whether she liked it or not.

What Shizuku was hearing was also undeniably real. The princess's tone of voice made it sound like she would take pleasure in peeling the skin off anything or anyone she touched. That alone was enough to instill fear in Shizuku.

She held her breath, trying to remain unnoticed.

"I must apologize. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you any more about Farsas's forbidden spell incident, howev—"

There was a smacking sound, as if someone had just been slapped in the face.

Shizuku found herself flinching, as if she were the one who'd been hit.

The woman spoke again, her voice as cold as ice.

"You're a complete fool. A child would make a better emissary than you."

"...No words can express how sorry I am to have failed to live up to your expectations."

"I'm tired of listening to you. If a task this simple is too much for you, then there's no point in keeping you around. How about I feed you to the livestock

instead? It wouldn't matter to you if you lost an arm, would it?"

She mocked him in a way that only someone who knew their own power could.

The tense atmosphere seeped out of the room, making Shizuku feel as though her legs were sinking into the ground.

She'd heard that the king's younger sister was cruel, so she was definitely living up to her reputation—and not in a good way. If she treated people who worked for her this badly, how would she treat everyone else? Shizuku covered her mouth with her hand.

She'd been in life-threatening situations many times before, and there had even been moments when she'd had to face danger alone, having been separated from Erik.

This time, however, was different: *She had been the one to leave him.* Shizuku had left Farsas and come to Kisk without telling Erik. She couldn't count on him to save her, and she knew she shouldn't drag him into any more trouble. She was more alone than she ever had been since arriving in this world.

The fear made her skin crawl as that alluring voice continued to speak.

"You should know better than anyone what fate befell those who tried and failed to ingratiate themselves with me. Don't assume you're any different."

"...I understand," Niké responded, meekly accepting her abuse. It was as if he were a completely different person.

Shizuku involuntarily took a deep breath in, then whispered to Faneet beside her.

"Is she just threatening him? There's a rumor going around about her gouging out the eyes of a mage who dared to criticize her. That's got to be an exaggeration, right?"

"No—it's true. One member of the nobility who angered her was executed just the other day."

"...I see."

People would soon realize she was all talk if she kept issuing empty threats to

her subordinates. It sounded like she had no qualms about executing those who displeased her, just as the rumors suggested.

Noticing that Shizuku's hands were shaking, Faneet expanded on his previous remark.

"She's unsparing, but not unreasonable. When she discovers that you can help her in a way that nobody else can, she's sure to treat you accordingly."

"Can I, though...?"

Shizuku was unique in that she came from another world—but that was hard to prove. Back in Farsas, she'd vowed to Lars that she was just human; however, this time the situation couldn't be more different.

She pressed her temples.

"There's a child on the way, right?"

"Yes."

It was that piece of information that had driven Shizuku to come to Kisk. She couldn't let a child be killed for having a language impediment.

That said, up until this very moment, part of her hadn't been able to fully believe the story. Somewhere in her heart, she'd deluded herself into thinking that nobody would ever do such a thing to a child.

However, Faneet had been telling the truth.

Shizuku could feel herself becoming more and more confused, so she gently shook her head. Then she closed her eyes and confronted her thoughts.

She couldn't let her anxiety paralyze her.

She had to prepare herself for what was to come. There was no point in second-guessing herself now. The princess's harsh personality was precisely what had spurred her to come all this way alone: to stand in front of the woman. Nobody else was going to do it for her.

She had two aims.

Her first was to ensure that Erik, who knew a lot about forbidden spells, didn't become the princess's target.

Her second was to present education as a cure for the language impediment that was infecting the children of the continent.

Those were the two objectives that Shizuku needed to accomplish. Both goals would be hard to achieve if she'd stayed behind in Farsas—the second more than the first.

Lars was in Farsas, and he would never learn to tolerate Shizuku. If she touched on the issue of the children's language impediment, there was a risk that Shizuku's entire existence would be covered up, as Erik had warned her.

However, there was a chance she could dispel concerns about the epidemic from inside another one of the Great Nations. Shizuku wanted people to accept her way of thinking about it, no matter how long it took. Not being born with innate language skills wasn't a death sentence for children. If people came to realize that, they'd stop fearing the disease and grieving their children's futures.

Perhaps *this* was the reason why Shizuku had ended up in this world. As that grandiose fantasy crossed her mind, she couldn't help but smile a little.

She must have finally calmed down, because behind her closed eyelids she could see herself walking into the distance.

"...I'm going to be fine," Shizuku reassured herself.

It was too early to retreat; she hadn't even taken one step forward yet. Plus, if she gave up now, she was sure to regret it. It would haunt her forever if her cowardice got the better of her and she ran away from what she needed to do.

That was why she was going to be fine.

Shizuku raised her face, and she heard Faneet whisper something quietly to her.

"Watch what you say. From this point on, you're the only person who can protect yourself from the princess."

"I know."

In return for Shizuku accompanying him, Faneet had promised to keep her otherworldly origins to himself. He'd agreed to introduce her as someone who was simply trying to combat the illness, and to try his best to find a way for her

to get back home while she was accompanying the princess.

Faneet must have had his own priorities, but at any rate, he seemed to want Shizuku to stay safe inside the castle.

And so Shizuku had accepted these conditions. She didn't mention the meddling interlopers from outside the world—a confidential matter for the Farsasian royal family—but she *did* request a particular book that was key to her next objective. After all, there was a chance it was one of the interlopers' cursed artifacts.

The book in question documented secret histories and forbidden curses, and it was said to be in the possession of a woman in the northern part of the continent.

This woman might have been the mastermind behind the forbidden spell incident in Candela, and Shizuku asked for help finding her.

Now she just had to do what she could.

“...All right, I’m ready.”

Standing in front of the door, Shizuku pressed her trembling feet firmly against the ground.

From this point on, she was solely responsible for carving out her own path. Gone were the mage who’d helped her out of the goodness of his heart and the demon girl who’d stayed by her side on lonely nights. She’d turned her back on their kindness. The least she could do was try not to complain.

Until she was able to go back home, she had to do everything she could, no matter how much of a struggle it was. Venturing into the unknown was something that everyone had to deal with at some point, even if they might regret it.

“Excuse me,” Shizuku said as she stepped into the room.

The dimly lit space was filled with a suffocating aroma. It almost felt as if the air was tinged with color, and Shizuku automatically held her breath. Before long, though, she reminded herself to maintain her composure and carried on walking.

The princess was slouching on a chaise longue in the center of the room. Hiding half of her face with her fan, she gave Shizuku a curious stare.

Shizuku, however, didn't look the princess directly in the eye. Instead, she smoothly lowered her gaze and knelt before her, just as Faneet had instructed her to do.

Staring at the floor, Shizuku introduced herself.

"It is an honor to meet you. My name is Shizuku."

"So you're the girl that man has taken a liking to?"

Shizuku stayed silent as the princess scrutinized her.

She must have been talking about Lars. What kind of misunderstanding had been going around? Shizuku wished she could use some kind of dragnet to scoop up these mysterious rumors, but there was no use dwelling on what had already happened. For the moment, Shizuku's priority was making herself seem like a valuable asset.

"Raise your head," the princess ordered.

Shizuku obeyed her command and looked up. She met the princess's glistening amber gaze.

Ortea, the princess of Kisk, was a beautiful young woman who reminded Shizuku of a bewitching flower.

Shizuku knew they were the same age, but it would have been hard to tell looking at her. Ortea seemed to be simultaneously a young girl and a mature woman, like a jewel that changed color depending on what angle you looked at it from. "Enchantress" was perhaps the most fitting way to describe her.

She had several layers of pale, thin silks draped around her body, with a crimson sash loosely wrapped around her waist. Her bare, ivory-colored forearms had a captivating allure that even another woman like Shizuku could pick up on.

While Leuticia was described as an ethereal beauty with an aura as unyielding as crystal, Ortea's harsh yet enigmatic allure was more akin to obsidian. She may not have had features as fine as Leuticia's, but Ortea was so curiously

bewitching that it was hard to drag one's eyes away from her. Whether one found her charm sinister or enchanting depended on the individual.

Ortea narrowed her eyes at Shizuku. With her mouth still covered by her fan, the princess began to speak in a melodic voice that sounded almost as if someone were plucking the strings of an instrument.

"I ordered you to bring the man who was accompanying her, too. You're useless, Faneet."



Shizuku tensed up, as though she'd just been frozen to the spot. The princess had intended to summon Erik to Kisk after all.

She couldn't let that happen. Shizuku needed to make Ortea lose interest in him and direct it to herself.

She let out a deep breath and recited the speech she'd prepared.

"I regret to inform you that the Farsasian king's younger sister has wiped his memories, causing him to forget all confidential information. At this point, Your Highness, he would not be able to live up to your expectations."

"Be quiet. *I'm* the one who decides whether he lives up to my expectations or not."

Her sharp words startled Shizuku and caused her to tremble—but as scary as the princess's tone was, it seemed like this was no more than a warning.

"Everything that woman does is tactless. Top mage or not, she's incredibly bland," the princess grumbled, closing her fan.

This time, she must have been talking about Leuticia. Shizuku had heard that Farsas and Kisk weren't on particularly good terms, and that seemed to be the case. Feeling anxious, she tried as hard as she could to keep her expression neutral.

Ortea's gaze intensified as she stared at Shizuku.

"So? What can *you* do for me? I want to hear it from your own lips."

Shizuku had known that this question was coming.

The princess had probably already been told who Shizuku was and why she'd been brought there. Now she wanted to hear it from her directly. Having known that this was her plan, Shizuku summoned her courage to respond.

Forcing a confident smile, Shizuku straightened her back and looked up at Ortea.

"Princess, I come bearing a solution for the illness afflicting children all across the continent."

"A solution? To prevent it or cure it?"

"I'm going to cure it. In fact, I have been interacting with children with similar symptoms for some time," Shizuku responded.

This wasn't a total lie, but it wasn't the whole truth, either. Shizuku just wanted two things: time and an opportunity. Once she had them, she was sure she could make the most of the situation. She needed to pique the princess's interest as much as possible and convince Ortea that she could trust her.

"Actually, Mio's better at this than I am," she'd muttered to Faneet—but in this world, nobody knew about her family.

Two years younger than her, Shizuku's little sister was extremely eloquent. She never let anyone intimidate her and always confidently expressed her opinions. While some people found her assertiveness off-putting, Shizuku respected her sister and even thought she was pretty cool.

Mio was always admired by those around her, but even she had her weaknesses. Since they were family, Shizuku knew that better than anyone. Yet Mio would never reveal her weaknesses at a time like this; she would have resolutely gotten her feelings across.

So Shizuku blinked and steadied her gaze, fighting the urge to look away.

"...Mio, can you lend me some of your strength for a moment?"

A sweet aroma filled her lungs, almost invading her senses.

Ortea looked at her, encouraging her to continue. Shizuku kept her voice low, knowing it would start to shake if she let her guard down. With a clear mind, she took control of her mental state and calmed herself.

"Your Highness," she began. "While preventing the illness may be challenging, we can still address it. These children are simply having a harder time producing words than they did before. With the help of others, the children will regain their language skills within just a few years."

"A few years, huh? Sounds like quite a lengthy endeavor."

"Children have always needed time to grow. Now they'll just need to learn language on top of that."

Shizuku's unruffled reply made Ortea narrow her eyes with suspicion, and she

tapped her closed fan against her hand.

“How exactly can we assist them? Do we need to use magic?”

“We’ll use *language* to unearth their language skills,” Shizuku responded, summoning the confidence she was sure she’d have one day in the future.

Things might work differently in this world, so there was a chance she’d fail to teach the children effectively, yet she refused to entertain those doubts. Shizuku was convinced she would succeed. In doing so, she could bring about a brighter future for herself and for the children.

“People who have already acquired the language can serve as a catalyst by speaking to the children, coaxing out the words within their vocabulary. No magic power or spells are required. If those who know the language simply lend a hand, then eventually the children will start conversing like they were supposed to—with no trace of any impediment.”

“Hmph... Is that something that anyone can do? It doesn’t have to be you?”

“If we can come up with a method that everyone else can grasp, then yes.”

From this point on, Shizuku would have to bargain with the princess—and bluff a little, too.

Eventually, language education needed to become something that everybody could provide. However, right now, it was vital that Shizuku wasn’t thought to be unnecessary. With that in mind, she dared to look Ortea in the eye, assuming an air of importance.

It was impossible to tell what Ortea was thinking as she flashed Shizuku what looked like a mocking smile. As gorgeous as it was, there was a hint of wickedness to her expression, as though she could read Shizuku like a book.

Shizuku could feel an intangible pressure, and her back started to sweat. She didn’t let her unease show on her face, but Ortea laughed at her anyway.

“And you really believe that *you* can come up with such a method?” the princess asked.

“With your permission, Your Highness, I shall demonstrate the results of my hypothesis in your country. Other nations are focusing solely on uncovering the

cause of the illness, and they are trying to cure it with magic. However, debating the essence of the soul is pointless. All we need to do is restore these children's lost abilities."

"Did you play this trick on the king of Farsas, too?"

The princess's sharp retort would undoubtedly have sent a chill down Shizuku's spine if she hadn't anticipated it—but she had. Lars didn't know anything.

"I haven't broached the topic with him. I knew he wouldn't take my advice, so there was no point in trying."

"Then why did he keep you by his side?"

"The king of Farsas suspected that there might be something strange about me. I don't know why he thought that, though."

Ortea snorted with laughter. It wasn't clear whether she was laughing at Shizuku, Lars, or both of them.

It was fortunate for Shizuku that the illness hadn't been going around for very long.

At some point, someone else would realize that education could help children regain their language skills. However, it would likely take several years for the basis and methodology behind such teaching to be publicized and for the knowledge to become widely accepted. Shizuku, meanwhile, had the common sense and knowledge from her old world to back her up, giving her a head start as she raced toward the likely outcome. It was that advantage that put Shizuku in a position to help the children. Her goal for the time being was to lead them by the hand.

"Hmm, I see."

Ortea opened her fan again. Her amber eyes, fixed on Shizuku, seemed to be taunting her.

"Will you be able to deliver results?"

"I'm sure of it," Shizuku replied.

If Mio were in Shizuku's shoes, she would have been able to muster a smile.

She'd demonstrate her unwavering conviction through her actions. So Shizuku pasted a proud grin on her face—just like her sister would have. To win over someone as powerful as the princess, she needed to convey an excessive level of confidence.

For Ortea, who would soon have a newborn child to attend to, it must have been an intriguing offer. The best-case scenario was for the child not to get sick; however, the next-best option was to eradicate all traces of the sickness they'd contracted. Shizuku, who claimed she could eliminate its symptoms, could serve as a contingency plan. She was betting on Ortea choosing that option.

Before she knew it, Shizuku's sense of smell had become numbed by the powerful fragrance.

She found it hard to breathe as she waited for a response, and suddenly, Ortea let out a laugh. She pointed her folded fan toward Shizuku.

“All right. If you’re *that* confident, I’ll let you give it a go.”

“Thank you very much.”

“However, I’m not willing to wait years just to see you fail. You’ll have to show me results before then.”

Shizuku shuddered, feeling as though someone had just dripped water onto the back of her neck.

She'd suspected Ortea would say as much. There was no way she'd accept Shizuku's offer unconditionally, so there'd been a good chance the princess would assign her some kind of test.

Ortea tossed her fan aside and rested her chin on her palm. Her eyes were like those of a bloodthirsty beast as she looked up at Niké waiting by her side.

“Give this girl a room inside the castle—and a child.”

“I shall arrange it at once.”

Shizuku understood immediately what the princess's order meant.

Rumors circulated that the younger sister of King Beelhurse—the reigning monarch of Kisk—ruled the country from the shadows. Ortea, the Bewitching Princess, looked at Shizuku, her smile the antithesis of kindness. Its beauty was

like a curved blade, with an edge too sharp to be called “barbed.”

“That’s that. I’ll give you a month. During that time, you’ll need to ensure that, at the very least, their language skills are brought up to a level appropriate for their age.”

“I understand.”

“You know what will happen if you fail, right? Both you and the child will share the same fate. You’ll be chopped up into pieces and cast into the castle moat.”

“...!”

Shizuku had seen this coming, but hearing it made her breath catch in her throat.

This experiment could cost her her life. And she only had a month to show results.

She lowered her head, clenching her fists so tightly they started going red.

“I will do my very best to meet your expectations, Your Highness.”

“Make sure to provide me with plenty of entertainment,” the princess replied.

Shizuku gave her a deep bow, then rose to her feet. She mustered all her courage and left the room, and the princess’s laughter seemed to follow her, as if to say that she saw right through Shizuku. The woman’s sultry chuckle felt as if it was pressing against Shizuku’s back, and she bit down hard on her lip.

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Shizuku left the waiting area and made it out into the hallway—where she immediately sank down to the ground.

Faneet, who’d been accompanying her, looked at her in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“...I’m just drained.”

Shizuku had been playing a vastly different character from her own self. The princess’s dangerous reputation preceded her, meaning it was absurd to try to

intimidate her with bravado, and Shizuku was dismayed by how reckless she'd been. Still, in the moment, she'd felt like that was all she *could* do.

Shizuku had had her bangs trimmed to avoid looking too young, and she messed them up with her hand. She wanted to untie her hair, which was tied up at the back of her head, but the court ladies had put so many pins in it that she didn't know how to. After pulling out two of the pins, she gave up and lowered her hand.

"Was that okay...? I feel like she saw right through me."

"You did fine. The princess likes people with confidence."

"Sh-she does?"

"She gets a thrill out of executing arrogant people when they fail."

As Shizuku heard that unsettling remark, somebody smacked her on the head. Rubbing the spot where she'd been hit, she looked around to find Niké standing behind her. He seemed like a completely different person from when he was in front of the princess, and Shizuku scowled at his aggressive attitude.

"What's your problem? That hurt."

"Stop standing around like an idiot. Come on, hurry up. I'll even let you pick for yourself."

"Pick what?"

Ortea had asked Niké to find a room for her to stay in and a child for her to take care of. Was she going to choose her own room? Shizuku didn't care which room she had, but her query had left Niké dumbstruck.

"I'm talking about the kid, you idiot. The one you're going to die with. I'll show you to the lab so you can choose whichever one you want."

"...Huh?"

In just a few seconds, Shizuku had received several pieces of information that she couldn't overlook. Yet she put her uncertainties regarding herself aside and focused on the most concerning part.

"What do you mean 'lab'?"

"You're promising to teach these kids to communicate, but you don't even know what a *lab* is? I think you need to sort out your own mental shortcomings first."

Shizuku wanted to punch him.

Why was there always someone who made her want to thump them, no matter which country she went to? The veins bulged out of her forehead as she forced a smile.

"I know what a lab is. I just wanted to know why the children were there, you context-blind mage."

"What did you just call me?"

"Hold on a moment, you two."

With the tension escalating, Faneet stepped in. He maintained a safe distance between the pair, then turned toward Shizuku.

"For the past three months, children have been secretly gathered in the castle for medical research. Most of them are orphans or children of criminals from the slums, and they're being used as test subjects to uncover the cause of the illness and find a solution."

"What...? Test subjects...?"

"Just hurry up, baby-face," Niké retorted.

He started charging down the hallway before Shizuku had a chance to react. She hurried after him.

After striding down the long hallway and turning numerous corners, Shizuku started to hear shrill, crying voices. It wasn't just one but several reverberating wails overlapping one another. As soon as she realized they were the cries of children, Shizuku looked up at Faneet right beside her, but he simply shook his head in silence.

Niké eventually came to a halt in front of a set of double doors at the end of a corridor. He laid his hand on them, and they let out a *thunk* and swung open inward. The sudden increase in noise almost caused Shizuku to freeze, but before she was able to, Niké glanced over his shoulder.

“Get a move on, slowpoke.”

The man’s snide remark angered her, but she was in no mood to answer him right now. Having silently entered the room, Shizuku looked around the large space—and found herself speechless.

The intense crying had been coming from a magic circle drawn in the center of the room.

Sitting inside the circle were children around the age of three or four, clad in shabby clothes. Each of their tiny feet was shackled by iron fetters, chaining them to the floor.

“...What is this?”

One of them was bawling and thrashing around, while another scratched at his manacled feet with hollow eyes. There were a number of other magic circles and large-scale magic implements installed in the room, and several other tearful children were similarly restrained. Mages stood in front of each magic apparatus, concentrating on the experiments the children were being subjected to.

Shizuku stood rooted to the ground, dumbfounded. She had thought she’d gotten fairly used to this world, but this sight was so mind-boggling that she couldn’t say a word.

However, the sound of one of the mages slapping a child impatiently on the hand brought her back to reality.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

But Shizuku’s incensed shout was drowned out by the cries echoing throughout the room. Most of the mages didn’t even notice it. Only one man—who was relatively nearby—looked around with a scowl.

“What’s going on? Are you an outsider?”

“No,” Niké replied bluntly. “She’s a guest of the princess. We’ve come to fetch a child to experiment on.”

The man’s expression soured, and he looked down at his paperwork.

“Here we go again... It’s not like we have an endless supply of children, you

know.”

“If you have a problem, tell it to the princess.”

The man’s face immediately turned red. He glared at Niké with contempt and muttered something under his breath, then turned back around. It sounded to Shizuku like he’d said, “You damn lapdog...,” but she couldn’t say for certain with all the noise going on around them.

She glanced at Niké, but he hadn’t even raised an eyebrow. Instead, the man used his chin to gesture toward a magic circle.

“Pick any child you want. Just make it quick.”

“Make it quick...? What *is* this? What’s going on?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. They’re carrying out experiments to do with the sickness. They’re channeling magic energy into the children’s bodies and recording how they respond, as well as embedding spells into their minds to observe how their souls react.”

“But these experiments are making the children cry!”

“True, it’s distracting. It would be so much easier if they could use psychological magic to keep the kids quiet, but that’s not an option here. Extra spells could affect the data that’s being collected.”

His intentionally evasive answer only infuriated Shizuku even more.

She reached out as if to grab Niké by the collar—but before her hand could touch his clothes, Faneet tapped her on the shoulder from behind. In a flat and resigned voice, he attempted to calm Shizuku down.

“It wasn’t this bad at first, but the nobles grew impatient since we weren’t getting anywhere. They’re pestering us to deliver results before Farsas does. If the mages displease their superiors, it could cost them their lives, so the experiments have kept getting harsher, and the situation has only gotten worse.”

“But still...”

That was all Shizuku could say. She stared at a child who was reaching for her, having noticed Shizuku there.

Human rights meant nothing in the face of the nobles' greed.

Erik had told Shizuku something similar in the past, but this was the first time she'd seen such cruelty play out before her very eyes.

This group of impoverished, orphaned children and the offspring of criminals wasn't even afforded the right to protection. Shizuku stared intensely at the bruise-covered girl cowering in the corner and at the woman in front of her, who was intently scrawling something down.

No one paid any attention to the child's anguished cries. Both the adults and other children were preoccupied with their own affairs. The large room lay stagnant, devoid of any glimmer of hope.

Shizuku walked into the center of the magic circle.

She knelt in front of the little girl reaching for her, then stretched out her arms and embraced the child's frail frame. Her body was warm and soft, and she smelled of nothing but sweat and blood. Shizuku tearfully buried her face into the girl's shoulder.

Perhaps it was compassion. Maybe it could even be called hypocrisy.

However, in that moment, Shizuku felt genuinely glad that she'd chosen to come to Kisk.

"Everything will be okay... There's nothing to be scared of."

The child squirmed in Shizuku's arms, apparently surprised, and Shizuku gently wrapped herself around the child's body.

"Is that the one you're choosing?"

The child shuddered hearing this insensitive remark. Rage surged inside Shizuku, making her grit her teeth.

How shameless could these people be? She looked up to see Niké looming over her, holding a bunch of keys.

"I'll take this one, so get them to stop the other experiments."

"I can't do that. These experiments are being carried out at the king's behest. Even if the princess told them to stop, they wouldn't."

“Even if I insist that they’re unnecessary?”

“Who’s going to prove that?”

There was no warmth to his words. That was the undeniable reality of this world.

Nobody had proven that the experiments were pointless yet. No one had had the conviction to step forward—apart from Shizuku.

Niké knelt and took off the girl’s ankle restraints. The child scratching at his ankle stared at them, wide-eyed, apparently in anticipation of freedom. He tried to reach for Shizuku, but Niké casually brushed the small hand aside. The child fell onto his buttocks and started to cry, seemingly triggered by Niké’s callousness.

“What are you doing!?”

“You can only take one. What are you going to do with another? Are you on the hunt for more travel buddies?”

“You...”

You can’t be human, Shizuku almost yelled—but the man looked back at her with a dark, melancholic look in his eyes. This glance only lasted for a second, but his gaze was just as powerful as Shizuku’s and frosty enough to make her gulp.

Niké scowled at Shizuku as she sat there tongue-tied, but he soon averted his gaze and extended a hand toward the child who’d fallen on his bottom.

“If you’re angry, turn it into action. Don’t just run away.”

A faint light appeared in the man’s hand. The light coiled itself around the child’s ankle and started erasing the wounds that had been etched into his skin as Shizuku watched in disbelief. She held the child she’d chosen tightly in her arms without saying a word.

I just have to do what I can.

It was a thought she’d had countless times before and the way she’d gone about things so far.

Still...she'd never been so acutely aware of the weight her choices carried.

She was the only one who could protect this child. No one else could do it for her.

"...Just wait and see how things turn out in a month's time," she declared, her voice raspy. There was a lot more she wanted to say, but she held back.

"Sure. If you ever get the urge to flee, go ahead and let me know. I'll kill you."

Shizuku didn't feel like saying a single word. As she sat there in silence, Faneet lifted the child out of her hands and motioned for them to leave the room.

As soon as the doors closed behind them, the incessant sound of crying grew quieter.

Yet it still echoed inside Shizuku's head, showing no signs of stopping.

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The small cabin in the corner of the castle's outer garden had originally been a storage shed for gardening tools. It had since been converted into a habitable dwelling, making it a small but sufficient space for Shizuku and the child to stay in. As Shizuku surveyed the slightly dusty interior, Faneet handed her a piece of paper.

"This is the vocabulary she needs to learn."

"There are so many words here! I don't even recognize some of them!" Shizuku exclaimed as she looked at the list.

All of the words were written in fine print and packed together tightly. Naturally, most of them were terms Shizuku was familiar with, but she could tell at first glance that about thirty percent were new to her.

"Which ones don't you understand?" asked Faneet, who knew she was from another world.

He probably wanted to tell her how they were pronounced. Shizuku, however, stuffed the note into her pocket.

"Bear with me for a while. I'll make a note of all the words I don't know before the morning. Then you can teach me."

"Are you sure it can wait until tomorrow?"

They only had a month. Shizuku's and the girl's lives were both on the line.

Shizuku smiled awkwardly, then glanced down at the child by her feet. She saw a flicker of emotion in her light brown eyes—something that wavered between fear and hope.

"Tomorrow will be fine. Besides, I want to do a little cleaning today. I can start by teaching her the words I understand."

"All right. If there's anything you need, just let me know. I've also conveyed your situation to the kitchen staff."

"Thank you. One more thing: Can you let me know what kind of experiments the castle has conducted so far?"

While the scene Shizuku had witnessed in the laboratory was grim, she wanted to know what had already proved unsuccessful. She wasn't a mage herself, so that knowledge might be wasted on her, but she still wanted as much information as possible.

Faneet gave her a brief nod.

"Understood. I'll pass that on to Niké. Let me know if there's anything else."

The man left the cabin, his face devoid of expression, and Shizuku sighed as she watched him walk away. It was hard not to be reminded of Erik whenever she met someone with an inscrutable demeanor. That said, she'd spent so long traveling with Erik by now that she felt like she'd learned to decipher his thoughts. Shizuku nostalgically recalled memories from just a few days ago—but this wasn't the time to be dwelling on the past.

She crouched down and met the girl's gaze.

"It's nice to meet you," she said slowly. "Can you tell me your name?"

The child pressed her lips together tightly. Perhaps she'd grown fearful of people due to the treatment she'd endured in the lab. Before the child had the chance to become anxious around her, Shizuku offered her a smile. Then she pointed at her own face.

"I'm Shizuku. Shi-zu-ku."

"...Shizu...ku?"

“That’s right. Shizuku. What’s your name?”

This time, Shizuku pointed at the child’s face. Silence fell once again, but Shizuku kept smiling, refusing to look away.

If she wanted to earn the girl’s trust, she first had to show that she was sincere. It was the same rule no matter who you were dealing with. They were starting to build a new relationship, so they needed to become acquainted with one another and take their first step forward.

The little girl looked puzzled for a few moments, but then she hesitantly pointed toward Shizuku.

“Shizuku?”

She nodded, and the girl shyly pointed at her own face.

“Rio.”

Her voice was feeble—so feeble that it sounded like it was one cough away from vanishing altogether. Nonetheless, Shizuku gave the girl a gentle smile.

“Okay, then, Rio. Let’s both try our best, shall we?”

Shizuku extended her arms, and Rio looked at them apprehensively. Even so, she timidly approached and nestled into her arms. Shizuku gently embraced the girl’s small frame, trying not to squeeze her too tight.

Her warmth reminded Shizuku that this was a living person she was dealing with. It made her feel like she needed to hurry.

It didn’t matter that her words were empty platitudes—everyone knew that it wasn’t just the pure of heart who wanted reassurance. Was that desire to reach out to someone who was damaged a part of what it meant to be human?

Sometimes, delusion was what people needed to keep going.

“Let’s do our best,” Shizuku said again, although the girl hadn’t replied. She gently held onto her thin body.

This marked the first day of Shizuku’s new life.

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That first day flew by in the blink of an eye. Shizuku cleaned the cabin, cooked

food, and fed Rio, who soon drifted off to sleep. After tucking Rio in with a blanket, Shizuku turned her attention to her list of “what would be covered in the test.” She compared each word against the vocabulary in her homemade dictionary notebook and wrote the meanings beside them in English.

Shizuku had expected there to be a lot of words, but she didn’t think there’d be *this* many.

They were mostly nouns and verbs, but when she quickly counted them, there seemed to be more than six hundred.

Still, it wasn’t as though Rio would have to memorize them all. She’d only forgotten her innate vocabulary around five months prior; before that, she’d acquired language just like anybody else. The words she knew wouldn’t be in the test and had already been checked off the list, leaving a little less than four hundred that Shizuku would need to teach her.

Understandably, Shizuku found this number overwhelmingly large.

“She’s only three... I wonder if this is going to work.”

She couldn’t just say it was futile, though. Rather than thinking about whether it was possible or not, she needed to consider how to make it happen.

Shizuku quickly stopped doubting herself and started picking out animal names from the words she understood. She began making illustrated flashcards using the stack of papers she’d been given.

Teaching Rio the individual letters wasn’t necessary. What mattered was that she connected each word to the relevant subject.

That said, Shizuku was teaching her something that should have been innate. Rio needed to understand that these words were used in a multitude of scenarios; it would be a problem if she could say “cat” when she saw a drawing of one but failed to identify the real thing. For the time being, Shizuku had no choice but to work with Rio and address any problems as they came up.

As Shizuku was making the cards, she also picked out the words she couldn’t understand herself.

It was one thing if these words weren’t in her homemade dictionary, but if

they were words that were specific to this world, that'd be problematic. Shizuku would need to ask Faneet for the details. His cooperation would be essential, no matter what.

After creating fifty flashcards and finishing sorting out the vocabulary, she lay down next to Rio and drifted off to sleep.

She was so physically exhausted that she didn't even have any dreams.

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When Faneet turned up the next morning, he was shocked to see the cards that Rio was playing with. He picked one up and inspected it closely.

“These are very clever,” he said.

“The idea is to connect the pictures with the words. This kind of thing is my specialty.”

“What was your line of work? Were you an artisan?”

“I’m a student.”

This seemed to make sense to the man. Her age probably had a lot to do with that. People in this world tended to perceive her as a young girl—and her baby face definitely didn’t help her case.

It had been six months since Shizuku first ended up here. She probably could’ve claimed that she was nineteen, but since she didn’t know how their calendars lined up, it was hard to say for sure. People already looked at her suspiciously whenever she said she was eighteen, so imagining how they’d react if she said she was *nineteen* made her head hurt.

“Anyway, I need your help with this. I want you to teach me the words I don’t know.”

“Ah, okay.”

Shizuku gave Rio detailed instructions, and when the young girl managed to correctly name the illustrated animals, she’d praise her by saying, “That’s right!” and “Well done!”

As she continued with this task, she also listened to Faneet’s explanations and took notes. The words weren’t that difficult—they were for a three-year-old to

learn, after all—but there were some creatures Shizuku wasn’t familiar with. The mention of something called a “netai” made her frown.

“What’s that? Can you draw a picture of one?”

“I’m not very good at drawing. It’s something in between a fairy and an animal... I’ll see if I can find a picture book.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

Once she’d finished running things by him, Shizuku looked at her list and nodded. There was a momentary flicker of tiredness in her eyes—something she refused to show to Rio.

“I wonder what the format of the exam will be. Will we be tested on everything?”

“No. A hundred of these words will be selected. She’ll either be shown pictures and asked to identify them, or shown the actual things. It’s unclear how it’s actually going to work.”

“Will the princess decide the questions?”

“Niké will. He was responsible for that last time, too.”

“Last time? This has happened before?”

A chill went down Shizuku’s spine. Up until that point, she’d been convinced that nobody else had ever undertaken this test. She knew what Faneet was implying, yet Shizuku still asked for more information.

“It has. There have been four people, in fact, each with their own differing claims.”

“...Did they succeed?”

“If they had, I wouldn’t have brought you here. You heard the mage in the laboratory say, ‘Here we go again,’ didn’t you?”

Shizuku didn’t press him for any more answers. She was feeling a vague sense of discomfort that she didn’t want to verbalize in front of Rio.

“I’m only telling this because it’s you, but these kinds of endeavors are foolish. Entrusting these tasks to people who can’t produce results will one day

lead to irreversible consequences.”

The man’s voice rang hollow, devoid of any emotion. He only would have warned of “irreversible consequences” if he knew what was to come. Those who’d already failed no longer posed a threat—and the next person who could cause such problems was Shizuku.

Was she thinking negatively because she was a little on edge?

As Shizuku let out a sigh, Faneet handed her a document. She looked down to see a paper on the table.

“What’s this?”

“A list of all the treatments that have been tested in the laboratory. You wanted this, didn’t you?”

“Oh, thank you... The trouble is, I can’t read it.”

“I thought that might be the case. All of the trials utilized magic. Sometimes it was psychological magic, and sometimes they attempted to touch the children’s souls. Their main purpose was to awaken the children’s language skills.”

“Oh. That’s different from my approach, then.”

Shizuku was attempting to teach the kids, rather than drawing out their own inherent skills—something that was common practice where she came from. She did question whether it was okay to bring her knowledge into this world, but she figured that someone would come up with the same approach sooner or later. It was a simple plan: If they can’t remember what they’ve forgotten, then teach it to them. Eventually, that idea would emerge by itself.

She could sit around and wait for that to happen—but by then, it would be too late for the children who were around now.

Shizuku exhaled sharply and put those thoughts behind her. Faneet exuded an air of quiet resignation, and he posed her a question.

“Do you think you’re the person who’ll succeed?”

“I’m sure of it.”

If she didn’t stand a chance, she never would have taken on the mission. A

bittersweet smile appeared on Faneet's face at her response. At long last, he took a sip of the tea he'd been served.

"That said..." began Shizuku, "Niké's going to be setting the questions. I can't stand that guy."

"There's nothing you can do about that. He's the princess's favorite."

"Huh? That two-faced man?"

"That's why he's in charge."

Shizuku couldn't sense any kindness in his voice. In fact, she felt like she could detect the exact opposite.

She didn't know why that was, but even the princess's retainers must have had their disagreements.

Once Faneet had finished his tea and left, Shizuku put her all into conversing with Rio.

"All right, let's try this again from the start," she said in a cheery tone of voice.

Rio nodded and turned to face the vocabulary flashcards.

Their life together was only just beginning.

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Shizuku moved the knife around the apple, peeling the skin. Rio watched expectantly as it unraveled like a ribbon, the knife gliding along and revealing the white flesh underneath. Once Shizuku had peeled off most of the skin, she sliced the apple into smaller pieces to make it even easier to eat. Her knife skills had improved considerably since she'd found herself in this new world.

"Look, an apple," said Shizuku.

"Apple," Rio repeated.

"That's right. Good job. Here you go."

Shizuku picked up a small slice of apple, prompting Rio to open her mouth wide. She gently placed the piece on the young girl's tongue. The apples in this world were smaller than what Shizuku was used to, but they were sweet enough. Perhaps they'd been gifted to the castle because of their flavor.

After biting into a piece of her own, Shizuku smiled and said, “Yummy.”

“Yummy,” Rio repeated.

“The skin is ‘red.’ The inside is ‘white’... Got it?”

“Red?”

“Yeah. This is red.”

“White,” said Rio, pointing at the outside surface of the peeled apple skin.

Shizuku smiled awkwardly. She couldn’t let every simple mistake bring her down, and she corrected Rio for the umpteenth time.

“This one’s white. This is white, and so is that over there... White. The color white.”

“White?”

“White.”

It had been almost two weeks since Shizuku started living with Rio, and it turned out she was pretty quick on the uptake.

People always said that early childhood was a period of explosive growth. Sure enough, Rio had already memorized most of the animal flashcards she played with, and they had gone on walks several times a day to see the animals’ real-life counterparts.

Rio had grown fearful and thrown tantrums on a number of occasions, likely as a result of her memories of the laboratory, but Shizuku had managed to calm her down. Her day-to-day life with the girl revolved around blending play with learning, and it would have been a peaceful one if she’d been able to ignore the test looming over them.

Rio pointed to a white card.

“Red?”

“White,” Shizuku corrected her.

Rio’s ability to absorb information was definitely impressive. Shizuku had created cards with realistic illustrations—as a result, Rio could match the names of flowers, for example, to both their drawn and real-life counterparts.

However, there were some words that she kept remembering incorrectly. Although Shizuku repeatedly corrected her, she didn't seem to improve.

Rio looked worried. She must have noticed that Shizuku seemed concerned.

Shizuku patted her gently on the head.

"It's okay. Just learn at your own pace. Let's have a snack and go outside."

They couldn't rush things. Nor could she afford to make Rio anxious.

Shizuku kept reminding herself of these things, but whenever she thought about the number of words and days they had left, she couldn't rid herself of her nerves. If she failed, there'd be no makeup test. All that awaited both her and Rio was death.

When Shizuku had met Ortea, refusing her challenge hadn't been an option. Even so, there were times when she felt tormented by how high the bar was. She didn't want to have any regrets, but she couldn't help but wonder if there had been another path.

When she was feeling extremely anxious, Shizuku almost found herself criticizing Rio's mistakes, saying, "Why don't you get it?" And every time that happened, Shizuku couldn't help but scold herself for being so selfish.

Shizuku had already simmered half of the apples she'd received from the kitchen to make a sweet treat. She served what was left of it to Rio as a snack, then spent some time waiting for her to finish. Once Rio was done, Shizuku wiped the girl's dirty hands and mouth and changed her clothes.

The castle garden was huge. Faneet had told them not to be too conspicuous, but Shizuku didn't feel the need to venture farther—even just the rear garden felt too huge to walk around. As they were doing a lap of it, Shizuku ran into two court ladies holding jars.

"Oh, it's you, Shizuku. And you have Rio with you, too."

The woman who'd called out to them, named Yura, greeted them with a smile. She was the same age as Shizuku and had taken an interest in the pair ever since they'd moved into the cabin. Rio also recognized her, as she often came by to check on them.

Shizuku smiled back at her.

“Hello, Yura and Willett!”

“H-hello,” said Willett, bowing her head as she hid in Yura’s shadow.

Willett was only fifteen and had begun working as an etiquette apprentice earlier that year. She seemed shy and never greeted them loudly when they ran into one another, but would instead turn red and bow her head as she walked by.

The only other people Shizuku had met in Kisk were the intense Ortea, impudent Faneet, and spiteful Niké, so she thought fondly of these two “normal” women.

Yura looked at Rio, who was holding Shizuku’s hand.

“Are you two going for a walk?”

“Yes. We’re going to the stables to see the horses.”

“Oh, that’s lovely. By the way, we have some nice deugos in the kitchen. I’ll make sure to set some aside for you, so drop by on your way back.”

“Thank you!”

Deugo was a fruit unique to this world. It was a common citrus fruit in Farsas, and since it was a word on the test, Shizuku was grateful to be able to have the real thing.

“Thank you merry much,” said Rio, echoing Shizuku’s expression of thanks. It was so heartwarming that it made the three girls grin.

Shizuku bowed to the others, then headed toward the stables pulling Rio by the hand.

Even from a distance, the horses looked remarkably large and powerful. While Rio was excited, Shizuku made sure she didn’t get too close. She started asking Rio to name the things around her: a horse, the grass, and a wheel.

“What’s this?” she’d ask as she pointed to each thing.

Rio shook her head impatiently, seemingly distracted. However, Shizuku persevered with her questioning, and Rio began offering sporadic replies. After

she'd gotten more than a dozen questions right, Shizuku let her take a break. Rio wanted to play, so she let her do as she pleased.

"Two more weeks...and yet 2,600 words seem like so few," Shizuku murmured to herself.

Shizuku needed to teach Rio 400 words during this period, and that felt like a lot—but at the same time, an innate vocabulary of 2,600 words seemed insufficient. People *must* need more words to express their thoughts and engage in conversation.

All of the other words must be compound words, formed by combining pieces of innate vocabulary.

"People learn those compound words through education, so why wouldn't it occur to people that you can teach innate vocabulary, too?"

She rested her chin on the fence surrounding the stable.

Shizuku came from a world where *all* vocabulary was taught, so she felt it was strange that people had yet to come up with that idea. Still, people in this world saw things differently. They were pre-equipped with a grasp of grammar and innate vocabulary, so nobody thought those things could be acquired later on.

It would almost be like if children in Shizuku's old world suddenly lost the ability to cry.

People wouldn't come up with the idea of teaching children to regain that skill right away. And if there were a world where children couldn't innately cry and someone from that world recommended education as a way of fixing the problem, people would surely be shocked by this suggestion. Shizuku could imagine people suspecting that something was awry and endeavoring to uncover the underlying cause instead.

It was hard to overturn common beliefs that had been ingrained in people since the dawn of history. Not everyone could bring about a Copernican Revolution. Shizuku understood this, but she sighed nonetheless. Her thoughts were starting to give her a headache.

She looked over at Rio, who was pulling up grass a short distance away.

“The bar’s been set so high... I mean, am I even qualified to teach her?”

Shizuku was from another world—she couldn’t even understand how she was able to communicate here. Could she really teach Rio without encountering any obstacles?

Even when two different individuals translated the same text, there could be significant disparities in their interpretations. Moreover, Shizuku couldn’t pick up on any differences between Japanese and the language of this continent. If only she were aware of these potential differences, she would have been able to choose her words carefully. Was Rio fully understanding everything Shizuku wanted to say?

“There are so many questions I don’t have the answers to...”

“Is the pressure getting to you? You’re such a wimp.”

A thorny voice pierced Shizuku in the back. She didn’t need to question who was speaking. With a loud *tsk*, Shizuku looked over her shoulder and glared at the man who’d appeared out of nowhere.

“What do you want? If it’s a fight you’re hoping for, I’d rather you picked on someone else.”

“You don’t seem to be doing much.”

“That’s because I’m thinking. Children have short attention spans, so I have to be systematic.”

“You have two weeks left,” warned Niké.

“I know that,” Shizuku snapped curtly.

She knew better than anyone that her deadline was fast approaching. She only had half of her time left, and there were still over 200 words that Rio hadn’t learned.

Shizuku spent every night agonizing over the words Rio had memorized, the words she constantly got wrong, and the words she had yet to learn. She wished people wouldn’t point out the obvious.

“You don’t seem to be very busy, either. How about *you* do some work? You could go and see the princess.”

"She hasn't summoned me. If I turn up unannounced, I'll end up in her bad books."

"Then lurk around nearby. Like a ninja," Shizuku suggested.

"A ninja?"

Niké frowned but didn't ask any further questions.

"It's time to go home!" Shizuku called out to Rio.

Upon hearing her name, Rio turned around—but when she saw Niké in his mage attire, she froze. Shizuku's expression soured. Rio looked like she'd run away if Niké took a single step forward.

"Hurry up and leave. Rio's scared."

"If she's scared of me, I won't be able to conduct the test."

"...You've overseen it before, right? Did the previous attempts not make it to the testing stage?" Shizuku had been hit where it hurt, so she was trying to divert criticism away from herself.

Indeed, Rio was not yet in a position to be tested. Shizuku would have to convince her not to fear Niké. Still, it wasn't her fault for feeling that way.

His eyes glued to the frightened child, Niké responded to Shizuku's snarky comeback.

"So far, we haven't held any tests. The other people never thought to teach the children."

"What did they do instead?"

"One person tried to fill the hole in the child's soul with a forbidden curse, and someone else tried to use psychological magic to transfer an adult's intelligence to a child. Another claimed it was a physical malady and kept giving them magic medicine. The child died partway through, however. Oh...and there was one person who turned to godly powers for assistance."

"...I wish I'd never asked."

These experiments sounded a thousand times grislier than Shizuku had expected. She started to shake her head—but the last thing Niké mentioned

had sparked her curiosity.

“What do you mean by ‘godly powers’? Was there a new religion involved?”

“Uh, no! That person was a zealous adherent of Aetea. According to them, innate vocabulary wasn’t always set in stone. It only became fixed during the Age of Gods, so he turned to prayer to bring it back. The idea was ridiculous.”

“Uh, wait a minute.”

One part of Niké’s explanation had caught Shizuku’s attention, and she hurriedly interrupted him to clarify something.

“Is it true that innate vocabulary wasn’t always set in stone?”

“How would I know? There aren’t any relevant records. It was probably just some wild delusion.”

“There must have been some basis for his theory, right? Is there a bible or anything?”

“You really do ask some weird questions,” replied Niké. “There’s no bible for Aetea’s holy teachings. Where in the countryside do you even come from?”

“...I’ll exercise my right to remain silent on that.”

Unsurprisingly, Shizuku didn’t want him to question where she was from. She kept her eyes perfectly still, as though she were a stone statue.

At the same time, her sense of unease also dissipated, probably because she’d calmed down. She couldn’t even recall what had struck her as odd. It wasn’t as if she could interrogate the person directly, either—they’d likely been executed. Remembering what kind of position she was in, Shizuku started to feel gloomy.

Niké gave her a dubious look before shifting his gaze back to Rio. He crouched down and beckoned the child over.

“Come here.”

“What are you going to do to her?” asked Shizuku.

“Nothing. Shut up, baby-face.”

Shizuku felt the urge to swing her clenched fist at the back of the man’s head.

However, before she had the chance to do so, Niké took something out of his pocket.

“Come here. I’ve got something for you,” he said, offering Rio some candy wrapped in colorful paper.

Rio’s eyes lit up at the sight of the red and yellow wrapper. She’d been frozen stiff a few moments earlier, but now her curiosity had been thoroughly piqued. The young girl’s eyes darted around, her gaze brimming with both worry and excitement. Shizuku hesitantly forced a smile.

“It’s okay. Go on.”

Shizuku gave Rio a nod, paying close attention to make sure Niké didn’t do anything weird. After all, Rio wouldn’t be able to take the test if she didn’t get used to him.

After hearing Shizuku’s words of encouragement, Rio tentatively took a step forward. Niké hadn’t moved from his position holding out the candy, and Rio slowly approached him, then finally reached out and took a piece.

“You can have them all. Hold out your other hand as well,” said Niké.

Rio, who was about to take another, looked up at Shizuku with a puzzled expression. Shizuku created a bowl with her hands, prompting Rio to mimic her. With her small hands together, the little girl looked up, and Niké poured all of the candies into her hands.

Rio’s eyes began to sparkle, making Niké break into a smile. Shizuku was taken aback—it was the first time she’d seen him wearing a gentle expression.

“You’re...”

“I’m what?” Niké asked.

“...It doesn’t matter.”

Rio flinched in surprise when the man rose to his feet, but her attention soon returned to her sweets. After checking she was all right, Niké turned back toward Shizuku. He had the usual taunting look in his eyes again.

“If you’ve got enough time to play with a kid, then you can afford to work a little harder. Your baby face is looking younger by the minute.”

“What I do is none of your business!”

Despite his brief display of kindness, everything the man said and did continued to grind her gears. Instead of demanding he leave, Shizuku picked up Rio and promptly went on her way, leaving Niké behind.

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“Good morning, Rio.”

Three weeks had gone by. Shizuku woke Rio up and wiped her face with a well-wrung cloth. After she’d gotten the young girl dressed and laid breakfast out on the table, Rio took a seat by herself.

“Good morning, Shizuku.”

“Good morning. Do you want apple juice or deugo juice?”

“I want deugo!”

Shizuku stifled her laughter at Rio’s enthusiastic response and turned toward the kitchen. She peeled the skin off a deugo fruit and made some fresh juice for her.

Rio’s conversational skills were becoming more fluent by the day. The emphasis Shizuku had placed on her education was partially to thank for that.

Living with Rio, every day was filled with new discoveries. Back in her old world, a friend of Shizuku’s who worked as a part-time private tutor had once said, “Teaching is a great way to learn.” Now Shizuku truly understood what she’d meant by that.

Whether it was teaching Erik or Rio, the task required her to reanalyze the knowledge she’d accumulated, which deepened her own understanding of it.

Shizuku smiled at Rio, who was holding her spoon.

“Aren’t you going to say, ‘Let’s eat?’”

“Lettuce eat!”

“Yes, great job. Let’s eat!”

Shizuku started to eat her own breakfast as well. She hadn’t been able to eat much recently, likely due to her looming deadline. After finishing her very small

meal, Shizuku served Rio a homemade pudding. It was a simple dessert made with eggs and milk, but kids loved it. Rio's face immediately lit up.

They had around 120 words left to learn.

As Shizuku was contemplating whether Rio could learn them all in a week, she noticed that something had been shoved toward her. When she took a look, she realized that Rio was holding out her half-eaten cup of pudding. Shizuku's eyes widened.

"Huh? It wasn't yummy?" she asked.

"It's yummy," Rio replied.

"Then was there something in it?"

"Half. For Shizuku," Rio said quickly. She smiled, and a dimple appeared in one cheek.

Her pudding was so tasty that she'd decided to offer Shizuku half of it. As soon as Shizuku grasped the meaning behind Rio's unexpected words, a warmth spread through her heart. Was this what the urge to hug someone felt like? Shizuku extended her hands and gently ran her fingers through Rio's hair.

"Thank you, Rio—but you can finish it. I'm full."

"I can?"

"Yes. Eat up."

Rio clasped the cup against her chest, looking perplexed but pleased at the same time. Shizuku watched her intently as she stuffed her cheeks with a spoonful of pudding.

This new lifestyle imbued Shizuku with a renewed sense of gratitude toward her mother and sister. They were the main two people who'd looked after her when she was little. Thinking back, they'd been incredibly patient with her; toddlers could be extremely unpredictable.

"—No!"

The glass toppled over with a resounding crash.

This sound made Shizuku grimace, but the look in Rio's eyes was so apologetic

that she decided not to verbalize her emotions. Shizuku silently put the glass back and wiped the water. She couldn't be sure whether or not her silent actions were still expressing blame toward Rio.

Once she'd finished tidying up, she looked down at the child, who'd huddled into a ball.

"Don't hit things. It's fine, so let's just try again."

After finishing their morning study session, Shizuku had collated all of the words that Rio consistently got wrong. Her plan was to get Rio to review them; however, the young girl had been reluctant from the outset and wouldn't even sit in her chair. She was probably fed up with having to study the same words over and over again.

Even when Shizuku called her name, Rio flat-out refused to come over. Eventually, though, Shizuku managed to catch her. She had tried to make her sit down, but Rio had struggled and ended up knocking over a glass.

"What color is this, Rio?"

Once she'd managed to get Rio in her chair, Shizuku placed her hand on the child's shoulder from behind and pointed at a white circle—but Rio kept her mouth tightly closed and refused to answer. An emotion somewhere between anger and sadness started to build in her mind.

"Answer, Rio."

"...No."

"Rio."

"No!"

As Rio attempted to get down from her seat, Shizuku grabbed her by the shoulders and looked into her brown eyes.

"Listen to me, Rio. You need to study hard for one more week. You can play once it's over..."

"No! Let go!"

"Just a little while longer. Please."

“I don’t want to!”

“There’s going to be a test. You *have* to study!”

Why wouldn’t she understand? Everything hinged on this one week.

There was no way Shizuku could tell the young girl that her life was on the line. She didn’t *want* to tell her, and even if she did, Rio probably wouldn’t understand. Still, whether she could verbalize it or not, that was the unavoidable truth.

Shizuku hadn’t chosen Rio to kill her; she’d chosen her because she believed she would succeed. That had been her first step toward an unpredictable future.

Shizuku let go of her and knelt on the floor, looking up at Rio from below. The three-year-old child glared at Shizuku, on the verge of a tantrum.

“Please, Rio. Let’s study. If you work hard, you’re sure to stop making mistakes.”

“No!”

The child’s hand swung straight down toward Shizuku’s eyes.

It was so sudden that Shizuku couldn’t even dodge it.

A violent pain ran through her body. She saw red—both literally and figuratively.

“Rio!” Shizuku yelled.

Her voice didn’t sound like her own. The calm part of her already regretted what she was doing.

I want to stop myself, she thought—but it was too late. Her fury had already surged out of her throat.

But then...she heard the door opening from the outside.

Shizuku tensed up and gulped as the door creaked open behind her. Faneet stood on the other side and frowned, noticing the tension between the pair.

“What’s going on?”

The outside air drifted in. Shizuku's stiff legs began to shake.

Shizuku had rushed to her feet in anger and begun to raise her right hand into the air. When she realized what she was doing, she closed her fingers tightly. Rio was shielding her head with her hands, trembling.

She'd brought Rio here because she wanted to help her.

She'd never had any intention of hurting her.

She didn't want to give her any more bruises.

If it came to that—then she may as well have left her back in the laboratory.

"...I'm sorry, Rio."

The young girl didn't look up. She was still shaking.

Shizuku looked over her shoulder at Faneet, who was standing in the doorway.

"Sorry. You saved me there."

"You're bleeding," Faneet replied.

"I know. I'll go wash my face."

Faneet looked puzzled, but he didn't inquire further. As Shizuku was leaving the room, he walked over to Rio.

Shizuku went around to the back of the cabin and scooped some water out of the bucket. She rinsed her face several times with the cold water. Rio had swung her arm around and hit Shizuku in the eyelid, leaving a gash above her eye, but Shizuku couldn't even feel it stinging anymore. All she felt was regret. She couldn't believe she'd almost struck such a small child.

Words can only get you so far.

That was why people had to express themselves through their behavior. Shizuku knew that, yet she'd failed to truly grasp it.

She took some more of the clear water with her hands. Splashes of water dampened the hem of her clothes, and droplets trickled down her arms and seeped into her sleeves. But Shizuku just continued to wash her face, not worrying about any of this.

Her tears refused to stop, as if they were admonishing her for being so immature. Nevertheless, the water washed them away.

While she was washing her face, the gash on her eyelid stopped bleeding.

Shizuku quickly changed her clothes and tied her hair back before returning to the room where Faneet and Rio were waiting. When she opened the door, she saw Faneet pointing to pictures as Rio falteringly named the things in the illustrations. A moment later, they both turned their attention toward Shizuku.

“I’m sorry, you two. Was everything okay?”

“Just fine,” replied Faneet, as arrogant as ever.

Rio hurriedly hid behind his back. A bittersweet smile appeared on Shizuku’s face; it seemed she’d lost the young girl’s trust after all. A moment later, however, something unbelievable happened.

“I’m sorry,” Rio whispered softly, still hiding fearfully behind Faneet.

“...Rio.”

“I’m sorry.”

It was clear from the look in her brown eyes that she was worried she’d be abandoned. Her innocent yet pitiful gaze almost made Shizuku tear up again, but she held it back.

There was still some time left. They still had plenty of chances.

Shizuku looked at Rio, forcing a smile.

“I’m sorry, too,” she said.

“Rio will study,” replied the girl.

“Yeah.”

Shizuku returned to her seat, and Rio sat down beside her. Shizuku lovingly stroked her small head of soft hair.

Things were tough sometimes, but in a sense, Shizuku felt lucky. They were able to talk and smile at one another, and stay by each other’s side.

Shizuku leaned in close and resumed their vocabulary study session.

She felt nothing but love for that small girl nestled warmly against her.

“This must get a little tiring,” said Faneet in a flat tone of voice.

After completing their study session, Shizuku had gone to put Rio down for a nap.

Shizuku smiled hesitantly as she prepared some tea.

“Yeah. She’s only three. Not even education for gifted children would cram *this* much knowledge into her head.”

“I don’t mean her. I was talking about you.”

“Me?” Shizuku asked, pointing to herself.

Faneet nodded, his blunt gaze stopping on her.

“This is a new environment for you. Just living with a child must be hard work. Your exhaustion is what’s causing your mood swings.”

“I—I guess so.”

“If you feel like you’ve reached your limit, you should take a half day off. Just tell me what to do, and I’ll fill in for you.”

Faneet told her he didn’t need any tea and rose to his feet. It seemed like he’d just come to check on her.

The brusque man turned around to face Shizuku, who’d left the kitchen to say good-bye. He looked at her with an exasperated expression on his face.

“I won’t apologize for bringing you here,” he said.

“No, you don’t have to. It was my choice to come.”

“But...I think you’re working hard enough.”

Shizuku was slightly surprised by this comment. Before she was able to respond, Faneet turned around and left the cabin, his tall figure fading into the distance.

Alone again, Shizuku digested what he’d said to her. She couldn’t help chuckling.

Over the past six months, a number of people had told her the same thing—

that she was doing her best. It always pleased her to hear it. Those words of kindness made her feel like her efforts were being acknowledged.

Faneet's comment had made her happy, too. What she really wanted, though, was to succeed. She didn't care how much she had to struggle as long as it yielded the desired results. At some point, this experience would turn into a memory she could cherish.

Shizuku took a deep breath and returned to the table to sort out her self-made teaching materials.

She briefly considered taking a short nap but felt too pressed for time.

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"Now then, you have five days left. How are things going?" Ortea asked, sounding thoroughly amused.

Shizuku had been unexpectedly summoned by the princess, and she knelt on the floor with her head bowed.

Once again, strong incense wafted through the room, filling the space with a slight haze. Shizuku's breathing would become shallow if she wasn't careful, so she tried to slowly steady it. She channeled her energy into her abdomen, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"We're making good progress. She's a determined young girl, so that helps."

In reality, Shizuku was more anxious about their progress than anything else—but if she were foolishly honest in front of the princess, she'd only put herself at greater risk.

She didn't know why Ortea had summoned her, but her priority was surviving their meeting and going back to Rio.

Shizuku and Ortea were the only people inside the princess's private chamber. She remembered her manners and kept her gaze fixed on the floor, not having been granted permission to raise her head yet. All Shizuku could hear was the princess opening her fan.

"Oh. It looks like your attempts to sustain facial injuries are going swimmingly, too."

"This was simply a result of my own carelessness," said Shizuku.

The wound Rio had given her had almost healed, leaving nothing more than a faint mark. Much more noticeable were the dark circles under Shizuku's eyes and the general fatigue showing on her face. Since she'd been summoned so suddenly, she hadn't had time to conceal them with makeup.

Ortea snorted. It was as though she already knew the full situation.

"I realized I hadn't informed you about the test format yet, which is why I called you here. As Faneet may have already told you, she'll be tested on one hundred of the target words. The words will be shown to her on paper, and she'll be made to answer accordingly."

"I understand."

On the inside, Shizuku felt relieved. If the test format on the day had been different, she wouldn't have even been able to watch. It was fortunate that Ortea had cleared up those doubts herself.

"Oh, and it's not a matter of getting a percentage of them right; if she makes even one mistake, it's over."

"...Understood."

Ortea's words filled Shizuku with despair. She wouldn't even forgive a single lapse.

With only five days left, it would be hard to ensure that Rio got all one hundred questions right. Still, she had no one to complain to; Erik wasn't around. This time, Shizuku had to be the protector.

Since their argument, Rio had started studying of her own accord, although she still didn't seem to enjoy it. Either out of regret for hurting Shizuku or fear of being hurt, Rio had become even more obedient.

However, the better Rio behaved, the more despondent Shizuku felt. No matter how hard the three-year-old tried, her future would be cut short if she failed her impending test.

Shizuku made herself work hard right up until the last minute, but she couldn't force Rio to do the same. Every day, Shizuku would agonize over

whether they were doing enough to guarantee Rio's survival—and her confidence was waning.

Rio would appear concerned whenever Shizuku became consumed by these thoughts, and she'd ask whether Shizuku was okay.

Children were much smarter than grown-ups gave them credit for.

Rio always noticed when the adult who was constantly by her side felt down. For the past month they'd spent every minute of the day in close company, a bond no different from that of family.

Thanks to her healthy lifestyle, Rio's soft body was getting plumper. Her hair had become shinier, and she'd begun to smile more often, too. In ten years, she would probably grow into a lovely young woman. With a kind heart and a caring smile, she'd be sure to make friends and find love as she grew into adulthood.

But all of that would only happen if she did well on the test.

In their daily study sessions, Shizuku made Rio do repetition exercises, associating pictures with sounds. She grouped similar items together, like linking animals with animals and fruits with fruits. Shizuku also tried to incorporate vocabulary she'd be tested on into their daily conversations as much as possible. Shizuku had insisted to Ortea that words could act as a catalyst for language acquisition—and just as she'd claimed, her constant conversations with Rio had a significant impact on the young girl's learning.

Even so, things were far from perfect.

Shizuku wouldn't have said she needed another month, but she would've liked at least another week.

Suppressing her melancholy, Shizuku maintained a neutral expression as Ortea narrowed her amber eyes at her.

"What's wrong? Is there something you need?"

"No..."

"If you're not feeling well, should we postpone the test?"

"Huh...?"

Shizuku inadvertently lifted her head.

The moment she met Ortea's gaze, she instantly regretted it.

Seeing a flicker of hope in Shizuku's eyes, the princess let out a gleeful chuckle.

"No, there's no need for that, is there? I vividly remember you boasting about how you were going to succeed."

Shizuku clenched her fists as tight as she could while Ortea flashed her a dazzling smile.

The princess was just playing with her. Offering a glimmer of hope and then snatching it away was just what she did for fun. Shizuku was frustrated that she'd fallen for her tricks and shown a crack in her armor.

Ortea snickered, amused.

"Even when you fail, it's only you and the child who will be killed. That's not so bad, is it?"

Ortea spoke as if the future was already decided.

Well, perhaps it was. Ortea didn't believe for a moment that Shizuku would actually succeed. She simply enjoyed watching Shizuku and Rio toil away in vain. To her, it was like rolling candy around in her mouth, only for it to melt into nothing.

Shizuku held back her emotions and lowered her head once again.

"There will be no change of plan," Ortea declared, her voice as sharp as a guillotine blade. "Work diligently as instructed."

"...As you wish," replied Shizuku, her voice shaking.

Her mouth felt dry, and she could taste something resembling blood.

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The blue moon shone brightly, and Shizuku held back a sigh as she looked up at it. She repositioned the blanket in her arms. There didn't appear to be anybody else in the garden that night; the only signs of life were the patrolling soldiers' torches moving in the distance.

Shizuku held her breath and made her way through the darkness, heading toward the kitchen's back entrance. Now and then, she'd whisper, "Almost there," into the blanket.

Finally, a doorway emerged from behind the trees. Yura stood there, and she beckoned Shizuku over when she spotted her. Shizuku nodded and dashed toward the door. Once there, she slipped through the wooden doorway with the blanket in her arms.

After checking that Yura and Willett were the only people inside, Shizuku gently lowered the bundle onto the stone floor.

The blanket slowly unraveled itself, and Rio emerged from within, her eyes looking sleepy.

"Can I talk now?" she asked.

"Yes, but be quiet," Shizuku replied.

Rio yawned and nodded.

There were two days until the test.

Yet Rio still wasn't getting more than ninety percent of the questions right. There were a few dozen words that Rio either misremembered or couldn't remember at all, and Shizuku had been so troubled that she'd been struggling to eat for two days.

She needs to take the test and pass.

That was the best possible result. Obviously, Shizuku knew that.

However, passing was merely an outcome, not a solution. She wasn't sure whether Rio *could* pass or not.

What's more...Shizuku couldn't bring herself to play roulette with Rio's life, uncertain which way the wheel might spin.

If Shizuku's life were the only one on the line, she wouldn't mind. She could ready herself for that fate whenever she needed to. Rio, however, was different. She was a child—somebody who was supposed to be protected. The chasm between what Shizuku wanted and the reality of the situation eventually became too much for her to handle.

"The supply wagon will arrive first thing in the morning. If we sneak in before it leaves, we'll be able to leave the castle unnoticed. They rarely inspect the wagon on its return journey."

"Okay... I really appreciate this."

Shizuku had handed Rio to Yura, and the young girl glanced anxiously back at her. She must have been scared about where she was being taken. As Rio extended her tiny hands out toward her, Shizuku gave a pained smile.

"You'll be fine. Listen carefully to what Yura says."

Yura held Rio, still in the blanket, in her arms. Willett, meanwhile, was constantly glancing back at the door that led into the castle. Clearly fidgety, she told them she'd keep watch, then stepped out into the corridor.

Rio must have realized she was going to be separated from Shizuku, because her face crumpled as though she was about to cry. Shizuku placed a finger in front of her lips to shush the girl before she made any noise. Yura caressed Rio's little head and repositioned her in her arms.

"You're sure you're okay with this, Shizuku?"

"Yeah."

The pair had come up with their plan that evening.

Shizuku had been paying her regular visit to the kitchen when Yura had confronted her and interrogated her about what was going on. Shizuku's demeanor had been too peculiar to ignore, and after agonizing over Yura's questions, she confessed that she wanted to smuggle Rio out of the castle.

Shizuku didn't elaborate further, but considering Ortea's reputation—which transcended even national borders—Yura could guess what was happening. She immediately promised to help, saying, "If you bring Rio with you tonight, I'll arrange for her to be taken out of the castle."

"Are you *really* not going to join her, Shizuku? When she finds out Rio's gone..."

"It's fine. Just take care of her for me."

Shizuku knew Ortea wouldn't forgive her once she discovered Rio had

escaped, but if both of them fled, the blame would most likely come down on Faneet.

Shizuku had mentally prepared herself to face the consequences of her own inexperience; she'd already sacrificed herself once before, back in Farsas. As long as Rio was safe, that was all that mattered.

She placed a small envelope in Rio's hand.

"This is important. Don't lose it, okay?"

It was a hastily written petition addressed to Leuticia. In it, Shizuku explained that language wasn't innate in Shizuku's world, described the potential of education, and detailed the reality of the experiments children were undergoing in Kisk.

Once she made it out of the castle, Rio would be placed on a stagecoach bound for Farsas, as arranged by Yura. If Rio could get the petition to Leuticia after reaching the castle city, a brighter future would open up for her. Leuticia would undoubtedly figure something out for the little girl.

As Shizuku held onto Rio's hand, she internally apologized to a number of people. The girl's small fingers fidgeted around impatiently.

"Stay well, Rio."

"What about you?"

"I'm not coming, so—"

That was when they heard a brief scream echoing from the hallway.

Shizuku and Yura exchanged glances. Without a word, they immediately sprang into action. Yura went to hide Rio behind the kitchen counter, while Shizuku dashed over to the door where the scream had come from.

Before Shizuku could open the door, however, it swung open from the other side. The air from the corridor as well as the sound of Willett's groans infiltrated the kitchen.

A mage dressed in a black robe stood in the doorway. He was roughly twisting Willett's arm with one hand as he shot Shizuku a piercing look. The man's expression, illuminated by the nighttime lamps, was so stern that one might

even call it sinister.

When Shizuku met his gaze, she let out an exclamation of surprise.

“Niké... Why?”

“You’re plotting something interesting, aren’t you, baby-face? Where are you planning on taking that child?”

“What...?”

Shizuku stepped backward, not bothering to look over her shoulder.

Yura and Rio were hiding. She needed to find a way of diverting Niké’s attention.

Her legs seemed close to collapsing under the pressure, but Shizuku held her ground and turned to face the man.

“What are you talking about? Let go of Willett.”

“Don’t play dumb, you idiot. There’s a magic barrier around that cabin, so I know if someone leaves during the night. I just paid it a visit, and there was no one there.”

Niké lifted his free hand. He began to recite an incantation, and Shizuku went pale. Then she launched herself at the man’s outstretched hand.

“Stop!” she shouted.

“Let go of me, woman. Or do you want to die right here, right now?”

“I don’t want to let her die! Stop it!”

Shizuku clung desperately to Niké’s hand, trying to stop him from casting the spell. However, the next thing she knew, she heard a disapproving *tsk* and felt a sharp strike against her cheek.

She knew what had happened, but it still took a moment for it to sink in. Shizuku looked up at Niké.

He’d let go of Willett and used the hand he’d been restraining her with to slap Shizuku across the cheek, his furious gaze trained on her.

“You don’t want her to die? So you plan on saving one child and leaving the

rest to suffer? How stupid.”

“Leaving them to suffer...? I’d never...”

“You’re happy saving only the one that pulled at your heartstrings? Is everything okay as long as the people right in front of you survive? What an idyllic way of looking at things. At the end of the day, you’re no better than the princess. You both enjoy manipulating people’s lives to suit your whims.”

“That’s not true! I’m nothing like her!”

Shizuku just wanted to help.

That was all there was to it. She wanted Rio to be loved and protected, like all the other children she knew. She wanted happiness to become a normal part of her life. She wanted Rio to laugh, cry, and enjoy a fulfilling life.

Children were granted a long grace period before reaching adulthood. Why did Rio’s path have to be cut short after just a few years? Even here, it was possible to teach people language; Rio had been absorbing Shizuku’s knowledge like a sponge.

As such, all of those experiments were meaningless. If Shizuku proved that, she could save all the other children, too.

She just had to make sure she wasn’t blinded by her love for Rio.

“It was completely coincidental that you picked her. What if you had chosen a different child that day? You would have let *that* child escape and left this one to die. That’s how shallow this sentimentality is.”

“...”

Shizuku couldn’t refute Niké’s claims. After all, they were true.

She hung her head, holding onto her stinging cheek. The sound of Rio sobbing began to echo from behind her.

How was she supposed to move forward? She’d had no trouble with that before, but right now, she couldn’t remember how she’d done it.

She couldn’t come to a decision. The future was unclear. It seemed like no matter what direction she took, she’d lose something precious to her.

Shizuku stood there on the brink of collapse—but then a small child's hand stopped her from falling.

"Shizuku."

Rio tugged at the hem of her clothes. When Shizuku looked over her shoulder, she saw the girl's short fingers clenched tightly around her skirt. She looked up at Shizuku, her eyes wet with tears.

"Don't cry, Shizuku."

"Rio."

Shizuku couldn't remember what kind of things she'd thought about when she was a young girl.

All she could recall was that she'd loved her family. She'd loved her mother's smile and the warmth of her father's hands; all she had were a few fragmented memories. In hindsight, all she'd ever done when she was young was receive from other people. Was this how her parents had felt back then?

"Let's do our best, Shizuku."

Rio loved Shizuku, just as Shizuku loved Rio. The young girl helped her just as much as she wanted to help Rio. They had slowly begun to walk forward supporting one another.

Why had she spent all this time convinced that she was alone?

Shizuku crouched down and embraced the little girl. Niké looked at them, his eyes devoid of emotion. He shifted his gaze to Yura, who was glaring at him, and Willett, who was trembling beside him.

"If you needlessly interfere, you'll be dealt with, too. Keep that in mind," Niké said coldly.

"I humbly apologize," Yura replied.

"And you, baby-face."

"...What?"

Shizuku raised her head and looked at the mage. Although they both saw things from different perspectives, their gazes intersected.

At that moment, the look in the man's eyes reminded Shizuku of a snowy night. It was so serene that it seemed to swallow up every little sound, and its coldness seemed to bring back memories.

Realizing that neither she nor Niké was angry, Shizuku let out a sigh of relief. Niké frowned as he examined her tear-stained face.

"Don't betray us after putting in all that effort. Otherwise, your life will be wasted cleaning up after the child's mess."

"..."

"If you still don't get it, I'll kill you right now."

Without waiting for a response, Niké started chanting. A ball of fire appeared in his gloved right hand.

Rio cowered away, frightened, but she didn't try to escape. Instead, she stepped in front of Shizuku and clung to her in an attempt to shield her from harm. Rio's body trembled slightly as she held onto Shizuku, but at the same time, she was incredibly strong.

Shizuku blinked slowly, unable to put her feelings into words. A single tear rolled down her black eyelashes, dripping onto Rio's hair.

She'd worked so hard for so long. She needed to have faith in the time and effort she'd put in.

She could sacrifice her life when the time came, for the girl who'd been her constant support.

Shizuku held Rio against her chest.

"I'm sorry."

There was no answer. The little girl simply squeezed her hand in return, and Shizuku smiled. She gently lifted the girl's tiny body up into her arms.

It wasn't over yet—not even close. Shizuku wasn't the one to decide when things were finished.

There was only one day remaining, but progress could still be made in that time. There must be something left to gain.

Shizuku silently turned to the others present and bowed deeply.

With that, Shizuku carried Rio back to the cabin. That night, they fell asleep holding hands in their little bed.

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The person she was hugging gave off a gentle, sweet aroma. Shizuku closed her eyes and rested her face on Rio's back.

"When the test is done, can I play?" Rio asked in her young voice.

"Of course. You can play all the time."

"Will you play, too?"

"Sure... Let's play together. We can play all kinds of games."

Shizuku's whisper carried with it a multitude of emotions, and she put Rio down and led her by the hand instead.

They were heading deep into the castle. There, the fearsome princess would be waiting for them.

It had been a month since Shizuku first stepped into Ortea's chamber.

Back then, she'd proposed a challenge to the princess all by herself.

Now she knelt before Ortea with Rio by her side, hoping to deliver the results she'd promised.

As usual, the room was filled with a pungent smell. However, this time Ortea's figure was concealed behind a newly erected white curtain.

The princess's elegant voice reverberated from behind the curtain.

"So the day has finally arrived. Did you have any issues?"

"Thanks to you, Your Highness, I did not."

Shizuku momentarily worried about what she'd do if Niké had told the princess about the events of two days earlier, but Ortea seemed unaware. Keeping her eyes on the ground, relief flooded through Shizuku. Niké and Faneet also had their heads bowed to their master.

"In that case, let me see what you've managed to achieve. Are you ready?"

"Whenever you are," Shizuku responded with a calm expression on her face.

As she spoke, she squeezed Rio's tiny hand gently to encourage her. The little girl was shrinking away in fear despite Shizuku's composure. Ortea, presumably right in front of them, had probably picked up on the contrast. Still, Shizuku didn't really care.

"Step back. The child will sit in this chair," Niké instructed from where he stood in front of the curtain.

Rio sat down on the chair in the middle of the room. Shizuku was made to stand a short distance behind her. She was likely being kept out of Rio's line of sight to prevent any foul play.

Niké walked over to Rio and conducted a brief physical examination. Rio shuddered when she saw him, likely due to the events of two nights earlier, but as Niké directed her to raise and lower her arms and briefly checked her clothes, her nervousness appeared to dissipate. It looked like she was smiling slightly, but it was hard to tell from where Shizuku was standing.

Eventually, Niké returned to his spot in front of the curtain and took a stack of cards out of a large box that had been put there. The simple sight of them was enough to make Shizuku's heart leap.

I really hope she passes.

Right now, that was all Shizuku could wish for. It wasn't that she wanted to ensure her own survival; more than anything, she just wanted Rio to live.

From this point on, Rio was the only person who would be tested. From the beginning to the end, Rio was the one who had to answer the questions and produce results. That was a lot of pressure for such a young child to handle.

Shizuku wished she could take her place. She clenched her fists tightly.

After all, if this test ends in failure...

Shizuku had already resolved to offer her life in exchange for Rio's.

The pictures on the cards were realistic—far more realistic than Shizuku's illustrations.

Despite Shizuku's apprehension, Rio looked at the cards and began to give her

answers, one by one.

Rio pondered and puzzled over every single card that was flipped over, but in the end, she still managed to get each of the words correct. The test had begun with vocabulary that Rio was sure to know, and Shizuku couldn't help but let out a shallow breath.

One hundred was a daunting number.

As she counted the questions silently in her head, Shizuku was reminded of the enormity of the task before them. As Rio answered question after question, it felt almost as if the test would go on forever. Under usual circumstances, Shizuku would heap on the praise every time Rio got something right, saying, "That's amazing," and "You're doing so well." This time, the cards were turned over in silence, but Rio successfully followed along nonetheless.

Eventually, Rio reached the thirty-question mark. She hadn't made any errors yet.

Shizuku noticed that the palms of her clenched hands were slick with sweat. She couldn't help but worry about how long Rio's concentration would last and how much she would remember. As much as she wished they wouldn't, these anxious thoughts kept coming to her mind.

She looked up at Faneet standing next to her, who noticed her gaze and gave her a nod. He was as emotionless as ever, though, so Shizuku couldn't tell what he was thinking.

The sound of another card being flipped over brought Shizuku's attention back to the test. This new card was for "clock." Rio readily stated the correct answer.

Shizuku assumed the princess was behind the curtain, yet she hadn't uttered a single word since the test began. It was impossible to tell whether she was actually there.

Niké was standing with his back partially turned toward the curtain, so the princess might not have been able to see his cards.

At last, they reached the fiftieth question.

Was there a meaning as to why Shizuku had found herself in this world?

Was it a positive one, either for herself or for someone else here?

Shizuku thought back about all the people she'd met and said good-bye to so far.

She'd never felt like she'd saved any of them—not even once. In fact, she was the one who'd been saved by them. Those people would have continued striding toward the future, whether she was there or not.

But what about Rio?

Could meeting Shizuku really save her life?

Once they'd made it past the sixty-question mark, Niké started incorporating questions that didn't use the cards into the test.

He would take real objects out of the box, asking for their names or pointing to parts or colors for Rio to identify.

Rio spent a lot of time puzzling over the "parts" questions, but even when she seemed like she would trip up, she always managed to come up with the answer. Shizuku had been concerned about whether Rio could name the color "white," but in the end, she was able to identify it confidently. When Shizuku heard her come up with the correct answer, the ensuing relief almost made her legs give way.

Shizuku had no idea how much time had passed since the test began. She wanted to check, but there was no clock in the room.

Rio usually got bored after just ten minutes or so, but it had been much longer than that and she was still sitting politely in her chair. She immediately responded with enthusiasm whenever she was shown something she recognized.

However, that came to a stop when she got to the eighty-ninth question.

The card was asking her for the verb "to read." The moment she saw it, Shizuku thought, *Oh no.*

It was such a simple word, yet Rio had always got it wrong. No matter how many times Shizuku corrected her, she couldn't seem to get it right. With bated

breath, Shizuku waited for Rio to answer.

It's "read," Rio.

Yet her silent appeal went unheard. The card depicted a person holding an open book.

Whenever Rio wanted Shizuku to read her a book, the young girl would say "sing."

"...Um."

Rio fidgeted nervously in her chair. It seemed like she wanted to look back at Shizuku, but she couldn't. Shizuku couldn't help either, as much as she wanted to. Her powerlessness made her grit her teeth in frustration.

But just then, she heard the man say, "Ah," followed by the rustling sound of falling paper. Spread across the floor were dozens of testing cards. It seemed like Niké had let them fall, and he bowed in the direction of the curtain, then hurriedly picked them up again.

After gathering the cards, he presented Rio with a new card. This time, it was a word she knew—"sleep."

Shizuku's dark eyes opened wide, staring at the man who'd resumed the test.

Then, for the one hundredth question, Niké took a yellow fruit out of the box.

Rio gazed at it intently...then spoke.

"Deugo."

There was no way she could have gotten that wrong. Shizuku expelled the air from her lungs.

She felt a hot sensation in her chest. She was close to bursting into tears. She wanted to hug Rio.

How many hours had they spent studying? While some of Rio's learning had been incorporated into playtime, it hadn't all been fun and games. And yet Rio's hard work had helped her learn around four hundred words in a month. She was now up to par with other children her age who *hadn't* been affected by the disease.

While some of her speedy learning could have been attributed to the pair's hard work, it was possible that some innate vocabulary was ingrained in her already and that she'd just struggled to remember it.

As Shizuku pondered this, she couldn't help but want to run over to the little girl. Still, she maintained her composure and waited patiently for Ortea's verdict.

Shortly after Niké had put his cards away and bowed toward the curtain, the woman's bewitching voice rang out.

"You have done splendidly, girl."

Shizuku silently lowered her head. She wasn't sure whether the princess was talking to her or Rio, so she didn't say anything in response.

However, it didn't take long for Shizuku to realize that the praise was directed at *her*. In fact, it was directed *solely* at her.

"In just one month, you've demonstrated remarkable progress. I shall have you work for me. I can't wait to see those mages' faces when they hear about this. Right, Niké?"

"Indeed. I hope they feel ashamed of their own incompetence."

"Any semblance of shame within them has already been worn down. They wouldn't be able to survive the royal court otherwise. Anyway, Niké, have this girl serve as Seilené's personal attendant."

Shizuku hadn't heard this name before. Although she didn't show it on the outside, she was confused, but an idea came to mind when she saw Faneet begin to stir.

Originally, Shizuku had been summoned to the castle to educate a child who was soon to be born. Perhaps Seilené, who she was now being ordered to serve, was the mother of that child.

As Shizuku straightened her posture, Ortea—who was still behind the curtain—continued to issue instructions to Niké.

"Oh, and we no longer have any use for that child," she eventually said, raising her voice. "Dispose of it."

It was as though the princess had only just remembered Rio.

“Huh?” Shizuku reflexively replied—but nobody else said a thing.

Rio, seemingly unaware that the command pertained to her, was still sitting politely in the chair. Shizuku glared at the white curtain past the little girl’s head.

“But, Your Highness, she passed the test...”

“You did a wonderful job. I said so, didn’t I? I’m giving you a job as a reward.”

“I don’t care about me. I’m talking about Rio.

“Did you demand that she be *disposed of*? ”

As Shizuku made this astonished remark, the woman snorted with laughter.

Ortea, the princess of Kisk—whose tendency to harm others for her own enjoyment made her feared across the continent—chuckled airily behind the curtains, ridiculing Shizuku for being so naive.

“What’s the matter, girl? You haven’t grown attached, have you? I don’t see why you need her anymore.”

“Your Highness...she did a great job of keeping up with my teaching. If it weren’t for her efforts, I couldn’t have achieved this result.”

“Striving for survival—that’s simply human nature, isn’t it? Sometimes, our efforts don’t pay off in the way that they should. That, too, is just part of life.”

The woman’s voice dripped with venom, as if she were a beast tormenting its prey. Feeling detached from her emotions, Shizuku stayed perfectly still.

Effort didn’t always pay off. That much was true.

Ortea had the audacity to taunt them with this unavoidable truth, despite making no effort to give Rio the reward she deserved.

She was extolling the necessity of effort and demonstrating how fruitless it could be at the same time, and her snickering suggested she derived great amusement from the outcome she’d orchestrated. Shizuku felt as if that laughter was infiltrating her mind through her ears. As her legs began to shake, she rooted her feet to the ground.

“...I request an amendment.”

“An amendment to what? What am I supposed to amend?”

“Your decision to dispose of Rio. I kindly request that you reconsider it.”

An angry stare pierced the curtain. Faneet put out a hand to hold Shizuku back, but she brushed it away and stepped in front of Rio. She glowered at the princess through the curtain, shielding the confused child.

“I will work for you, Your Highness—but only if you save Rio.”

“What a naive thing to say. Aren’t you aware of the idea of utilizing people for your own gain?”

“If you execute Rio, that will make you a master who doesn’t reward people’s achievements. I can’t obey someone like that. Please amend your decision.”

Shizuku wanted to rip the white cloth that was blocking her vision to shreds and yell at the princess.

How hard had she and Rio worked? They’d invested all that effort so they could pass the test and be freed from this oppression. If they’d failed, Shizuku wouldn’t have cared about what happened to her as long as Rio lived.

But they hadn’t. They’d succeeded. And yet, despite this, the princess had decided to give Shizuku her approval and dispose of Rio. That was something Shizuku could simply not accept.

“...Your Highness.”

Shizuku clenched her trembling fists. Her palms had been sweating just moments earlier, but now she could feel nothing but her blood boiling.

The room, shrouded by that sweet fragrance, felt chillingly cold, as though Shizuku was the only person there with any emotion. Even that annoyed her, and she glared at Niké in front of her.

Ortea called out to the man from behind.

“Take that child away, Niké.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“Wait!” exclaimed Shizuku.

She stretched out her hands to stop Niké, but he shoved her backward. Shizuku staggered back, but Faneet managed to catch her. Meanwhile, Niké lifted Rio into his arms.

“Wait! Stop!” Shizuku cried out.

“Arrest that girl, Faneet,” Ortea commanded.

“But, Your Highness...”

“*Faneet.*”

Ortea’s voice was unyielding, and Faneet sighed and wrapped his arms around Shizuku from behind. Her attempts to rush toward Niké became futile as she was lifted partially off the ground, leaving her kicking against the floor. Shizuku fought against Faneet’s grasp with all her might.

“Let go of me! Give Rio back!”

Niké continued to carry the small girl outside. Just before the doors closed, Rio looked over the man’s shoulder at Shizuku, an anxious look in her eyes.

“Shizuku?” she murmured.

As Rio faded into the distance, Shizuku began to shriek. “Wait! Don’t take her! Rio!”

Her cries bounced off the closing door. As Shizuku stared at it, Ortea spoke to her in a gentle voice:

“When a beloved creature dies, people mourn its loss. However, eventually that sorrow fades and is forgotten.”

Her tone was amicable, but that warmth was merely a facade. The words were insincere, vacuous, and useless. Ortea herself knew this. Perhaps she even found pleasure in it.

Having been released from Faneet’s grip, Shizuku bit down hard on her lip.

It felt as if all the blood had rushed out of her body. Before she knew it, her whole head and body felt frozen to the core. Being inside her mind was like standing in front of the sea awaiting an incoming storm. Her thoughts were so tranquil that she could almost deceive herself into believing she was calm as

she slowly fixed her gaze on the sheer curtain.

“I won’t forgive you, Your Highness.”

Her assertion crept across the floor and echoed around the room.

As Shizuku’s anger burrowed deeper and deeper within her, the princess responded with an unfazed snicker.

Her voice was naturally overbearing, but Shizuku didn’t find it offensive anymore. Facing the sheer curtain, she took a step forward. Faneet reached out to grab her shoulder, but she brushed his hand away.

After striding up to the curtain, she grabbed the thin fabric and yanked it as hard as she could. The gauze made a high-pitched sound as it tore from the metal fixtures on the ceiling, revealing Ortea.

The woman was sitting in her large chair with one knee raised, and she glanced up at Shizuku with a bewitching look in her eyes.

“Well, this never happened to me before.”

“It’s a first for me, too. However, I deemed it necessary. Your Highness, please reconsider executing Rio.”

“Do you really have the power to demand such a thing?”

“If you don’t accept my request, I will refuse to cooperate with you at any point in the future.”

Shizuku’s eyes exuded a cold, intimidating aura that she’d never displayed before.

Even with Ortea directly in front of her, the light in her eyes didn’t falter. In fact, the growing intensity of Shizuku’s gaze brought a mesmerizing smile to the princess’s face.

Ortea pointed one of her ivory-colored fingers at Shizuku.

“But *anyone* can do what you did with that girl, right? Faneet observed your methods, so couldn’t he, for example, replicate your success without you teaching him?”

“Do you *really* believe that’s the case? Do you think I showed him all my

tricks?" Shizuku countered, causing Ortea to laugh out loud.

This exchange with Shizuku, who'd honed her anger to a fine point, was likely nothing more than another source of entertainment for the princess.

Shizuku narrowed her eyes and gazed at the beautiful, twisted woman.

"I'm an anomaly. There's no one else like me. In fact, there never has been. I possess a soul unlike anyone else in this world."

"...Huh?"

"Wait," said Faneet, attempting to interrupt Shizuku, but she ignored him.

Ortea raised a hand to stop her vassal from speaking. Faneet's concern was appreciated, but this wasn't the time for Shizuku to worry about saving herself.

Shizuku suppressed her emotions as she explained her story.

"I'm a human, but I'm not from this world. For some unknown reason, I ended up coming here from another world. That's why the king of Farsas was trying to root out what made me different... I suggested that we could teach language to children because that's the norm where I'm from. I have knowledge of how language is acquired from a whole different world. But, Your Highness, if you dispose of Rio, I'll die and take that knowledge with me."

Shizuku was haggling, taking advantage of her own unique status to save Rio's life.

It was by no means an unfair deal. Time and time again, Erik had asked Shizuku if she knew how unique she truly was.

Unsurprisingly, Ortea's eyes widened hearing this sudden confession; however, her expression soon went back to normal. Tilting her head to one side, she looked up at Shizuku.

"What a foolish story. Is that what you want me to say?"

"I'm telling the truth. You're welcome to assume I'm lying, but you'll regret it once you've lost me."

"How can you prove it's the truth? Is your body built differently? Shall I tear you apart and take a look?"

“Do as you please, but my body is perfectly normal. They examined me in Farsas after I almost died. The only things that are special about me are my soul and my knowledge. However, if you fail to amend your decision to dispose of Rio, I won’t be able to offer you even a sliver of that wisdom.”

This negotiation felt like walking on a tightrope.

Still, fighting on was Shizuku’s only option—even if the odds weren’t in her favor.

From Ortea’s perspective, a child’s life may have been no more significant than that of a bug. However, if it mattered that little, allowing her to live shouldn’t have been a big deal, either.

That’s why Shizuku needed to persuade the princess—a woman famed for her cruelty above all else—of her own value.

All of a sudden, Ortea had stopped smiling. Just one corner of her crimson lips curled upward.

“I could use psychological magic to drag that information out of you, you know.”

“If that’s what you think, why not give it a try? Are you aware of the recent events in Farsas? Have you heard, for instance, about the man who attempted to use psychological magic on me—only for his own mind to collapse?”

Shizuku needed to take advantage of anything she could. She refused to back down.

She had to lure the princess into her trap, whether accidentally or as a result of her misunderstanding. Shizuku needed to convince Ortea that her cooperation was essential.

“If you promise to treat me appropriately, then I will use my knowledge for your benefit. I will give the children the gift of language, rid them of their illness, and help them regain their knowledge. However, if that is not what you wish for, then this negotiation will reach an impasse. I will not be able to offer you a single word of what is inside me.”

Shizuku spoke confidently, without hesitation, and Ortea observed her

closely. For the first time, Shizuku saw a hint of doubt in the princess's upward gaze, reminding her that she was just nineteen, after all.

After a long pause, Ortea finally spoke.

"You're suggesting I spare that child's life?"

"I want you to spare all the children who were forced to undergo those experiments. And you should treat them well, as compensation for the ordeal they've been through."

Shizuku wasn't begging Ortea for help. If Rio hadn't been taken out of the room, she might have done so—but the situation had changed now. Shizuku and the princess were already on equal footing.

Unlike before, Shizuku's demeanor now exuded cold authority.

Ortea narrowed her eyes. "You're confident you can deliver on your claims, aren't you?" she asked, her voice lacking any trace of mockery.

"I'm sure of it. I promise."

"Very well. I accept your conditions."

Ortea gave Faneet a signal with her eyes. The man nodded silently, then exited the room.

Shizuku, now alone with the princess, had been giving Ortea a distinctly cold look, but she swiftly bowed in a somewhat self-important manner and turned around. As she walked away, the princess's sharp voice pierced the air, directed at the nape of Shizuku's exposed neck.

"What's your world like?" she asked.

"...Apart from the fact that language isn't innate, it's not much different from here," Shizuku responded.

Without turning around, she continued to make her way out of Ortea's room.

Starting that day, Shizuku was formally welcomed into Kisk's royal court. Her role was that of a court lady, but within the castle's walls, she was treated like a magistrate.



In the end, Shizuku never got to see Rio again.

That privilege was outside the scope of the rights she'd been granted, so the castle mages turned her away.

However, when Shizuku heard the orphaned Rio had been taken in by one of the mages retiring from the castle, she accepted this outcome. The middle-aged mage had grown weary of the repeated experiments and had long expressed a desire to quit. Shizuku gave all of her self-made flashcards to the man, who intended to go back to his hometown with Rio.

In exchange for this going-away present, Shizuku received a portrait of herself that Rio had wanted to give to her, which she put inside one of her books for safekeeping.

The other children who had been confined to the laboratory were either introduced to adoptive parents or taken into foster care. As a result, they all found a place they could call home.

Niké gave Shizuku a list detailing where all fifty children had ended up, telling her she had the right to know. It seemed like he'd been the one to arrange everything. Although Shizuku knew she couldn't read it all, she gratefully accepted the document and sometimes found herself gazing at it before bed.

The month since Shizuku had parted ways with Rio passed in the blink of an eye.

She, alongside Faneet, had been appointed to serve the lady named Seilené. The pregnant woman possessed the kind of beauty that one would expect from a noble and was just one month away from giving birth.

In addition to her work surrounding early childhood education, Shizuku assisted Seilené in various aspects of her daily life, assuming the role of a court lady. Once her child was born, Shizuku's real work would begin, and she spent her days studying diligently in preparation for that moment.

It had been two months since Shizuku had first been brought to this country.

Before she knew it, she'd spent more time in Kisk than she had in Farsas.

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In a corner of the castle garden stood a small cabin. Shizuku stood in its

doorway, gazing into the emptiness within.

“Are you crying?” came a voice from behind.

Shizuku smiled awkwardly and turned around, running her fingers through her windswept bangs.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“It just looked that way,” Faneet said, as expressionless as always.

Shizuku appreciated his concern, though at the same time, she felt it was unnecessary. She didn’t want anybody to mollycoddle her. She no longer saw herself as a child who needed protection.

Faneet draped the shawl he was carrying over Shizuku’s shoulders. He must have brought it for her, since she’d ventured into the garden at dusk with only light clothing on, and she accepted it with a word of thanks.

“It sounds like Rio’s doing well,” he said.

“Oh. I’m glad to hear that,” Shizuku replied.

“Do you miss her?”

Without responding to his question, Shizuku turned away from the hut with a serene smile on her face. She walked past the man and began striding ahead. Faneet positioned himself beside her.

“...I thought you might sneak back to Farsas once the test was over,” he said.

“I’m not going back. I made a promise to the princess.”

She should have called it a deal, rather than a promise.

Shizuku had chosen to keep fighting from within the castle—not only to save Rio’s life but to provide a future for children with language difficulties, including those who were yet to be born.

At the very least, Ortea had enough influence to stop the experiments when Shizuku managed to produce results. Under her patronage, establishing measures to address language impediment might be a possibility.

That was why Shizuku had decided to stay in Kisk. Instead of searching for a way to get home while Erik protected her, she was devoting herself to what she

could do about the problem in front of her.

Some people might call her choice stupid or claim that she was betraying Erik and Mea's trust. However, there were times when you couldn't choose *either* of the alternatives available to you.

Shizuku could feel herself beginning to get emotional, and she swallowed a lump in her throat.

"...There's still stuff I need to do. I'll be fine."

She closed her eyes and felt a warmth behind her eyelids that reminded her of her childhood. At some point, those memories would disappear, too.

Shizuku wasn't the only one who found herself repeatedly saying good-bye to those she couldn't bear to leave behind—it was a universal experience. She'd let go of people who'd been extremely precious to her, but that was how she knew that the decision she'd made was the right one.

Shizuku lightly pressed the inner corners of her eyes and let out an inaudible sigh.

The sky was red from the setting sun. The breeze felt a little cold against her skin, which made her smile.

"Hey, Faneet," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for bringing me to this country."

Shizuku's true feelings were hard to construe from her tone of voice, as if they were obscured by a delicate gauze. The man furrowed his brow.

"...I don't think that's something you need to thank me for."

"Maybe not."

Shizuku began to laugh. Her gentle voice rippled across the grass, spreading as far as the eye could see.

With that, she slipped inside the small hut, bringing a touch of warmth to it just as she'd done before.

2. A Flower Bud in the Shade



Kisk was the newest of the four Great Nations.

Around 250 years earlier, a war involving several countries had broken out in the center of the continent. The three countries this war had created remained at odds with one another for a long time, engaging in conflict after conflict. However, around 100 years before Shizuku's arrival, they unexpectedly merged into one unified nation. After changing its name to Kisk, this new country invaded Gandonia—its neighbor to the north—and took some of its territory.

Kisk became feared shortly after its inception due to its belligerent actions, but it was its western neighbor, Farsas, that took the wind out of its sails.

Sixty years earlier, an army led by King Dysral of Farsas suddenly set its sights on the neighboring country of Casola.

Casola—situated by the sea and sandwiched between Farsas and Kisk—was a small nation that most other countries didn't know about. Kisk had been pressuring Casola to merge into its own territory, but after a sudden military campaign, Dysral managed to conquer the small nation of Casola in just two weeks.

Shortly thereafter, Dysral himself succumbed to madness and was deposed. Rodeus, who subsequently ascended the throne, not only apologized for the deposed king's actions but also returned Casola's territory and provided assistance for its restoration. However, Farsas's involvement with Casola meant that Kisk was unable to meddle in the country. Even prior to this turn of events, Kisk hadn't had a favorable view of its long-established neighbor, yet following Farsas's involvement with Casola, Kisk's animosity toward the country deepened.

Gandona, a nation that bordered both Farsas and Kisk, viewed Kisk's hostility toward Farsas as "childish resentment" that seemed to stem from the fact that Kisk lacked much history of its own. Regardless, Kisk paid no heed to such opinions. In fact, in the present day, it proudly displayed its own arrogance to its neighbors. "We don't care about other countries," it asserted. "Our nation is already a great power."

At least, that was the facade it liked to present.

"Why do they care so much about Farsas anyway...?" Shizuku remarked candidly after finding out about Kisk's twisted feelings toward its neighbor.

This was a decidedly problematic statement, and if anyone had heard her, she would have been criticized for it. Fortunately, however, there was no one else in the break room where Shizuku was drinking her tea. She opened the history book she'd borrowed from the library and started copying the parts she understood into her notebook.

Since arriving in Kisk, she'd begun to feel incredibly grateful that Erik had taught her the basics of grammar, but she still wasn't proficient enough to gain a full grasp of the texts. It was like trying to read a university-level English paper with the knowledge of a seventh grader. Even so, Shizuku didn't become discouraged and continued to skim through Kisk's history books.

She checked the clock just to make sure, but break time wasn't over yet. For the time being, Shizuku had a lot on her plate. Not only did she have to assist the pregnant Seilené, she also had work related to language education and her own studies to focus on. Her break times, during which she could leisurely flip through books and enjoy a cup of tea, were extremely precious to her.

As Shizuku absentmindedly picked at her sweets, the door opened and Willett stepped inside. After exchanging greetings, the girl looked at the book Shizuku was reading and pulled a face of disgust.

"You're reading *another* one of those books?"

"What do you mean? I borrowed it from the library."

"That's exactly my point."

When they'd first met, Willett had been too shy to say much at all to Shizuku,

but lately, she'd started talking to her like a close friend. Thanks to Shizuku's baby face, Willett must have perceived her as being close to her own age, which made her more approachable. Still, Shizuku was effectively a magistrate, making her Willett's superior, so the other woman used polite language when speaking to her—albeit only at the most basic level.

"Never mind that, Willett—teach me how to read this."

"You're asking again? You're so smart, so how come you can't read words?"

"I'm not that smart, which is why I can't read them. If you teach me, I'll learn."

If Shizuku had asked anyone else about a word, they might have found it suspicious how much knowledge she had in some areas and so little in others. Willett, however, didn't pay this any heed and willingly helped her out.

"That says 'slope,'" the girl promptly explained.

"Thanks," Shizuku replied, scrawling a note in the corner of her notebook.

"More importantly, Flower Rain Day is just around the corner. Who are you going to give your flowers to?"

"Huh? Why would I give somebody flowers? Is it to promote world peace?"

"Of course not. Don't you know about Flower Rain Day?"

"I've never even heard of it."

"A-are you serious?"

Shizuku's apathetic response seemed to ignite a peculiar fighting spirit within Willett. Suddenly brimming with enthusiasm, she explained that Flower Rain Day was an annual event—seemingly unique to Kisk—which involved giving flowers to a member of the opposite sex you were interested in as a token of your affection.

Its origins dated back to the founding of Kisk. According to the story, just before the three nations that formed Kisk merged together, the princes of two of the countries showered the queen of the third with flowers to ask for her hand in marriage.

"I bet it was hard to pick up all those flowers afterward..." Shizuku commented.

"That's not what the story's about!"

Willett's complaint brought her back to her senses. Shizuku's comment sounded like something Erik would say, which she found troubling. Had she unwittingly begun to mirror his behavior? She didn't want to become as impassive as he was.

"So it's like Valentine's Day?"

"What's that?"

"Don't worry. Okay, I get it now."

To Shizuku, Valentine's Day in her old world was when she would give small gifts or chocolate to all the people who looked out for her in her daily life. Was it right to assume that Flower Rain Day was the same? Faneet was one man who tended to look out for her, but she didn't think flowers would suit him. Receiving a bouquet would probably bother him.

Shizuku shrugged at Willett, who was giving her an expectant look.

"I don't think I'll give anyone flowers."

"Huh?! But this chance only comes around once a year! Are you sure you're okay passing it up?"

"That doesn't trouble me in the slightest. I really don't care."

"Seriously...? But don't you think Faneet and Niké are super good-looking?!"

"You think they're good-looking...?"

Shizuku considered the two men Willett had mentioned to be pretty average in the looks department. In truth, though, she could never really tell whether a man was attractive or not. Perhaps she'd grown too accustomed to seeing Erik and Lars, or maybe Erik's views—that people's personalities made it hard to determine how they actually looked—had influenced her own perspective. She found Faneet kind and reliable, whereas Niké truly got on her nerves. That said, she had no idea whether or not they were good-looking.

"Those two have a lot of fans inside the castle—but since they're the princess's staff, nobody can bring themselves to approach them."

"Oh, right. The princess *does* scare people, after all."

"But you work directly under the princess, just like them. So..."

"...You want me to act as a sacrifice?"

Shizuku felt like a dummy being thrown into a minefield. She was completely drained, but it seemed like this romantic event was a serious affair for the young girl. Willett was four years younger than her, and the girl's eyes sparkled as she looked at Shizuku.

"...Neither of them is really my type, though," Shizuku replied.

"Oh? Then what kind of guys *do* you like?"

"It's hard when you put me on the spot like that, but I guess I like someone I can respect. Someone smart, who cares for others like it's second nature."

It was a fairly vague preference. Shizuku had tried to express her ideas in words, but they had no substance. She groaned, struggling to visualize a specific kind of person who'd fit her description.

Willett, meanwhile, looked puzzled. "Sounds like you're pretty picky."

"I don't think so. I'm just not really sure."

"Well, anyway—I'll provide the flowers on the day. I'll give it my all."

"Whoa, where did that come from?! How'd you lure me into that trap?"

"It's just in case you decide to give them to someone."

Willett took a piece of paper from her pocket and wrote something on it. It was probably a flower reservation slip or something similar. Shizuku couldn't be bothered to stop her, so she just watched. They were only flowers—she could give them to someone on the day, or she could just use them as decorations.

Shizuku took a sip of her cold tea.

"So which of the princes who proposed to the queen did she eventually choose?"

"Huh, don't you know? The queen married them both. They became a throuple."

"...Whoa, that sounds messy."

Shizuku hadn't been able to help let her true feelings show; after all, she'd grown up with the idea that a wife only had one husband.

Willett just gave her another exasperated look.

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The man prodded the carved white stone game piece with his finger. It moved a little, but didn't topple over. He lifted it up, then glanced at his opponent sitting opposite him, trying to discern her reaction.

"Do you *want* to go to war, Ortea?" he asked.

"I did not say that."

"I've also been thinking I want to do something about Farsas."

Ortea's brother, the king, spoke in a vague manner, eliciting a sardonic smile from his younger sister. While he usually listened to what she had to say, he was understandably cautious when it came to war. This was not so much due to his dislike for war, however, as it was due to Farsas's formidable military strength.

King Beelhurse, the incumbent king of Kisk, was by no means an outstanding or wise individual, yet he wasn't ignorant enough to be called stupid. He felt threatened by Farsas, the most prominent country on the continent, and while he also felt bitter about past grievances, he didn't like the idea of declaring war outright. In fact, upon hearing about the ace that Ortea had up her sleeve, he even suggested resorting to assassination.

As Ortea was pondering how to manipulate her brother, the king brought up an entirely different matter altogether.

"Come to think of it, that girl you're in charge of... What was her name again? The one who made us shut down the experiments."

"Are you referring to Shizuku?"

"Yeah, her. What's she like? I'd like the chance to see her."

"I will not give her to you. She's mine," Ortea warned her brother.

She hated the idea of relinquishing her unusual pawn to the king. The ability to flawlessly manipulate people was not a skill he possessed.

As the pair conversed, Ortea continued to move her pieces across the board.

Beelhurse smiled at his sister.

"I didn't say I wanted her. I'm just curious. Isn't she the one who picked a fight with you?"

"We simply made a deal. I would never fight with a subject."

Shizuku had confronted Ortea head-on.

The princess had never come across someone like Shizuku before. Well, that wasn't strictly true—some people had remonstrated with her several years ago, but they'd all been banished from the court or executed. The fact that Shizuku, who claimed to be from another world, had remained in the castle made her an exception. Although Ortea was suspicious of the story, she couldn't refute the girl's assertions altogether, which had worked in Shizuku's favor.

A bitter expression had appeared on Ortea's face, and her brother knocked over one of her pieces with his own.

"Still, if I'm kind to her, then she'll be treated less harshly. It seems like the girl in question is being shunned by the mages since she shut down their experiments."

"She will not lose heart over something so insignificant. After all, she's one of my vassals."

Shizuku wouldn't let people as irrelevant as the royal court mages get to her; this was a girl who'd stood her ground against Ortea herself, after all. The princess's prideful response made the king laugh.

With that, the pair redirected their attention back to the game board—and all discussion of Shizuku faded away.

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Seilené didn't have a husband.

Since she was pregnant, Shizuku had assumed there was a man in her life. Yet

there didn't seem to be any probable fathers around, so Shizuku refrained from broaching the subject with her. Moreover, Seilené's presence was kept secret, known to only a select few within the castle, and as such, Shizuku kept their acquaintance to herself.

Ortea was sheltering the woman in secret. All Shizuku knew was that the child she would soon give birth to had a significant role to play.

"Could you pass me that lipstick over there?" Seilené said with a sigh, and Shizuku handed it to her.

In this world, lipsticks were often kept in small glass saucers. Every single one of the makeup products spread out on the table was of superior quality and something the other young court ladies would have looked at with envy.

Shizuku, meanwhile, didn't feel any particular emotion as she went about her duties. With her long hair tied up in a tight ponytail, she had a stern appearance more akin to that of a teacher than a court lady.

Seilené sighed as she looked at her belly in the mirror.

"My body feels so heavy and cumbersome... I can't wait to be free of this."

"You only have one month to go, so just endure it until then."

"After the birth, I wonder if my body will go back to the way it was before."

"My cousin once said that if you wear shapewear and do some light exercise once you recover, everything goes back to normal," Shizuku replied. It was a very practical suggestion.

Seilené looked at Shizuku's reflection in the mirror, annoyance in her eyes.

"You're so young. I'm jealous..."

Seilené only appeared to be in her early twenties herself. Just how old did she think Shizuku was?

Shizuku pondered this as she tied up Seilené's thick blond hair. Once she was done, she started to brew some fragrant tea. As the steam tickled her face, Shizuku heard a lethargic voice call out to her.

"I must say, I'm feeling rather low. Could you read me a book, perhaps?"

“Uhh...”

Shizuku didn’t know what to say. She could manage children’s picture books, but any regular book would be a challenge; she’d have to make stuff up while she read. As she was wondering what to do, Seilené gestured toward the bookshelf in the corner of the room.

“Pick something from there. Anything will do.”

“Does it *have* to be from that bookshelf...? They must all be difficult to read.”

While she was letting the tea steep, Shizuku went to look at the bookshelf. She’d hoped there would be some with pictures, but unsurprisingly, they were all thick books. She touched the spines, reading out the words she could understand.

“*The History of Rozsark*... Is that something you’re interested in?”

Although Shizuku had never visited the country, she’d heard its name mentioned countless times. Shortly after arriving in this world, Rozsark had invaded its neighbor, Anneli. It was also the country that Farsas had asked to temporarily govern Candela Castle after it was annihilated in the forbidden curse incident.

Shizuku got the impression that it was a fairly chaotic place, but that was about it. What had it been like in the past?

Just as Shizuku was reaching for the book, Seilené’s voice cut through the air.

“That doesn’t interest me in the slightest. I just happened to bring it with me.”

“Oh, right,” Shizuku replied casually. Judging by the sudden severity in Seilené’s tone of voice, however, she might have touched on a sensitive topic.

Shizuku shifted her gaze to the next book.

“Huh?”

The old, navy-blue book had nothing written on its spine. Shizuku pulled it out—but as she lay her fingers on it, a slight tingling sensation akin to a static shock shot through them. Startled, Shizuku glanced at her hand, but she noticed nothing untoward. She regained her composure, then removed the book from

the shelf.

The thick, leather-bound book was adorned in silver. There was no title on the cover, either, but it did have a strange inscription on the back. The book's cover felt oddly familiar to her touch, as if she were holding the hand of a loved one.

Shizuku stared at the untitled tome.

She'd seen something like it before.

The sense of *déjà vu* she was experiencing was impossible to shake, and Shizuku felt something stir in the depths of her memory. She placed her fingers on the cover to open it—but just as she did, a piece of paper from the middle of the book drifted to the floor.

“Oh!”

Shizuku hastily picked it up. It was a small, old portrait. The edges were worn, and it seemed almost faded.

The picture was of a man and a woman. Shizuku felt her eyes drawn to the woman, who was sitting on a chair.

“Lyshien?”

Lyshien was the princess of Anneli who'd been imprisoned. Shizuku had encountered the girl on her travels, and this woman in the portrait bore a striking resemblance to her.

Yet upon closer inspection, they weren't the same age; the woman in the picture looked nearly ten years older than Lyshien. Shizuku was about to take a closer look at the man beside her when Seilené spoke up, her voice tense.

“Do you know that girl?”

“Huh?”

Flustered, Shizuku quickly placed the portrait back between the pages and closed the book.

Lyshien's story was a complicated one.

Despite being the princess of Anneli, her overwhelming magical power had resulted in her being locked away and her existence concealed. It was only after

Rozsark invaded that she had been released and taken away as a hostage by Rozsark's King Oltovine. Having now been freed from Rozsark as well, she was likely residing somewhere with her husband.

Erik and Shizuku were the only ones who knew that, though, and Shizuku hastily explained things away.

"No, my imagination's playing tricks on me. She just happens to resemble someone I know."

Initially, Niké's master had tasked him with looking for Lyshien. Thinking back, that master was probably Ortea. Shizuku couldn't let a slip of the tongue put Lyshien in danger.

Seilené stared intently at Shizuku, who was tense with nerves. When she realized what book Shizuku was holding, she frowned.

"Stop looking at that," she said, seeming somewhat flustered herself. "Pick another one."

It didn't sound like she was going to question Shizuku about Lyshien. As Shizuku placed the navy-blue volume back on the shelf, Seilené asked her bluntly, "How much longer is that tea going to take?"

"Oh, I forgot. I'm sorry. I don't think I left it too long, though."

Shizuku hurried back to the teapot and poured the nicely steeped fragrant tea into a cup. As she served the pink drink, she raised a certain topic to test out the noblewoman's response.

"Have you heard of Flower Rain Day?" Shizuku asked.

Seilené cocked her head slightly.

"What's that?"

After leaving Seilené's room, Shizuku visited Ortea to give her a regular update. The princess was stretched out on her chaise longue, playing with a stack of stone spheres on her side table.

Ortea was stacking the marble-sized spheres into a pyramid shape. This task seemed to require a fair amount of patience and precision, but the princess had almost finished. Somewhat surprised by this, Shizuku issued her report.

"Seilené is fine. She's just frustrated because her body won't do what she wants it to. Please arrange for a physician to give her a thorough checkup. I don't know much about pregnancy myself."

"Isn't she ready to give birth at this point?" Ortea asked.

"I don't know. Why don't you leave that to the professionals?"

Shizuku's prickly retort made the princess chuckle slightly. Although her attitude often skirted the line of disrespect, the princess didn't reprimand her for it. She probably felt it was too late for that.

Ortea held a black sphere in her hand. She grasped it in a graceful manner, but it made Shizuku feel like something was missing, and she found herself furrowing her brow.

"Anyway," Shizuku continued, "arrange for people to be present at the birth and get her a wet nurse. I don't have the relevant knowledge, and it doesn't sound like Seilené wants to raise the baby herself."

"Very well. I'll do that," Ortea replied.

The princess stretched out her slender fingers and attempted to place the sphere on top of the stack. Since she was lying down, however, she couldn't quite reach, and the ball wouldn't settle into position.

Shizuku watched for a short while, wondering why she didn't just sit up. Then Ortea hit another one of the spheres with her finger, almost making the stack collapse.

"Excuse me," Shizuku said, taking a step forward.

She steadied the stack of balls, which had almost toppled over, then took the black sphere out of Ortea's hand. Without hesitation, she confidently placed the final piece on top of the pyramid.

The princess's eyes widened, and Shizuku flashed her a vindictive smile resembling that of a condescending teacher.

"If you just sit back and relax, other people will snatch the best bit away from you," Shizuku told her.

"...You work for me. Your achievements are basically mine anyway."

"You're a little disappointed, aren't you? Feel free to tell me I'm wrong."

Shizuku's false yet unwavering smile made Ortea grimace for a moment—but she soon reverted to her usual snooty expression and averted her gaze.

"You may leave now," the princess said.

"As you wish," replied Shizuku, giving Ortea a polite bow before exiting the room.

It was only after the door had closed silently behind her that she remembered something.

"Oh, I forgot to ask who the princess was planning to give flowers to."

It was hard to imagine Ortea giving flowers to anyone, but as a member of the royal family, she was sure to be familiar with her country's customs. Shizuku didn't think Willett had lied to her, but being a young teenager, she likely had a skewed perspective of things. That being the case, Shizuku had wanted to ask a few other people about the event. It was so far down her list of priorities, though, that the topic had completely slipped her mind.

"Oh well. I guess I'll ask Yura instead."

Shizuku yawned as she strolled back down the hallway. She felt like she heard a passing court lady murmur, "I could really go for some chocolate," but she had no idea why.

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Shizuku had meant to ask Yura, but the day of the event had come around before she got the chance. Clearly, it wasn't a major priority for her—so when Willett handed her a bouquet of white flowers, she was understandably dumbfounded.

"Huh? Isn't this a little big?"

"I told you I'd put my all into it. I was so excited."

"..."

Shizuku accepted the bouquet, which was big enough to cradle in her arms, and glanced down at it. It seemed too large to be a mere courtesy gift, but perhaps she was the only one who felt that way. Even if it *were* a token of

genuine affection, its size would scare the recipient away.

Shizuku wanted to sigh and complain to Willett about how she really felt, but she managed to repress all those bitter urges.

“...Thank you,” she said instead.

“You’re welcome! Good luck!” Willett chirped. She ran off like a puppy carrying a small bouquet of her own.

Shizuku, now alone in the break room, somberly scrutinized her bouquet. Considering its size, her private room was the only place for it.

Fortunately, she had the afternoon off that day; she could hide away in her room for the remainder of it. With that decision made, she left the break room and started making her way there.

“If only Erik were here.”

Erik seemed indifferent to any kind of event and showed no interest in matters of the heart. Shizuku could have given him the bouquet and said it was a thank-you for everything he’d done for her, and he would have accepted it without question. In that scenario, she would have made the effort to prepare some food and snacks for him.

As she envisioned this, her eyes drifted toward the window, where she spotted something bizarre.

“What’s that?”

Something resembling the hem of a garment was sticking out from behind a shrubbery.

For a moment, Shizuku wondered if it was another corpse, but it was still daytime. If a body were on the loose, it would have caused more of a commotion. Yet despite that, Shizuku still had some lingering doubts, so she headed outside.

“Oh! It’s you?”

A voice completely lacking in concern echoed from above him, and Niké frowned. He’d been reading a spell book among the shrubbery.

“What do you want, baby-face?” he replied curtly.

“I thought you might be a corpse, so I came to check.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I’m still alive.”

As he waved his hand dismissively, it collided with something else. At last, Niké looked up, to discover that the object in question was the large bouquet Shizuku was carrying.

“What’s that?” Niké couldn’t help but ask, intrigued by the mysterious item.

“It’s my punishment stick. I use it to punish people I don’t like,” Shizuku quipped.

“...What goes on inside that head of yours? Do you have *any* common sense?” Niké asked.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

It annoyed Niké that Shizuku had changed the topic, but it’d only attract attention if he started arguing with her here.

“I’m reading a book,” he replied honestly.

“I can *see* that,” Shizuku said with an exasperated look.

Then she crouched down beside him with the bouquet in her hands.

“What is it?” she asked. “Are you fleeing from debt collectors or something? You’re hiding, right?”

“Debt collectors? Don’t be ridiculous! I was about to go into town, but then I realized today’s a bad day for that!”

“Oh. Because it’s Flower Rain Day?”

Niké was surprised to hear those words come out of Shizuku’s mouth, but he figured that her fellow court ladies must have made a fuss about it. It was obvious that Shizuku’s bouquet was for the event, whether she claimed it was a “punishment stick” or not. He wasn’t sure whether she was the recipient of the flowers or if she planned to give them to someone else, but the substantial size hinted at their deep emotional significance.

“It’s busy in town today. I thought about getting my hair cut, but decided

against it."

"Oh yeah? That's tough, considering how little time off you get."

Shizuku didn't have much time off, either, but she remained remarkably nonchalant about it. Since arriving in Kisk, she had shown hardly any vulnerability—particularly after being separated from the child she'd been living with. They'd been like family, so close that Shizuku had even let the girl call her by a nickname. When Niké had seen Shizuku in Farsas with her mage companion, her smile had been more carefree. Now she seemed like an entirely different person. Niké tutted, frustrated by this thought.

For some unknown reason, Shizuku had plopped herself down beside Niké and started scrutinizing him. Her gaze made him feel uneasy in a way he couldn't quite pinpoint, and he closed his book. Just as he was about to move to a different spot, the girl came up with a bizarrely cheerful suggestion.

"Do you want me to cut it for you, then?"

"...Huh?"

Niké, who'd half-risen to his feet, looked at Shizuku. Her large, black eyes were brimming with childlike excitement that captured his attention—so much so that it was a little unsettling.

Leaving the bouquet behind, Shizuku rushed back to the castle and borrowed Yura's haircutting scissors.

"Are you going to cut your own hair?" Yura asked with a confused look. "Do you want me to do it for you?"

"No, they're not for me. I've always wanted to try cutting someone's hair. You know, like a pet groomer."

"What's a pet groomer?"

Shizuku left a somewhat skeptical Yura behind and returned to the garden. She thought Niké might have run away, but he was sitting in the same spot as before. He looked visibly displeased when he saw the scissors in her hand.

"Are you serious about this?" he asked.

"Of course. Now turn around."

“You’ve done this before, right?”

“Sure have. I’m actually pretty good,” Shizuku replied, telling a bare-faced lie.

She ran a comb lightly through the man’s gray hair. Even if she messed it up, he was a guy, so it shouldn’t make him *that* upset. And if it went well, it might even relieve some of his stress.

Shizuku picked up the sharp-looking scissors.

“So what can I do for you today? An undercut?”

“I’d kill you. I just want it a little shorter.”

“Okay, just a bit shorter all over. Got it.”

That sounded like an easy task, even for a first-timer. Niké’s hair was about shoulder length, so she could simply start there and tidy it up.

Shizuku began trimming his hair, in such good spirits that it almost seemed like she’d start humming. The sudden snipping sound stunned Niké, but he trusted her confidence and stayed quiet—or at least, at first he did.

“...”

He could hear the intermittent sound of the scissors.

Snipping sounds were followed by the rustle of the hair falling to the ground. The silence that followed prompted him to look down and survey his surroundings.

Was he imagining it, or was there an oddly large amount of hair scattered around him? He hoped that it was his imagination.

Still, his neck *did* feel strangely cold. With no mirror in sight, Niké finally spoke up.

“Hey.”

“What?” Shizuku replied.

“What have you done to it?”

“Huh? To what?”

Niké felt like Shizuku was playing dumb, but then he felt the scissors slide

through his hair once more. He froze. From above, he heard Shizuku let out a thoughtful groan.

“Hmm.”

It wasn't long before she changed the subject, though.

“Hey, have you ever seen Leuticia?” she asked.

“The princess of Farsas? Of course I have,” responded Niké.

“She’s so pretty, don’t you think?”

“Yeah—about as far away from you as one can get.”

"Erik...the person who used to look after me, said that Leuticia's face was symmetrical. Apparently, that's quite rare," said Shizuku, deftly brushing off Niké's snide remark about her own appearance. He couldn't quite grasp what she was getting at, though.

“What’s your point?” he asked.

“Just that symmetry is a tough thing to achieve.”

“...I'll kill you.”

“Wait a sec. I’ll see if I can make both sides the same length.”

“What?!”

Niké had a horrible feeling about what Shizuku was trying to do, but the seriousness of her voice and the sound of the scissors snipping away behind him made it impossible for him to move.

A stream of ominous comments left Shizuku's lips, such as, "Oops, I cut too much there" and "I'll do the right side next." Niké wanted to cover his ears. He vehemently regretted letting Shizuku cut his hair—but it was too late for that now.

By the time he was freed...the damage had already been done.

Shizuku put down her scissors and went to see Niké from the front—and the moment she did, she doubled over with laughter.

Niké clenched his trembling fists. Some hint of self-restraint stopped him from lashing out at Shizuku, and instead he gave the young woman a deathly stare. She'd laughed so hard her eyes had welled up with tears.

"Didn't you tell me you were good at this?!"

"Sorry, that was a lie. It was my first time."

"Hurry up and die already."

"Hold on... It's not *that* weird. You just look younger."



Still clutching her stomach with one hand, Shizuku offered him a handheld mirror. Niké snatched it—but when he saw his reflection, it left him speechless.

Despite him requesting a slight trim, his ash-gray hair was almost half its previous length, so much so that he looked like a boy in his late teens. The haircut itself was fairly neat and refreshing, but the expression on his face wasn't doing him any favors.

As he looked at the veins bulging out of his forehead, Shizuku—who'd finally stopped laughing—flashed him a cheeky smile.

“Sorry, baby-face,” she said.

“You...”

“How old *are* you, actually?”

“Twenty-one! What did you think you were doing? Getting your own back?”

“Oh. If you’re twenty-one, then I don’t see the problem. You’re young. You can get away with that haircut.”

“You really think I can go out in public like this?!”

“You’ll get used to it. It’ll be fine.”

Despite being yelled at, Shizuku didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“We can call it square now, right? You’ve been picking on me nonstop, after all.”

“You really think I deserved *this*?!”

“Fine. I’ll give you my bouquet to make up for it.”

Shizuku chucked the white flowers at him. Niké was taken aback, but ended up accepting it anyway. The fact that she’d innocently given it to him indicated that she probably didn’t know what Flower Rain Day was all about.

“...Who gave you this?” asked Niké.

“Huh? Willett did. It’s beautiful, don’t you think?”

“I see.”

Why did Shizuku’s response come as a relief to him? Not wanting to dwell on

it, Niké picked up his spell book and carried it under his arm, along with the flowers. He decided to go back to his room before anyone saw him, but as he turned on his heel, he heard the woman's disconcertingly calm voice call out to him.

"Hey. You protected Rio in the test, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"If I'm wrong, then just forget it. Thanks."

Niké turned around to see that Shizuku was already walking away, waving at him over her shoulder. In that moment, it seemed to him as though she carried the weight of solitude on her small shoulders.

She used to smile in a more charming way. Having that man beside her had reassured her, and it seemed as if she'd enjoyed every conversation they shared.

There was no trace of that person left anymore. The abrupt shift in her surroundings and the constant stress of her current environment had changed her. To some extent, Niké was to blame for that. He was the one who'd told Ortea that she was the king of Farsas's favorite.

Niké understood the circumstances that had caused this inevitable change in Shizuku. He knew perfectly well how she'd struggled and how much hardship she'd been through during the month she'd spent with that child, as well as in the month since she'd lost her.

Despite all that, Shizuku's arrival had brought an end to those vile experiments and saved somebody.

"I'm not going to apologize to that baby-faced woman."

The man ran his hand through his freshly cut hair. He let out a sigh, then continued making his way toward his room in the castle.

From high up in his fourth-floor window, the king looked down at the now-empty garden.

"What a sweet girl," he said to himself, resting his chin in his palm. "I hope she'll be able to support Ortea."

Beelhurse continued to lean on the window frame for a while, but he must have eventually gotten bored, because he stood up straight and disappeared into the room.

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It was ancient history now.

The room was situated deep within the enemy-occupied building.

It was an incredibly small, pitch-black room with no windows or lights. The first thing that greeted the man upon opening the door was the musty smell that lingered in the air.

She must have noticed the light pour in, but the girl didn't say a word. No crying could be heard, either, which almost made him think he'd gone to the wrong room.

Eventually, though, his eyes adjusted to the light inside. He saw the girl and immediately fell to his knees.

"Have you come to kill me?" she asked in a hoarse voice.

He'd never expected her to say something like that. The man felt his voice catch in his throat, but before he had the chance to refute her question, the girl began to laugh.

Her laughter echoed softly around the dark, enclosed room. She covered her mouth with her small hand as she continued to chuckle.

Caught in the grip of that warped sound, the man found himself frozen in a deep sense of despair. Was he really too late?

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Seilené walked at an extremely deliberate pace. Noticing the step in front of them, Faneet wordlessly extended his hand, and she accepted it with a smile.

Flowers of every color were blooming in the small, private courtyard. As Seilené strolled around, she held onto her hair, which fluttered in the breeze.

"Thank you. This cheers me up."

"I'm happy to do something like this whenever you like. Just let me know."

Faneet's response brought a serene smile to Seilené's face.

As Shizuku watched the pair converse from behind, she couldn't help but feel they looked like a married couple. Even Faneet's typically sour expression appeared to have softened. Caring for Seilené came incredibly naturally to him, and he treated her as cautiously as one would a fragile object.

While Niké and Faneet were both Ortea's close aides, the princess seemed to employ Niké's help more frequently. This was presumably because Niké—a skilled mage who could use teleportation magic—could assess situations in foreign lands for her.

Faneet and Ortea had apparently known each other for a long time, but being a swordsman with a somewhat inflexible personality, he sometimes got on the princess's nerves. When Ortea came up with outrageous ideas, Faneet was usually the first person to try to put a stop to them, while Niké would readily accept her plans.

Faneet was especially attentive toward Seilené and the child she was carrying, and he regularly admonished the bored princess for being so impatient.

"Faneet doesn't have feelings for Seilené, does he?" Shizuku murmured softly to herself.

She'd noticed how he silently changed positions whenever the wind shifted, so that it wouldn't blow directly on Seilené. And he'd even mentioned wanting the baby to be saved when he'd gone to Farsas to fetch Shizuku. Perhaps Faneet had a personal attachment to the noblewoman and her unborn child.

All of this, however, was mere speculation.

Shizuku shook her head and went to fetch some hot water for Seilené, who would be returning to her room very soon. Before stepping back inside the castle, she casually glanced back at the pair strolling through the flowers, side by side.

They really do look good together. For some reason, that thought made Shizuku feel weird.

"How do you teach someone to speak when they don't have innate language?"

"You repeatedly connect objects with their respective words. People use body

language and gestures, so you can communicate that way, too. Gestures are another form of language.”

Shizuku had revealed that she was from another world, but the princess didn’t seem to fully believe her. In fact, she still seemed about 70 percent skeptical. The reason for the other 30 percent that couldn’t dismiss her claim, however, was the book Shizuku had shown her.

The book Shizuku had brought with her contained no letters that were used on the continent, despite it being printed. When the princess saw it, her expression had shifted.

“Anyone could make up something like that, if they wanted to,” she’d remarked, shoving the book away—but there was no doubt Ortea’s worldview had been shaken.

Furthermore, although several people had attempted to follow Shizuku’s method of educating children, they seemed unable to replicate her success, which contributed to Ortea’s uncertainty.

Shizuku wasn’t *trying* to withhold her expertise, but it seemed the very concept of teaching a language confused the other adults. It would take them several hours to teach a child something that Shizuku could teach in no time at all. As a result, she had to juggle creating educational materials, teaching the children in person, and conducting training sessions for aspiring teachers all at the same time.

Serving Ortea, however, took precedence over all of these roles. The princess had ordered her to look after Seilené, so she had to dedicate whatever free time she had left after that to her education work.

As busy as her days were, Shizuku felt a certain satisfaction from the authority she’d been given. It came with the obligation of responding to Ortea’s occasional interrogations, but the princess’s questions were always straightforward and never annoying or offensive.

“I understand that it’s a form of language, but isn’t there a limit to what you can express through gestures? What if someone learns a word incorrectly?”

“We just patiently correct them. They’ll get it eventually.”

"That sounds like an incredibly roundabout way of teaching somebody."

"Teaching people things is rarely straightforward, though, don't you agree? That problem isn't unique to language," Shizuku replied. "Progress is progress, regardless of whether it's linear or not. It's not a problem."

If Ortea were as academically inclined as Erik, the fact that Shizuku was from a world with no innate vocabulary would have made her question why she was able to speak the continent's language.

As perceptive as Ortea was, however, she simply took Shizuku's claim at face value. She seemed to believe Shizuku's assertion that her world was "not much different from this continent," indicating that she had difficulty questioning her preconceptions when it came to situations that strayed too far from what she knew. Shizuku found this surprising.

Regardless of the similarities with Shizuku's world, it was probably hard for people in this world to understand what made Shizuku so different, considering the concept of language barriers didn't even exist here.

Shizuku had been wanting to ask Faneet how much of her and Erik's conversation about innate language he'd heard and what he thought about it. It wasn't an easy topic to broach, and she hadn't found the right moment yet.

Faneet had done everything he could to locate the red book, which was possibly one of the interlopers' cursed artifacts, but both the book and the woman who owned it seemed impossible to track down. When Shizuku heard that even Farsas's investigators had failed to capture her, she found herself looking up to the heavens in despair.

Although she was supposed to be talking to Ortea, Shizuku was engrossed by these thoughts, and she suddenly noticed the silence in the room and redirected her gaze. Ortea was giving her a piercing stare, making Shizuku think her tirade of questions had come to a halt—but she was wrong.

"Are you sure your arrival wasn't what caused this outbreak?" asked the princess.

"It sounds like the outbreak started shortly before I arrived. And, in the first place, I don't have the sort of strange powers necessary to trigger something

like this. You examined me, remember?"

Shizuku had undergone a thorough physical examination immediately after she started working for Kisk. It seemed like this was a regular part of the civil service exam, but Shizuku, having declared that she came from another world, had undergone an even more rigorous physical exam than was normal.

The exam, however, produced the same conclusion as the one conducted in Farsas: Shizuku was just an ordinary human.

Upon receiving this report, Ortea had instructed Shizuku, who'd been standing right in front of her, to show her her blood. Yet even when Shizuku cut her palm to show the princess that her blood ran red, Ortea merely frowned slightly and said nothing.

Shizuku had been scared that the princess might lose interest in her if her body was normal, but she'd allowed Shizuku to live and treated her as a member of her staff. That was probably a sign that Ortea—like Lars—wasn't entirely convinced.

"Is there a possibility that killing you would suppress the outbreak?" Ortea asked.

"I don't know, but I doubt there's any connection. When I first came to this world, I found myself in the Souit Desert in Tarys. The disease's point of origin was farther west, though, wasn't it?"

"It seems so," Ortea mused, contemplatively putting a finger to her chin.

If Lars were in Ortea's position, he probably wouldn't have hesitated to kill Shizuku.

Ortea, however, wanted to give Seilené's unborn child the best upbringing possible.

From her perspective, killing Shizuku wasn't worth the risk. If Ortea were to eventually make that gamble, she'd do it when she was confident that she no longer needed Shizuku around. That said, Shizuku planned to escape from the castle before things reached that stage.

"What did that man do with you?" Ortea asked. She didn't mention his name,

but she was clearly referring to Lars.

Shizuku closed her eyes and forced a smile.

“He tried to kill me. The princess scolded him for it, though.”

A snort of laughter escaped Ortea, but Shizuku couldn’t be sure which emotion was behind it.

Being royals, both Lars and Ortea possessed the same incomprehensible twisted nature. In Shizuku’s eyes, that effectively made them the same.

After Shizuku left, Ortea called Niké in and listened to his brief report.

“So assassinating the king of Farsas is a no-go?” she spat, making no effort to conceal her disdain.

“I sincerely apologize,” Niké replied.

“You fool. You never bring me any good news. But...never mind. My brother wants us to make it happen by any means necessary. Though even if our plan did succeed, it wouldn’t make things any more interesting.”

Ortea flicked her pink-painted nails. The sound was quiet, but both of them could still hear it. Then she directed her nails toward Niké.

“How is the situation in the Rosta region?”

“The same as usual. Skirmishes occur all the time, but Tigor, the current lord of the region, is managing to keep them under control for now.”

“Summon Tigor to the castle. Have his son rule over Rosta instead,” the princess commanded.

“As you wish,” Niké replied simply.

He’d known what Ortea was trying to do the moment she’d brought up Rosta. However, Niké knew that if he tried to inquire about the specifics or ask, “Why do you want to summon him?” he’d be reprimanded.

So instead, he promptly left the princess’s room to carry out her orders.

As he was walking down the long corridor, a dry chuckle escaped Niké’s lips.

“A war, huh? I guess it only takes a moment to throw things off balance.”

For Ortea, such changes were just another source of entertainment. A fleeting distraction to alleviate her boredom. Yet despite knowing this, the mage continued to do everything she asked of him.

He stifled a sad smile. Making his way down the dim hallway, Niké felt as if the resentment left behind by people who'd lived similar lives to him was entrenched in every inch of those walls.

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"They've already failed twice. That's probably a sign to give up."

Leuticia shrugged at her older brother's offhand remark.

While she wholeheartedly agreed with his point of view, she found it odd how little the idea of his own assassination fazed him.

Danger was something that constantly followed the royal family, but there had been several other close calls following the desecration of the mausoleums—an incident triggered by a forbidden curse. She wished he'd take these threats more seriously, but she also knew that telling him so was pointless. She hoped he'd at least heed her warnings, even if she did have to repeat herself several times.

"People think you're an easy target because you don't have a successor, Lars. And it doesn't help matters that we're the only direct descendants to the throne remaining," she explained.

"Even if I were to have a successor, protecting a child would be even more challenging. They're so fragile."

"That's no excuse not to have a successor, though."

Her argument was sound, and Lars evasively gazed up at the ceiling.

Leuticia's lectures often fell into one of two categories: extremely lengthy or very brief. On this occasion, Lars couldn't tell which direction she was going in. He waited, dreading the former, but luckily her remonstrations stopped there.

The king shifted his gaze back toward his sister.

"So who do you think is behind this?" he asked.

"It's hard to say; they've been clever enough to use intermediaries. Still,

considering their knowledge and the scope of their actions, it's highly likely that the culprit is a mage."

"It's either Gandonia or Kisk, then."

"What makes you say that? Just a hunch?"

"They're the only other countries with mages that skilled. There's Medial, too, but they have nothing to gain from killing me. It's too far away."

"So it *is* a hunch, then."

"Yeah. A shot in the dark."

The next thing Lars knew, a wooden carving of a cat came hurtling toward him, and he caught it in one hand. Leuticia, having flung the figurine toward her brother with remarkable accuracy, gave him a disapproving look.

"It doesn't matter if it's just me, but don't let anyone else hear you say things like that. It could cause problems."

"I know, I know. I just wish it was easier to flush out the perpetrator."

"I'll catch them next time," Leuticia said, her lips curving into a callous smile.

The glimmer of anger she exhibited made the king narrow his eyes at her.

"Think you can win?"

"Of course. No matter who they are, I'll tear them to pieces with my own two hands."

His sister's declaration brought a wry smile to Lars's face. After all, she was one of the continent's greatest mages.

The undercurrents slowly stirring beneath the surface had begun to show themselves and make their mark on history.

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The buildings of Kisk Castle were laid out like the walls of a maze and interspersed with gardens. Shizuku had puzzled over why the castle was built this way, but it turned out that the other two unified countries had made substantial expansions to the castle when Kisk was first founded.

After Yura explained this to her, Shizuku remarked, "They should have just

built a new castle.”

“Her Majesty the Queen didn’t want to leave this one,” Yura clarified with a sly grin.

It sounded like Tryphina, the first queen of Kisk and a woman who’d married two princes, had been quite uncompromising.

Shizuku turned the corner of the building, clutching a number of books in her arms.

It was quicker to cross through one of the several courtyards to get to the library than to navigate through the building itself. However, immediately after rounding the second corner, she heard something hurtle through the air, followed by the sound of something smashing.

When she turned around, Shizuku saw the remnants of what appeared to be a vase scattered across the ground. She bent to pick up the pieces. There was no sign of any flowers or water on the floor—just broken bits of ceramic.

“That was a close one.”

She could have died if the vase had hit her directly. Thanking her lucky stars, Shizuku looked up toward the higher floors of the building. She couldn’t see anyone at the open window on the third floor, but she could sense someone hiding there.

It might be best to get away from here.

Just as that thought ran through her mind, a hand reached out from inside the window—clutching another small vase.

There was a stifled laugh. Taking that as a signal, the hand holding onto the vase let go.

Shizuku dropped her heavy books and leaped backward, out of the way. It felt as though the weapon dropped on her had grazed her nose.

“H-hey, watch out!” she yelled.

Condemnation filled her voice, yet she heard no word of apology. That wasn’t surprising, though—they were doing it on purpose. Avoiding the spot directly beneath the window, Shizuku pondered how to retrieve the books she’d

dropped.

This wasn't the first time an invisible wrongdoer had pestered her.

According to Faneet, the mages who'd had their unsuccessful experiments interrupted harbored a grudge against her.

"How petty!" Shizuku had blurted out upon hearing this. If someone had overheard her reaction, though, it would have only made the harassment worse.

When Shizuku learned that it *wasn't* the princess but the mages who disliked her who'd insisted she not be allowed to see Rio again after the test, she'd been more horrified than angry. While she'd never been targeted so directly before, by now Shizuku had been subjected to all sorts of aggravations including having suspicious parcels sent to her room and strange rumors circulating about her.

"It happens to me all the time," Niké had said with an unbothered look. "But I fight back."

This suggested that such treatment was a natural part of working for the princess. At least, Shizuku hoped that was all there was to it. She would be deeply offended if she were grouped with Niké for any reason other than their direct service to the princess.

"I guess it's on me to pick up these pieces, too? How infuriating," Shizuku muttered as she cautiously approached the shattered vase.

Just then, a voice from behind attempted to stop her.

"It's dangerous. I'll pick them up for you."

A man walked in front of her, then bent and started gathering her books spread out on the ground. For a moment, this unexpected assistance left Shizuku dumbstruck—but once she'd returned to her senses, she hurried over and picked up the rest.

The man put together the books he'd picked up and returned them to her.

"Here you go. Are they okay like this?" he said.

"Th-thank you so much!"

From the front, he appeared exceptionally well-dressed. He must have been in his mid-thirties and looked to be a gentle and refined man of status. Shizuku felt grateful for his help, yet wary at the same time. She wasn't very fond of nobles, likely due to the ideas Erik had implanted in her, and wanted to avoid any involvement with them, if possible.

The man noticed Shizuku looking around restlessly even after receiving her books and cocked his head in confusion.

"Is something the matter? Are you missing one?"

"Oh, no. I was just wondering if there was a broom around..."

"Ah, were you planning on cleaning this up? You weren't the one who broke the vases, were you?"

"Well, no. But still..."

"Just leave it be. The cleaning staff will come by eventually."

The man's assertion was oddly forceful. Shizuku made an ambivalent, uncomfortable expression.

Regardless of what the man said, Shizuku found the idea of abandoning the scene extremely unsettling. Was it really okay for her to just leave it like this?

As if having read her mind, the man glanced up at the still-open window and chuckled.

"You don't have to clean everything up yourself; that's what the cleaners are paid to do, after all. When they discover these suspicious broken fragments, they'll report it to their superiors, and the subsequent investigation will determine who dropped what, and from which window. If the object turns out to be castle property, the likely culprit will be given a warning. It's sometimes necessary for matters to be dealt with in such a way. You understand that, don't you?"

The man seemed to know that Shizuku was being harassed, and he was basically telling her not to hide it. Shizuku felt like *she* was the one being given a warning, never mind the culprit. After thinking things over for a moment, she bowed.

“...I’m sorry.”

“It’s no problem. Anyway, I assume that you’re in a hurry since you were taking a shortcut. Don’t let me keep you.”

The man pointed in the direction of the library, and Shizuku bowed to him repeatedly before leaving.

She’d thought that making a fuss about the harassment would only please the perpetrators, so she’d been ignoring it. From the castle’s perspective, though, that probably wasn’t the best response.

Given how things had escalated, Shizuku decided that she’d report the next incident to her superiors.

Bizarrely, however, the harassment came to a stop right then and there.

※

No one in the castle considered Yura to be anything but diligent.

She was always rushing around the castle, attending to not only her primary duties but also extra tasks she stumbled upon by chance.

Since she always seemed to be in the middle of some kind of job, Shizuku barely ever saw her in the break room. That day, though, was an exception.

When Yura spotted Shizuku, she quickly moved past pleasantries.

“Shizuku, about those scissors...”

“Oh, thanks so much for lending them to me. It was a big help,” Shizuku replied.

“No, that’s fine. I was just wondering...”

“Yes, I used them to cut Niké’s hair.”

“I knew it.”

It seemed like the news of Niké’s new hairstyle had spread like wildfire among the court ladies. The orders he received from Ortea meant that he was away regularly, so spotting him inside the castle was a rarity—despite this, everyone seemed to be talking about it. Shizuku was delighted to hear all the gossip, knowing that Niké would be furious if he caught wind of it himself.

"I think it really suits him. Don't you think that fresh new look helps hide how sly he really is?"

"Shizuku...didn't you get scolded for that?"

"He got mad at me, yes, but the princess just found it funny."

One time, when Shizuku went to report to the princess, Ortea had asked her whether she was the one who'd cut Niké's hair. When Shizuku said yes, the princess had roared with laughter, her face hidden behind her fan—a very unusual sight.

Nevertheless, it sounded like most of the women had a favorable opinion of Niké's new hairstyle. Was Yura the exception? She was giving Shizuku a stern look.

Shizuku didn't care what Niké thought, but perhaps it was best to apologize to Yura. After all, she'd been the one to lend Shizuku the scissors.

Shizuku went to bow, but before she had the chance to say anything, Yura slowly began to speak.

"Please be more careful, Shizuku. He's already put you in danger several times, hasn't he?"

"H-he has?"

"Yes! Mages are dangerous! It's careless to let yourself be alone with him!"

"But I thought we were colleagues..."

"You're so naive!"

"I'm sorry!" said Shizuku.

Despite apologizing, she didn't really understand what Yura meant. Nevertheless, the other woman kept talking.

"The same goes for Faneet. It's unavoidable when you have to work together, but you shouldn't let your guard down any more than you need to. You never know what's going to happen. If you ever find yourself in trouble, just let me know. I'll beat whoever's troubling you to a pulp... Got it?"

"G-got it," replied Shizuku, standing up straight.

Yura gave a satisfied smile, then excused herself and strode out of the break room.

In contrast to her typically serene demeanor, Yura had been acting remarkably tempestuous.

“You’ll beat them to a pulp...? How are you going to do that, Yura...?” Shizuku muttered to herself, astonished.

Both Niké and Faneet were competent individuals, and Yura was just a court lady. What could *she* have up her sleeve? A vision of Yura brandishing a meat cleaver came to mind, but Shizuku shuddered and shrugged off the thought.

“Hey, baby-face.”

Shizuku was in the vicinity of the princess’s room when the mage called out to her in the corridor. She stared intently at him.

“To a pulp...”

“Huh? What’s the matter?” Niké asked.

“Oh, nothing. Anyway, what’s this?” Shizuku asked him, looking at the papers he’d handed her.

The man looked visibly displeased.

“Can’t you tell by looking at it? You wanted to know what that Aetea adherent claimed when he experimented on that child. This is the thesis he submitted.”

“Oh! I didn’t know you had something like that.”

“It seems like it was mixed with his initial petition to the princess. I found it when I was sorting through some documents.”

It had completely slipped Shizuku’s mind, but the theory that innate vocabulary wasn’t always fixed had caught her interest when she’d been helping Rio study for her test.

“Thank you—but these papers might be tricky for me.”

“Huh? You’ll understand them. I know you’re young, but you *are* an educator, aren’t you?”

“I—I might not understand most of it... Do you?”

To be precise, it wasn’t that Shizuku couldn’t understand the documents but that she was unable to read them. However, since Niké wasn’t aware of her origins, she couldn’t afford to divulge any more information than necessary. If he skimmed through the material, perhaps he could give her the key points.

As Shizuku contemplated how to ask for his help, she glanced up at Niké—only to find him glaring at her with disgust in his eyes.

“There really isn’t much going on in that head of yours, is there? When I get back, I’ll explain it to you. Until then, just look over the parts you can understand.”

“Huh? You’re going somewhere?”

“I’ll be away from the castle for a while,” he told her.

It was normal for Niké to be absent from the castle, so Shizuku nodded, opting not to probe further. He was probably up to no good, but there was no point asking him about it. Even if Shizuku pressed the princess, her master, for answers, she probably wouldn’t tell her the truth.

“You always get the troublesome tasks, don’t you? Like with Lyshien—” Shizuku began, only to receive a sharp tap on her forehead.

“Do not speak that name. As far as anyone is concerned, I failed to locate the princess of Anneli,” Niké interjected sharply.

“Oh...”

In other words, Niké had decided not to tell the princess that he’d let Lyshien get away. He’d likely done so out of sympathy for the young girl’s circumstances. After all, she had lived the life of a prisoner. Shizuku had mixed feelings about this, but she pushed them from her mind.

“The princess must have been really angry... Thank you.”

“She wasn’t. I had a substitute.”

“A *substitute*?” Shizuku asked, momentarily confused by what the man was talking about.

Niké frowned at her.

“It’s nothing *you* need to know about. Anyway, I’d better get going.”

“Oh, sure. Try not to get beaten to a pulp, okay?”

“What an ominous way of saying good-bye.”

With that, Niké left. Shizuku watched him walk away, then went back to her work.

That evening in her room, Shizuku tried to decipher the thesis she’d been given with the help of a dictionary.

However, extracting words she recognized from the huge number of sentences didn’t help her grasp its meaning. Shizuku had already given up on starting at the beginning and picked out several words that were written in bold.

“God... Ludia, the god’s wife, words, books, records, immigrants, god-given, mysterious, continent, dialect, understanding...”

The words were like pieces of a puzzle that wouldn’t join together.

Dictionary in hand, Shizuku struggled over the words until late into the night, but ultimately, she gave up and went to bed.

※

For the first time in a long while, Shizuku dreamed of standing in front of three books.

The navy-blue book she’d picked up told the story of the woman involved in the founding of Kisk.

The life of the queen, tainted by deceit and self-sacrifice, wasn’t confined by only the complex structure of her castle but also by the sentiments of several other entwined individuals.

Tryphina—the woman who’d had two husbands and given birth to a new royal lineage—had had an incredibly lonely existence shrouded in secrecy, like a labyrinth with no way out.

※

Kisk was known for being a country in constant conflict, especially within the

Rosta region.

This turmoil had begun sixty years earlier when Farsas, ruled by the disgraced king Dysral, had conquered the neighboring nation of Casola. The king of Kisk at the time had generously welcomed refugees from Casola, allowing them to settle in the Rosta region. This had all been a part of his strategy to claim Casola's territory for himself. However, within a year, Farsas—which had a new king by then—was already helping Casola rebuild.

Kisk's plans had gone awry, as it was no longer able to justify its intervention in the matter, and the nation encouraged the many Casola refugees to return home. Yet the refugees refused to leave, having braved the war to reach their neighboring country.

It was the original inhabitants of the Rosta region who were most aggrieved, though. The kingdom had assured them that Casola would soon be captured and promised them special privileges upon its acquisition. However, far from receiving those promised privileges, the original inhabitants had to share even their lands with the refugees—leading them to direct their anger toward Kisk.

The people appealed directly to the king, but he ignored their complaints as there was a chance that Farsas would intervene if the refugees were expelled. Instead, he decided to build a town near the border for the former citizens of Casola, effectively isolating them from the rest of the populace. The king was probably thinking tactically, hoping that living close to the border would eventually encourage them to return to their homeland. Yet even sixty years later, they hadn't gone back and had maintained close trade links with their motherland, which was under Farsas's dominion.

No matter how many years went by, the view that the Rosta region's original habitants held regarding the refugees didn't become any more positive.

"Tigor hasn't been blessed with the most reliable of successors."

Niké had pieced together the various pieces of information he'd purchased from informants with the fruits of his own research, and he let out a laugh.

For over two decades, Tigor, the lord of the Rosta region, had skillfully managed to keep the inhabitants of his region at bay, despite their conflicting views. However, merely a week after he had been unexpectedly summoned to

the castle, the region he'd left behind had descended into chaos.

Tigor's son, who was now the acting lord, seemed oblivious to how precarious the situation in his region truly was. Overjoyed that his troublesome father was out of the picture, he had ignored the complaints of his subjects and reveled in his newfound freedom. Yet numerous issues were already beginning to arise as a result.

A derisive smile appeared on Niké's face.

"Still, it would be a problem if he *was* competent. The princess wants flames to rise from these embers."

Selecting a few pieces of information, Niké began to manipulate them to further fan the flames of discord.

The dispute between the inhabitants of the Rosta region was on the verge of developing into something even bloodier. A conflict between the population of what had once been Casola, before Farsas took over, and the people of Kisk was looming in the not-too-distant future.

※

Seilené said she wanted to take a brief nap, so Shizuku left her room. As she was making her way back, however, a man called out to her and stopped her in her tracks.

"Hey, you over there!" he shouted from a distance.

Shizuku stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

The man appeared to be about her father's age, with a few specks of grey running through his brown hair. He was dressed in extravagant clothing that made it immediately obvious he was a nobleman, yet the panicked manner in which he ran to Shizuku didn't seem to fit with his smart appearance. He gently grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Is it true that you're a close aide to Her Highness?"

"I work for her, but I'm not sure I'd call myself a 'close aide.'"

"I must meet with her! Tell her it's Tigor, and she'll understand. Please, go and speak to her at once!"

Shizuku didn't have the authority to get someone an audience with the princess. Ortea seemed to be more adept at governance than her brother, so she must play a role in most of the kingdom's affairs, yet she rarely left her private chambers. Magistrates visited the princess with documents in hand a few times a day, but Shizuku wasn't involved in any of that.

"I doubt I can be of any help," Shizuku told the man.

"You can put in a good word for me, though, can't you? Some magistrates have told me they'd act as an intermediary, but they don't follow up on their promises. I beg you! My people's lives are at stake! War could break out if we're not careful. Can you tell the princess that Tigor wants to speak with her?"

The way the man was grasping her shoulders and the gravity of his plea left Shizuku speechless. Just what was going on? She was confused, but after explaining that passing on the message was the best she could do, Shizuku ultimately agreed to the man's request.

"So this man named Tigor wishes to speak with you."

"I refuse."

Ortea dismissed the idea instantly. "I thought as much," Shizuku wanted to retort, but the princess's expression caught her off-guard, making her frown.

Usually, Ortea would turn down any inconvenient requests with a bitter look on her face—yet today was different. The corners of her mouth were curled upward in what looked like a contemptuous smile.

Maybe she's carrying out another cruel plan.

"Why don't you just meet with him very briefly? It sounds like the lives of his people are in danger."

"Didn't you hear me say 'I refuse'?"

"I did. But you wouldn't want a war to break out, would you?"

Ortea let out a snicker. Her beautiful smile was filled with confidence. Shizuku's eyes widened slightly.

"...You're not doing this on purpose, are you?"

“Doing what?”

“Are you refusing to meet with him *because* there could be a war?”

Shizuku didn’t know why she’d leaped to that conclusion, but she was convinced she was right.

Ortea knew what was happening, yet she still wouldn’t meet with Tigor. There was no way the magistrates would ignore Tigor, having heard that lives were on the line. It wasn’t that they’d disregarded him—his pleas *had* reached the princess, after all.

“Isn’t there anything we can do? There’s nothing more important than stopping a war, right?”

“Didn’t you have wars in your world?”

“We did, but I never experienced one personally.”

“Then sit back and enjoy. You’ll get to see a side to people you’ve never witnessed before.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku was completely taken aback, but Ortea just cackled with laughter, her bewitching voice echoing around the room. When Shizuku eventually came back to her senses, she lowered her tone.

“Do you *enjoy* seeing people die in vain? That’s depraved.”

“War is unavoidable,” the princess argued back. “Sometimes, a little war’s all you need to fix things.”

“Then why don’t you tell that to Tigor’s face? You can tell him you’re sacrificing his people for the greater good.”

As soon as Shizuku finished speaking, she felt red liquid splash against her face, making her close her eyes.

Something cold slid down her cheek, and when she wiped it off with her hand, the sweet smell of liquor invaded her nasal passages. She glared at the princess, who’d thrown the contents of her cup at her.

“What a waste of alcohol. Argue your point verbally before resorting to those

sorts of tactics.”

“Don’t get too big for your boots, girl.”

“I understand what you’re trying to say, but it’s part of a retainer’s job to offer sound advice. If you don’t like it, you can disregard it.”

Shizuku knew she was acting grouchy, but she couldn’t suppress her emotions quickly enough. Ortea seemed equally displeased, but Shizuku faced her anger head-on.

She didn’t know what went through the head of a ruler. She couldn’t understand their struggles. There may have been times when war truly was unavoidable, but to revel in the reality of it—not as a bluff or to put up a strong front—you’d have to be truly corrupt.

Shizuku looked down at the princess, incensed.

“If it’s for the greater good, at least have the decency to explain that to the lord,” she said. “Sacrificing the people of your nation in silence will only invite distrust. Continue down this path, and the foundation of trust you stand on will crumble away.”

Shizuku’s lecture to the princess was as uptight as an elder might give, yet it also bore the idealism of a student’s grievances. Ortea’s mouth twisted into a cynical smile, and a barbed voice began to crawl from her red lips.

“I could explain, but he wouldn’t understand. It would merely result in him tiresomely squawking at me, just like you’re doing now. Also, you seem to be mistaken about something: The relationship between the royal family and their people is not built on mutual trust, but it’s one of convenience where both parties leech off one another.”

“They *leech* off one another? That’s an exaggeration. It’s only natural that people want to rely on the kingdom in times of need.”

Ortea was always blunt, but on this occasion, her words sounded *particularly* spiteful. Shizuku’s admonition made the princess raise her eyebrows.

“You say they want to rely on the kingdom? These people act like they should be protected, only to betray their country for their own gain. They scream

about how weak they are, then take our sacrifices for granted. What kind of relationship can we possibly build with such people?"

Her master's uncharacteristically emotional tone of voice made Shizuku frown.

"That only counts for part of the population, though. Not everyone is like that."

"Don't make me laugh. Who is this 'everyone' you speak of? How much do you really know about the people of this country?"

"Well..." Shizuku began, but when she caught sight of Ortea's amber eyes, she was left speechless.

At some point, indignation had surfaced in them—the indignation of someone who'd been hurt.

Her master looked as though she was moments away from descending into a fury, yet her beautiful face looked almost pitiful.

"The more a person blends into the masses, the more oblivious they become of their own actions. They believe any deed is justifiable, as long as it's 'for the good of everyone.' All the while, they pretend to be distressed by their choices. They feign ignorance and virtue—"

Ortea had begun to raise her voice, but she cut herself off as soon as she noticed it.

The light of reason swiftly returned to her eyes. She looked at Shizuku, who stood there utterly dumbfounded, and erased all expression from her face. Holding her fan, Ortea rose from the chaise longue.

"I don't care how complacent the country you come from is, Shizuku. Just don't brandish your baseless delusions in front of me. They're an eyesore."

"Princess, wait—"

Ortea turned on her heel and disappeared into the bedroom at the back of the room.

The door slammed shut. Shizuku simply stared at the pale gray door, an anomaly among the other red-hued furnishings.

You couldn't redeem yourself by burning bridges. Nor could you make up for a lack of understanding.

And yet Shizuku's final glimpse of the princess as she scuttled away had seemed to emit both a sense of resolute arrogance and a hint of dejection. Shizuku gritted her teeth, having been left with a bitter taste in her mouth.

After leaving Ortea's room, Shizuku made her way through the courtyard toward her own chambers.

The smell of the wine that had been thrown in her face was stronger than she'd expected, which put her off the idea of traversing the indoor corridors.

Shizuku untangled her alcohol-drenched hair as she cut across the garden, when suddenly she heard a familiar voice.

"It looks like someone got you good," said the man who'd picked up Shizuku's books a few days prior.

Shizuku's shoulders drooped slightly.

"I wouldn't say that. In fact...I think I was the one who pushed the princess's buttons."

Shizuku wasn't entirely certain what she'd done wrong, but Ortea's behavior had clearly been abnormal.

She felt guilty, as though she'd touched on a sore point. Up until then, Ortea had been nothing more than a cruel member of the royal family, but now, for the first time, Shizuku had seen a different side to the princess. She stifled a sigh, unsure of her own feelings.

The man chuckled at her from where he sat on a bench.

"Ortea has a fiery temper. She must be hard to handle."

"Huh...?"

His words were kind and sympathetic, but the fact that the man referred to the princess by her first name made Shizuku shudder.

Everyone in the castle avoided referring to the princess by name. They usually called her "Her Highness" instead. There was only one person who could

possibly be on a first-name basis with her.

In blank amazement, Shizuku turned toward the man.

“You’re not...His Majesty, are you?”

“That’s right. My name’s Beelhurse.”

This man was undoubtedly the king of the country—Ortea’s half-brother, sixteen years her senior.

Shizuku, who was currently in the employ of the nation of Kisk, hurriedly knelt on the grass.

“I’m so sorry, Your Highness. Please forgive my lack of decorum...”

“It’s fine. Not everyone knows what I look like, after all. And besides, I was hoping to converse with you as equals. Just think of me as Ortea’s big brother.”

Surprised, Shizuku looked up to find the king smiling gently at her. He gestured to the seat next to him on the bench.

“Why don’t you sit here?”

“O-okay...”

Shizuku gingerly sat down beside him, leaving a space between them. She tied her hair back into a tight ponytail to prevent the smell of alcohol from drifting through the air.

Beelhurse seemed relaxed as he continued the conversation.

“I heard that Ortea had a girl her age working for her and wondered what you were like. It’s rare that someone has the guts to lash out at my sister nowadays.”

“...I apologize for that.”

“What do you think of her? Somewhat of an enigma, isn’t she? Have you run out of patience with her yet?”

It momentarily upset Shizuku to hear a family member talk about the princess like that, but she quickly shook her head.



"No. I'm new to this, after all. The princess has her own opinions, and we're in very different positions."

Ortea had made a decision about a territory that Shizuku knew nothing about. She was a foreigner with no real knowledge or skills, while the other woman was a royal princess. It was only to be expected that they would have different perspectives.

What Shizuku spoke of was a kind of ideal for any world, in any era. It might not have been appropriate for Kisk at this point in time, but that was only to be expected considering it was an entirely different world.

Shizuku knew that, but she still hadn't been able to stay quiet. Her inexperience must have been partially to blame for that, but her personality most likely played a part as well.

Or had it been because Shizuku had sensed something in Ortea's eyes, almost as if she wanted to be challenged?

Out of all the people who worked for Ortea, Niké responded to her commands the quickest, no matter what they were. Although Faneet sometimes expressed his reservations, he'd reluctantly oblige once the princess repeated her orders enough times. Shizuku, meanwhile, would outright refuse to listen to demands she found unacceptable. She was the only person who occasionally refused to comply with the princess's wishes.

Ortea sometimes seemed to enjoy her defiance, while at other times, she would irritatedly silence it.

The reaction Shizuku had received from her that day, however, fell into neither of those two categories. The princess's eyes had appeared to convey a sense of loss, as though she was concealing an old wound. She'd almost seemed like a little child clutching her knees as she squatted despairingly on the ground.

Shizuku caught herself wishing she could read Ortea's mind but soon snapped back to reality.

If Shizuku were to say that to her, the princess would probably laugh at her for being so presumptuous. Still, the image of Ortea's pained expression lingered in her mind, like a bone stuck in her throat.

“...Princess.”

Shizuku wondered if she should have been more persistent with Ortea.

It might have caused their conversation to escalate into an unnecessary argument, but at least she may have been able to uncover a little more information about the princess.

Beelhurse smiled awkwardly at Shizuku, who'd become distracted by her own thoughts.

“So? What caused the disagreement this time? Tell me.”

“Oh... Okay.”

It was an order from the king, so she couldn't disobey it.

Shizuku explained the incident involving Tigor, choosing her words carefully. After hearing the general outline of events, the king sighed.

“Ortea thinks it's okay to treat others as she'd have them treat her. She's willing to betray people because she doesn't mind being betrayed. It's a difficult mindset to comprehend.”

“...But the other party won't necessarily feel the same way. If there's a power or status disparity between her and the person she's dealing with, they might not be able to get their own back. Some people might resent her for being so unfair.”

“That's true. People get knocked down without warning, and few manage to crawl their way back up again.”

Beelhurse smiled as he looked at Shizuku. His calm gaze bore no resemblance to Ortea's.

Linking his fingers together on top of his green silk robe, the king looked up at the castle's pure white walls.

“As for the issue regarding Rosta...I'll try and talk to Ortea about it. I'm not a particularly gifted king, however, so I constantly rely on my sister's help. There's no guarantee that our discussion will go well.”

“That's more than enough. Thank you very much.”

"In exchange, I want you to stay by Ortea's side."

"Me?" Shizuku exclaimed, taken aback.

The king nodded. He was much older than her, so it was hard to see him as a brotherly figure, and he smiled at her as one would smile at a young child.

"I want you to stay by her side and support her. And, if possible, I want you to tell me what she's doing and what she's thinking. The way she sees it, I'm no more than an unreliable older brother. She always avoids me."

"If that's all you wish for me to do, I'm glad to help."

"I'd really appreciate it. You're a good kid."

Beelhurse pulled at his long robe as he stood up. Shizuku hurried to her feet, too, and the king leaned over and peered into her face.

"Please, don't betray her. Ortea needs a friend like you."

There seemed to be considerable force behind his gaze, which was now so close to hers. It made Shizuku's breath catch in her throat for a moment, so it couldn't have been just her imagination.

He emanated the same kind of royal authoritativeness that Ortea, Lars, and Leuticia possessed. Surprised to find herself the target of it, Shizuku recoiled. As she took a step back and bowed, the king thanked her, then turned around.

Shortly after the king's trailing robe disappeared behind the foliage, Shizuku finally began to move again. She plonked her listless body down on the bench and let out a long breath.

"It's almost like...when one sibling is eccentric, the other one becomes more respectable."

There was no one around to reprimand her for this disrespectful remark. With a scowl, Shizuku absentmindedly pulled at her bangs, which had already dried from earlier.

The white stone walls surrounding the small courtyard gradually twisted and intertwined with one another, turning the vast grounds of the castle into a distorted maze.

Shizuku had been trapped inside it as a pawn, and she sighed as she gazed up at the unreachable sky, unsure of the role she'd been given.

3. A Birdcage of Iron Chains



When Shizuku had started college, she'd experienced the anxiety of living away from her family for the first time in her life.

That anxiety, however, had faded after about a month. All alone, she woke up, did her chores, took classes, and then came home. She'd gotten used to that lifestyle.

Although it had been almost three months since she'd arrived in Kisk, Shizuku was keenly aware that she was yet to adjust to her new way of life.

“Excuse me,” Shizuku called out as she entered the spacious room.

Everything in the room was pale green. As soon as she stepped inside, Shizuku bowed to the woman who was reading a book in a chair she'd placed by the window.

Shizuku covered the woman's stomach with the shawl she'd brought, and the woman smiled up at her.

“Thanks, Shizuku.”

“No worries. Is there anything else you need?”

“No. It feels like time's been passing really slowly lately.”

A vague sense of calm radiated from Seilené's expression. The first time they'd met, Shizuku had been struck by how self-important she seemed, but of late, that seemed to have faded almost to nothing. As the monotonous days passed, she seemed to have become one with her unborn child, who was slumbering in amniotic fluid.

She'd become a shadow of her former self... Shizuku saw her every day, yet

she felt unable to ask what was weighing on her mind.

Seilené caressed her round belly. Her eyes didn't seem to focus on anything as she distractedly gazed out of the window.

"Hey. Could you take care of this baby once it's born?" she asked.

"We've already arranged for a wet nurse, but I'll help out in any way I can."

"Thanks. That makes me feel...a little bit better."

Seilené let out a deep sigh, then leaned back in her chair, almost as though she were sinking into it.

She must have been anxious about the impending birth. It occurred to Shizuku that getting Faneet to take her place might calm Seilené down. She silently bowed to the woman, then looked back at the clock.

"Shizuku," Seilené called her. "When I'm gone, I want you to hide that book somewhere."

"I'm not sure I can make any promises..."

When would Seilené be leaving? If it was after the child had grown somewhat, Shizuku wasn't sure she'd still be in the country.

However, Seilené gently shook her head.

"It's just hypothetical. I'm talking about that untitled book. You remember it, right?"

Shizuku gulped slightly. That was precisely what she had been wanting to ask Seilené about.

She glanced at the bookcase. The navy-blue, leather-bound book was still on the shelf.

Is this my chance?

Shizuku hesitated for a moment, then made up her mind and opened her mouth to speak.

"Are you from Anneli, Seilené?"

Seilené hadn't heard of Flower Rain Day—an event that everyone from Kisk

seemed to know—meaning she must be from abroad. What's more, she'd reacted upon hearing Lyshien's name. Lyshien might have been the princess of Anneli, but her very existence had been kept secret. Didn't that indicate that Seilené had been in a position close to her?

The mysterious woman's eyes widened slightly.

"You do ask some funny questions. No, I'm not," she replied.

"Are you from Rozsark, then?"

"..."

After being released from her confinement, Lyshien had lived briefly as a hostage in the neighboring country of Rozsark. Shizuku also recalled seeing a book on Rozsark's history in Seilené's bookcase.

Shizuku had never truly suspected Seilené was from Anneli—*this* was her real question.

Niké had let Lyshien get away, but he'd also said that he had a "substitute." Most likely, that "substitute" was someone who could provide information about Rozsark's king.

"Did you offer Kisk information about Rozsark in exchange for protection for yourself and your unborn child?"

Shizuku had come to the conclusion that Seilené must be in Kisk because, for some reason, she'd been left with no choice but to leave her homeland and seek refuge here.

Seilené looked at Shizuku. After a long silence, she sighed.

"And where are *you* from?" she asked.

"I..."

If Shizuku were to answer that question, she would have said, "I'm from nowhere."

As she hesitated over what to say, Seilené watched her intently. The look in her eyes was somewhat indistinct, and her thoughts were unreadable.

"To say that I sought protection for my child sounds too noble," Seilené

continued in a voice that made it impossible to tell how she was feeling. “I weighed Rozsark up against Kisk and chose the one that offered more for both me and my child. That’s all there was to it.”

Seilené averted her gaze and looked out of the window.

This seemed to signal that their conversation was over. Still, Shizuku felt like she’d gotten pretty close to the core of the matter. For now, that was enough for her.

Shizuku silently bowed again and was about to leave Seilené’s presence when a hoarse voice called out from behind her.

“But I do wonder...did I really do that of my own volition?”

“Huh?”

What did that mean?

Shizuku turned around, but Seilené was still looking outside. She stroked her belly with a pale hand.

“Don’t give that book to Farsas, Shizuku,” she added.

“Don’t give it to Farsas? Why not?”

But Seilené didn’t answer. Shizuku would never have given Seilené’s personal belongings to Farsas anyway, so why would she say such a thing?

Confused, Shizuku waited for Seilené to continue, but it didn’t look like she was going to budge. That last comment she’d made was delivered in a monotone, as if she were reading off a script.

Still puzzling over it, Shizuku left the room.

That evening, however, Seilené’s labor pains began.

“You’ll be okay! Just breathe!” Shizuku told the woman lying on the bed in pain.

It had been two days since her labor pains started, and the waves of pain had pushed Seilené’s stamina to its limits.

With each contraction, Seilené writhed in agony. Shizuku found the situation incredibly intense—especially considering she’d never witnessed childbirth

before—yet she stayed by Seilené’s side the whole time, even forgetting to sleep or feed herself. She rubbed Seilené’s lower back when she was hurting and gave her words of encouragement as they waited for the moment to arrive.

However, on the morning of the third day, a mage doctor arrived.

“She’s almost at her limit,” he declared with finality.

The mage insisted on getting the baby out using magical intervention, pointing out that Seilené had almost exhausted all her energy. Having learned about this method beforehand, Shizuku nearly objected to the risky procedure, yet she couldn’t deny that Seilené was getting weaker.

Shizuku reluctantly entrusted Seilené to the mages and exited the room. Faneet was in the antechamber, and he served her some hot tea.

“You have nothing to worry about,” he told her. “The baby will be fine. In the meantime, you should get some rest.”

“Yeah... Maybe you’re right. What about you?”

“I’m staying here.”

His response was decisive and forceful. Although Faneet wasn’t allowed to enter the birthing room, he’d been waiting in the adjacent room since Seilené had gone into labor, without even taking any breaks.

His unshakable tone reassured Shizuku.

“Can I sleep for a little while, then? Wake me if anything happens.”

“I will.”

Stifling a yawn, Shizuku left and returned to her chambers deep inside the castle. Her room was about 140 square feet in size and contained nothing more than the basics, making it look plain at first glance. That said, all of the furniture she’d been supplied with was of superior quality.

After washing away her sweat in her bathroom and wrapping her wet hair in a towel, Shizuku crawled into bed. Exhaustion soon took hold of her, and she fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

As she slept soundly, Shizuku had many dreams. She dreamed about her

family and friends, being at home, being at university—and she dreamed of her travels with *him*.

It was as if, one by one, her memories of times gone by had been extracted and were displayed, glittering inside a glass cabinet. Shizuku knew she was dreaming...and that alone was enough to make her feel a little bit sad.

Shizuku had been completely exhausted, but she was jarred awake by a weight pressing down on her body. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that it had *fallen* on top of her.

The sudden impact made her catch her breath.

“Guh... What?!”

The room had gone dark in no time at all. As she shouted, Shizuku looked down at her bed...and was left speechless.

“What are you doing? Is this a prank?”

A man was lying face down on top of her blanket. She hadn’t seen the mage in question for a while, and his sudden presence made Shizuku grimace. The absurdity of the situation made her feel like she was still dreaming. Maybe she actually was. Still in a daze, she gently shook her head as she put on the jacket by her bedside.

“Hey, Niké. What are you in here all of a sudden? At least knock...or bang on the door before you come in.”

Suppressing a yawn, Shizuku hit Niké on the back of the head, but he didn’t reply.

She began to frown—but finally realized something was amiss.

Beneath his body, the blanket had gradually started to turn crimson.

The unmistakable scent of blood immediately made Shizuku feel wide awake. She shoved her legs out of the bed and leaped toward Niké.

“What’s going on? Niké! You idiot!”

There was no response. Shizuku cradled the unconscious man’s head.

At that moment, Shizuku heard something that sounded like an insect buzzing

above her head. She looked up.

In the dimly lit room, a small golden arrow was suspended in midair—dripping blood from its tip.

※

It was vital to always have more than one plan.

If Ortea truly wanted to bring Farsas down, she needed a meticulously thought-out strategy. However, Niké suspected that what she *really* wanted was to create pandemonium.

Farsas was said to be the strongest nation on the continent, and Ortea wanted nothing more than to plunge it into uncontrollable chaos. Even if Kisk ended up getting dragged into the commotion and war ensued, the princess wouldn't care. That was why there was no need for a detailed plan. She just needed multiple sparks to ignite the flames.

Niké was working to make this a reality, subtly fueling animosity in the Rosta region as well as making trips to Farsas. He had carefully selected and made contact with disgruntled lords and nobles who'd been mistreated by the castle, skillfully sowing the seeds of rebellion by dangling enticing pieces of bait in front of them.

Having been tasked with carrying out secret operations in multiple locations, it was no coincidence that Niké spotted Leuticia.

Leuticia had shown up on the evening of the first uprising in the Rosta region.

With their lord, Tigor, out of the picture, dissatisfaction among the people of Rosta had gradually increased. One evening, this brewing unrest erupted into a large-scale looting spree in the town where the former residents of Casola resided.

The town of Caribala, which was frequented by merchants from Farsas, was attacked by weapon-wielding mobs, instantly turning the settlement into a battlefield. The people of Casola must have already sensed that a threat was coming, because all the residents either chose to fight back or flee the border town completely.

Despite all the screams, shouts, and flowing blood, barely any soldiers rushed

to the scene. They stayed silent, having been bought off by the people who loathed Casola. From the lookout tower on the outskirts of the town, the burning shops almost looked like bright, blooming flowers.

Niké had been observing the situation from afar when he suddenly noticed that the fire in a shop about to burn to the ground had been extinguished. His expression shifted.

“What?”

He strained his eyes to see a woman standing in front of the shop.

Her long, black hair was illuminated by the red flames, and the sight of her beautifully sculpted profile made Niké catch his breath.

“The princess of Farsas!”

That woman wasn’t supposed to be in a place like this. She was one of the continent’s best mages.

Even if she’d been near the border, the fact that she was here, beyond the borders of her own country, meant that she must have gotten hold of some kind of intel. Leuticia was neutralizing the rioters as she continued to put out the flames.

“This isn’t good... She’s combatting it too quickly.”

It would cause problems if the conflict was quelled at this early stage. Ortea intended to escalate this chaos into war with Farsas.

But—what if this was actually a great opportunity?

It was rare for the Farsasian princess to be within Kisk’s borders, especially in the midst of a riot. *Anything* could happen in a situation like this.

The royal siblings of Farsas had always been thorns in Kisk’s side. If assassinating the pair had been feasible, the country wouldn’t have had to resort to these measures.

“All right...”

Niké quickly finished his calculations and began to formulate a spell. He channeled enough force to penetrate Leuticia’s protective barrier in a single

strike and aimed it at the woman standing on the road.

He was far enough away that she wouldn't notice him. Plus, he doubted he'd miss. Leuticia's barrier was thin, presumably because she was focused on extinguishing the fires. Niké was well aware of his own strength and knew it was most effective when used in this way.

"It's time to say good-bye...Princess of Farsas."

With a flick of his fingers, the condensed power transformed into a small sphere, which Niké sent hurtling toward her.

The silver ball traced an arc through the air, heading toward the woman's head. When Niké saw the flawless trajectory it was following, he was convinced he was going to succeed.

The sphere was supposed to pierce the woman's temple.

Yet just before it touched her black hair, it burst open. Leuticia turned her head and looked toward her shocked attacker.

Despite the considerable distance between them, the beautiful woman seemed like she could see him perfectly well.

Her relentless stare sent a shudder down Niké's spine.

He'd fallen into her trap.

Leuticia had made her barrier look thinner on purpose to make him believe he could kill her. She'd provided him with an opportunity and waited eagerly for him to act on it.

She knew the people who'd repeatedly attempted to attack her and her brother would strike again.

Not all of the assassination attempts had been carried out by Niké himself; he'd also hired assassins through intermediaries. But right then, he'd been blinded by what he perceived as a perfect opportunity and had taken action himself.

Having deflected Niké's attack, Leuticia started muttering something under her breath.

“This is bad...!”

Niké knew he couldn’t win if Leuticia challenged him head-on, and he immediately began to put together a teleportation spell.

But it was too late... The homing arrow that Leuticia created had already memorized Niké’s magical energy.

※

The golden arrow floating in the center of the room trembled slightly, almost as if it were alive.

Suddenly, its tip turned toward Niké, who’d fallen face down. Shizuku quickly shielded him with her body, gritting her teeth in anticipation of the pain.

Yet the agony she expected never came. Instead, she heard the muffled voice of a man coming from beneath her.

“You’re so heavy...you stupid woman...”

“Shut up! Wait, you’re alive?!”

“Don’t just assume...I’m dead... Anyway...listen to me... The arrow’s stopped, right...?”

Shizuku lifted her head slightly. He was right; the arrow appeared to be spinning in place, as if it had lost track of its target.

“Yeah...it has. But what are we supposed to do now?”

“It’s tracking me... But it’s not as accurate now that it’s away from the caster... And it can’t see me because of you...”

“Oh! It can’t see you because I’m clinging onto you?!”

The arrow seemed to be made of magic and must have been programmed to track down and attack Niké. However, it had stopped functioning effectively now that it was so far away from Leuticia. With Shizuku shielding Niké from harm, the arrow had partially lost sight of its target and was unable to decide on its next move.

“But what do we do? We can’t stay like this forever,” said Shizuku.

“Five seconds. Then I’ll keep it distracted... During that time, you’ll have to

break it," replied Niké.

"With my hands?"

The arrow looked like it would give her an electric shock if she touched it. Shizuku stared at her hands.

Either way, there was no time to hesitate. Niké was hurt.

She nodded slightly. "Got it. Let's go."

Shizuku tapped her fingers against the man's body as she counted, then lunged at the golden arrow right on cue.

It was a nerve-racking moment—but the arrow ended up slipping through her hands at a terrifying speed, hurtling toward Niké's back.

"Wait...!"

I thought you were going to keep it distracted! Shizuku screamed internally as she flung herself across the bed. She reached for the arrow as it threatened to pierce Niké's skin.

I might not be quick enough.

An indescribable chill seized hold of her heart.

Still, Shizuku didn't allow herself to freeze in fear. She bent forward, focused solely on the arrow's path. In her peripheral vision, she caught a glimpse of a red bloodstain.

For a moment, she prepared herself for Niké's death.

And yet the arrow, dripping with blood...stopped just before piercing his back. Shizuku's fingers touched it where it trembled in the air.

"Ow...!"

A searing pain coursed through her. Her reflex was to pull her hand away, but she managed to overcome her instincts with sheer willpower and grabbed hold of the arrow, forcefully snapping it into two.

The pain made her feel faint. *I don't think I can take it anymore*, she thought to herself, but the next thing she knew, the magic arrow had dissolved like snow in her hands. Dazed by the lingering pain, Shizuku hurriedly brushed off

the golden particles that clung to her fingers.

“Gah, that hurt... That should do it, right, Niké?”

There was no reply. All Shizuku could hear was a pained groan.

It was only then that Shizuku finally realized she'd stepped on the back of the injured Niké's head with all her weight.

※

The woman's well-shaped eyebrows shot up.

Noticing this slight change in her expression, the young man sitting opposite her looked up. Using nothing but his gaze, he wordlessly asked what had happened.

When Leuticia noticed he was looking at her, she let out a small sigh.

“It's been destroyed. I thought I'd be able to finish him off...but it seems he teleported several times, which made it hard to pin him down.”

There was a hint of self-reproach in her voice.

The young man neither comforted nor chastised her. He simply nodded silently and looked up at the ceiling.

Leuticia rested an elbow on the table and propped up her chin with her hand.

“Well, at least I have a pretty good idea who's behind this now. And I found out something interesting, too.”

“You did?”

“Yes...about Vivia. It might not live up to your expectations, though,” she said, flashing an ambiguous smile.

The young man didn't reply. He just let out an irritated sigh and began spreading his papers on the table.

※

The arrow had kept following him, no matter how many times he'd teleported. Niké had made peace with his own death fairly early on.

After all, he was up against the Farsasian royal family. There was no way he'd be able to escape. He could try to defend himself, but their attacks would keep

finding him until he died.

Even if he managed to flee to a faraway location and the arrow became weaker, it would be impossible for a person to destroy it on their own. The golden arrow, an example of advanced tracking magic, would accelerate if a spell was cast. It was designed specifically for killing mages.

The only possible way to destroy it was to ask a non-mage for help. But who was Niké supposed to turn to?

The officers and mages who worked for the castle despised him for his unwavering loyalty to Ortea. Even Faneet, who served the same master, didn't think much of Niké and his obedience to the princess.

He didn't have any allies. He was going to be killed, pitiful and alone.

He'd known for a long time things would end that way. The moment he'd surrendered himself to Ortea and relinquished his dignity and free will to her, he'd forfeited his right to a dignified death.

It had happened just four years earlier.

Alongside the mage who was acting as his mentor, Niké had made a direct appeal to Ortea about her tyrannical behavior.

It had come in opposition to the execution order that one of the mages had been given. Looking back at it now, though, it didn't seem like that big of a deal. If Niké had known the princess's inclinations at the time, he probably would have said it couldn't be helped.

However, back then, the princess's decision had seemed like an expression of arrogance that couldn't be ignored.

Niké had stood in front of the princess filled with righteous indignation—and watched his mentor's eyes be gouged out.

If Niké had been asked which part of the whole ordeal he found most frightening, his answer would have been simple: all of it.

"You've displeased me, so give me your eyes," the princess had said.

Niké's mentor had shown no signs of hesitation as he fell to his knees. Everything, from Faneet pinning Niké's mentor down from behind to the

fifteen-year-old girl thrusting her fingers into the middle-aged mage's eyes, had been chillingly abnormal. None of them had lashed out or kicked up a fuss; they'd just carried out the task matter-of-factly, as if they were from an entirely different world.

When Niké saw his master clutching at his now hollow eye sockets, his terror had reached its breaking point. The man had a stern, righteous, and honest nature, and when Ortea had asked him how he felt, he'd turned his bloodied face to the princess, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

It was incomprehensible. Fear took over Niké, rooting him to the spot. The indignation he'd felt upon entering the room had been smashed to smithereens within a matter of minutes, alongside his free will and his very understanding of the world around him.

"You're next," the princess had told him—but having been overwhelmed by a perverse kind of intimidation, Niké had reversed his stance and begged for mercy. He'd groveled on his trembling hands and knees; even now, he could clearly remember the sensation of his forehead rubbing against the floor. His mentor calling out his name and the princess's derisive laughter as well.

Those were Niké's memories of the loss he'd experienced at seventeen—a loss he'd never be able to recover from. That day, his life had changed completely.

For the past four years, Niké had worked diligently for the princess, even though the mages he'd once called friends scorned him and called him a dog. With a mixture of fear and disgust underlying his facade of obedience, he'd silently turned his back on his mentor, who'd left the castle with no eyes, and on his fellow mage, who'd been executed as planned.

Faced with his own impending death—something he'd always known was coming—the image of a certain woman came to mind.

Unlike him, she hadn't let herself accept defeat.

If she'd been there on that day, in that moment, would she have been able to stick to her principles?

He was annoyed that a small part of him wished they'd met sooner.

“Oh, you’re alive,” said a foolish-sounding voice from right beside him.

The brightness made Niké cover his eyes with his arms, but the girl wouldn’t let him. Not only did she pull his arms away, she even went as far as to pull his eyelids open. She brought the magic light closer as she peered into his right eye.

“Hey. You *are* alive, aren’t you?”

“That’s so bright! What are you trying to do?!”

“I wasn’t sure if your pupils had dilated.”

“Well, check some other way!” Niké instinctively yelled.

He noticed the pain had disappeared from his body, and he stood up. His clothes were still bloodstained, but his wounds had already healed. The blood on his mage attire was dry, suggesting that a considerable amount of time had passed. Although the room was dark, Shizuku was awake and looked unperturbed.

“I managed to catch a mage and got him to tend to your wounds. I thought about moving you to your room, but it seemed like too much of a bother.”

“...So this is your room?”

“*You’re* the one who came here. Cleaning your blood off the sheets was quite a challenge.” She placed a laundry basket at his feet. “Now that you’re awake, take those off. I’ll get rid of the stains,” Shizuku said, pointing at Niké’s clothes.

There was a problem, though; mage attire was all in one piece, with the top and bottom parts joined together. Shizuku either didn’t know how mage uniforms worked, or she didn’t view him as a man, but either way, she was being overly meddlesome, and Niké clicked his tongue at her.

“I’d rather go back to my own room than undress here,” he said.

“Feel free. But if you don’t clean that blood properly, you’ll be stuck with it.”

“It’s okay. I’ll just throw these clothes away.”

The moment he stood up, Niké was overcome by dizziness. He must have lost too much blood. Still, he waved off Shizuku’s concerned look and reached out for the door, then stepped into the dark hallway.

"Are you sure you're all right?" she asked.

"Of course. You should go to sleep, too," Niké replied.

"I'm not sleepy."

As he began to walk away, Shizuku offered him a magic candlestick.

"Take this. It *is* the middle of the night."

Niké stared at the item in her hand.

He could illuminate his own path. Candlesticks like that were for court ladies who couldn't use magic. Still...

"...I'll give it back to you later," he said.

"Sure. Take care."

"Sorry about this."

Shizuku's eyes widened, but Niké chose not to concern himself any further. He resumed striding in the direction of his own room.

He thought of himself as a person who was prepared to die at any moment. The things he'd done were a testament to that, and he wasn't going to change anytime soon.

However, despite this, why was it that he couldn't help but feel relieved that he hadn't given up?

No amount of pondering over it would give him an answer—and even if it did, that answer would only serve as a burden.

Maybe it all boiled down to something simple...like the warmth of the light he was holding in his hands.

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After Niké left, Shizuku quickly tidied up her room. She glanced at the clock. It was still before dawn.

At one point, she went to check how Seilené was doing, only to be told that the surgery was still ongoing and that she wasn't allowed to enter the birthing room. So Shizuku decided to pay another visit later on. The cafeteria wasn't open yet, so she made some tea and nibbled on some bread instead.

The idea of a child being born made her strangely restless, even if it wasn't her own. The fact that she'd been appointed the child's educator only added to that sense of unease.

After eating her simple breakfast, Shizuku opened one of her books. None of the information seemed to be registering, though, so instead she got dressed and headed back to the birthing room.

The room was discreetly nestled deep within the castle. The surrounding corridors had been buzzing with anticipation when she'd visited two hours earlier, yet now they were eerily silent.

Had Seilené finished giving birth? Tormented by a sense of foreboding, Shizuku's steps naturally became more sluggish. Just then, a man called out to her from behind.

"You're awake already?"

"Faneet. How's Seilené? Did she have the baby?"

"Yes. You should come with me. This way."

Shizuku changed directions, scurrying along behind the tall man. She was guided to one of the royal family's rooms that had until now been unused. Shizuku glanced around the spacious area decorated in hues of pale blue and white.

The furnishings were eye-catching, and the room itself had large windows, intricately carved stone pillars, and unvarnished wooden shelves adorned with delicate dolls. It didn't really feel like a child's bedroom, but it was undoubtedly more luxurious than the room Seilené had been in before. Shizuku, who'd had a middle-class upbringing, couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration.

"This room is amazing, just like the rest of them. I've gotten used to it at this point, but it still surprises me at times."

"What's amazing about it?"

"People who spend all their time in royal palaces wouldn't understand."

Whenever Shizuku and her sisters saw fancy hotel suites on TV, they would always say how they'd love to stay there for a night. Yet now that Shizuku had

actually been inside royal bedrooms, she actually felt like she'd struggle to sleep comfortably there.

Shizuku pointed at the door that led to the bedchamber itself.

"That way?"

"Yes. The baby's asleep at the moment."

Upon seeing Faneet, the guards standing in front of the door bowed and stepped aside. Shizuku nodded in their direction as she slipped between them, then pushed the door open as quietly as possible.

The first thing she saw was white gauze suspended from metal fittings on the ceiling, shielding the bed from view. Shizuku got Faneet's permission to carefully push the fabric aside.

She peeked through the curtain. When she spotted the sleeping infant lying in the center of the wide bed, her breath caught in her throat.

The baby was even smaller than she'd expected, almost like an exquisitely crafted doll. The pure white skin appeared incredibly soft and delicate, and a pair of long eyelashes fluttered occasionally, as if in a dream.

Shizuku gazed in awe at the baby's beautiful, perfectly formed features.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"A boy."

"Oh, wow. He's going to be a handsome young man."

Not wanting to wake him, Shizuku stepped back outside the canopy. Once her nervousness had dissipated, she realized she and Faneet were the only ones in the room besides the infant.

"Where's Seilené?" she asked.

"She left the castle and went to another palace in the east. She's going to rest there for a while," Faneet explained.

"Already? But she only gave birth a few hours ago."

"She used a teleportation ring. I chaperoned her, and she seemed to be doing fine. She asked me to pass along her regards."

“I see...”

She might only have been working for Seilené for a month, but Shizuku still hadn’t expected them to be torn apart so suddenly. The fact that she hadn’t been able to say good-bye made her feel sad and disappointed.

But right at that moment, something that Seilené had asked her came to mind.

“You know, she was planning on giving one of her possessions to me. Did you hear anything about that?”

“I don’t think so. Was it a precious stone or something similar?”

“No, a book. Do you think it’s still around?”

“I would expect so. They’re cleaning her room this morning, so you should ask one of the court ladies.”

“Thanks.”

Shizuku could ask a court lady for help, but without a title, the book would be hard to identify. It would probably be quicker for her to swing by the room and grab it on her way back. With that plan in mind, Shizuku went to leave the bedchamber. However, before she opened the door, she looked over her shoulder and glanced at Faneet, who was standing by the side of the bed.

“The truth is...I had a sneaking suspicion that you were the father of Seilené’s baby,” she admitted.

“That couldn’t be further from the truth. If it were my child, there’s no way the princess would concern herself with it.”

“You might be right about that. Who *is* the father, then?”

The question was somewhat of a joke. Shizuku was by no means expecting to receive an answer.

Yet despite this, Faneet replied to her in a flat tone of voice.

“Who knows? It’s probably the king of Farsas.”

“...What?”

The king of Farsas was somebody that Shizuku knew all too well. Faneet’s

incendiary answer wasn't comical enough to be a joke, and it left Shizuku speechless.

But no matter how hard she stared into Faneet's eyes, he wouldn't expand on it. So with a heavy feeling in her chest—apprehension, perhaps—Shizuku eventually left the room.

On her way back, Shizuku headed to the room that Seilené had been using before giving birth. She used her extra key to enter the empty chambers, then took the navy-blue book from the bookcase. The room looked exactly the same as it had three days earlier, yet Shizuku felt a slight flicker of unease in the corner of her mind.

That discomfort, however, refused to take on a tangible form, and Shizuku was too drained from everything she'd been through to identify it. Clutching the book, she put the ownerless room behind her.

※

A week had passed since the child had secretly been born inside the castle, and in one corner of Kisk's castle city, a street diner was crowded with travelers, mercenaries, and people from all sorts of other walks of life. Among the crowd were more burly men than usual, a consequence of ongoing riots in the Rosta region.

The inside of the diner seemed perpetually dark and dingy, likely because the windows were so small. In the corner of the room, a man grumbled to his companion as he cut up a slab of meat.

"It's no use. There are no decent jobs here. Maybe there's something in Rosta."

"You were the one who said we should come to Kisk, right? You said that Farsas doesn't employ mercenaries..."

"Yeah, but the castle isn't doing anything, and the nobles are just running around in circles. Kisk's intentions are even harder to discern than I had thought. At this rate, a messy conflict could break out at any moment."

"I couldn't care less," Lydia replied indifferently, picking up a piece of meat with her fingers.

Although her skills were on par with the best royal mages, people often avoided employing magic-wielding mercenaries in wars. Their lack of experience in group combat made them difficult to manage.

Lydia hated the idea of being bossed around by people she didn't like—which was precisely why she'd refused to work for a castle. She'd never go out of her way to take on work related to war.

Nobles in Kisk had sensed unrest and were recruiting for their own private armies. Lydia, however, had immediately dismissed these opportunities, saying, "I don't like standing around and waiting for something to happen."

Taking a sip of her fruit wine, she took a piece of the meat Tarkis was cutting and moved it onto her own plate, as if it was an entirely normal thing to do.

"How about we head north? Apparently, demonic spirits have started showing up in the western part of Medial, the Great Nation in the north. I heard they're recruiting mercenaries in droves to form hunting parties, so even alone, there'd be no shortage of work."

"Demon hunting, huh?" Tarkis replied. "Not exactly my forte."

"I like it—it's quick and easy. If you don't want to, I'll just go by myself."

"Traveling's a hassle without you around. Maybe I'll join you after all..."

Having been unable to settle on a plan, the pair put a pin in their conversation and focused on their meal.

A short while later, however, a man came over to their table. The hood of his robe was pulled down over his eyes to conceal his face, and it was clear from his demeanor that he worked for the upper classes.

He began to speak, purposely stifling his voice.

"I'm looking for a skilled mercenary capable of infiltrating a building unassisted."

"Do you want a mage or a swordsman? What's the objective here?"

"Assassination. It doesn't matter what kind of mercenary you are, as long as you have the skills."

“Assassination’s out of our wheelhouse,” Tarkis replied curtly, waving his hand dismissively. “Go and find someone who specializes in that kind of thing.”

The man in the robe, however, refused to retreat. He kept persisting, his voice tinged with bitterness.

“Our target frequently employs assassins themselves. If we use a skilled professional, our plan might get uncovered, so we’d prefer to employ someone from outside the usual circles.”

“Assassins aren’t that loose-lipped, you know.”

Something sounded off about all this. The act of trying to employ an assassin was obviously suspicious in and of itself, but given the client’s apparent status and the current circumstances in Kisk, it felt especially worrying.

No matter how many times Tarkis tried to turn the man down, he persisted. Reluctantly, Tarkis told him about a small tavern frequented by mercenaries. While ordinary folk seldom visited it, a number of his acquaintances regularly did; although you could find many skilled individuals there, most of them were volatile characters. Much like the woman beside him, they’d refuse to take on a task that didn’t appeal to them, no matter how large the reward was.

After Tarkis had told him how to find the tavern, the man expressed his gratitude and left three silver coins on the table. This was enough to cover their meal, and they’d even have a little left over.

Once the man had departed, Lydia raised her voice in dismay.

“Argh, what a shady character. Do these people just assume we can’t see right through them?”

“Who knows? Maybe none of us really knows ourselves,” Tarkis concluded vaguely.

Then he called over the server and ordered some more meat.

Lydia, who’d taken most of Tarkis’s original meal for herself, subtly stuck out her tongue and ordered another drink for herself.

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Tryphina, the queen involved in the foundation of Kisk, had married the

princes of two different kingdoms and given birth to five children. Born from the mingling of these three royal bloodlines, the nation quickly rose to prominence, overpowering neighboring countries and cementing itself as a major power.

However, the early days of Kisk weren't all sunshine and rainbows.

Queen Tryphina, the country's first ruler, passed away in an accident at the age of thirty-three.

That was just one of several incidents that had been kept secret.

Very few people were familiar with these tragedies—all of which were the product of twisted emotions.

"I don't care for children. Why else do you think you're here?" Ortea predictably responded.

"I knew you would say that," replied Shizuku frankly, tipping the teapot in her hand.

As far as Shizuku knew, Ortea's room was the most chaotic in the entire castle. It should have been spacious, yet it was crammed with strange furniture and other knick-knacks that suited the princess's tastes.

Among these trinkets, Shizuku had found something that resembled a small teapot. She'd discarded the wilted flowers it contained, washed it out and then prepared some tea in it while she gave the princess her latest update.

"He's a very well-behaved baby. I doubt he'd cause you any trouble," she offered.

"How many times do I have to give you the same answer? Quit nagging me," retorted Ortea.

"I thought some extra information might make you change your mind."

Since the birth of the child, Shizuku's already busy schedule had become even more hectic. She spent about ten hours a day with the infant, during which she took intermittent breaks. That said, the child's wet nurse, who attended to the baby day and night, must have had it even tougher.

"Would you like to meet him?" Shizuku had asked while she was updating the

princess on the baby, who was almost two weeks old now.

Ortea had dismissed this suggestion, however, and Shizuku served her some red-hued tea. The princess silently accepted the drink and took a sip.

“Don’t make me repeat myself. I am *not* going to meet him. Not until he can greet me properly anyway.”

“That will take at least three years. Feel free to let me know if you ever change your mind.”

The fiery side to the princess that Shizuku had caught a glimpse of some time ago hadn’t resurfaced. Instead, she’d reverted to her impenetrable, frosty attitude.

Ortea’s resolute, haughty demeanor suggested that she wanted to prevent Shizuku from delving beneath her facade. Shizuku sensed this and refrained from prying too intrusively, well aware that the very act of uncovering a secret could hurt somebody.

Instead, Shizuku refused to let Ortea’s disdain upset her and faced it head-on.

This was a different approach from that of her two male colleagues, and it had the potential to both please and annoy the princess. A certain sense of superiority that she was “difficult to kill” was required to employ this tactic.

Shizuku didn’t hesitate to make use of the advantage this gave her. Without her, there’d be no one else who could share their honest opinions with the princess. That meant nobody would be able to question Ortea’s true intentions, either.

“Princess, there’s something I want to ask you,” she began.

Shizuku wasn’t bothered about unearthing the princess’s deepest thoughts, and right now, there was something that she was desperate to ascertain.

When Ortea noticed Shizuku narrowing her dark eyes at her, the princess stopped sipping her tea and raised her face.

“What is it?”

“Whose child is Vied?” Shizuku asked.

This question had been nagging at Shizuku for the whole two weeks he'd been alive. Why was Ortea making sure that this infant, who didn't seem to have any power, was so well taken care of?

The child was being treated with an excessive amount of care. Shizuku knew that the castle had agreed to take care of Seilené and her baby, but there had to be more to it than that. The only likely explanation lay in the identity of the father, who'd given the boy his name.

Ortea looked bored, and the corners of her mouth curled upward.

"He's Seilené's, obviously. You must know that."

"I'm asking about his father, *obviously*. Seilené isn't from Kisk, right? Whose wife is she?"

Seilené hadn't said so explicitly, but she was most likely from Rozsark. The fact that she knew about Lyshien suggested that she'd been a member of the royal court—which begged the question, who was the father of her child?

Steam drifted from Ortea's teacup as she gracefully placed it back on the table. She uncrossed her slender legs, then repositioned them.

"What are you going to do with that information? Don't you think Seilené herself is the only one who truly knows the answer to that?"

"But you must know who the father is. You wouldn't have taken them under your wing otherwise. Is Vied's father *really* the king of Farsas?"

The two women locked eyes. The ensuing silence made Shizuku nervous. If Ortea said yes, that would place Vied clearly at the center of the conflict between the two nations.

Had Faneet been joking, or not?

If Lars was Vied's father, that would explain why Ortea had taken Seilené in.

As things stood, Lars and Leuticia were the only direct descendants of the Farsasian royal line. If something happened to them and Ortea showed up with Lars's child in her arms...the crown of Farsas could fall straight into her hands.

As the child's educator, Shizuku couldn't bring herself to turn a blind eye to that possibility.

Shizuku's steadfast demeanor evoked an icy sneer from Ortea.

"Good question. Still, even if he *were* the father, it wouldn't mean a thing unless he owned up to it, would it?"

"If this wasn't the Farsasian royal family we were talking about, I'd be inclined to agree with you," Shizuku said, staring at her master.

In this world, there was no such thing as paternity tests.

It was impossible to prove that someone was the father of a child, even using magic. If both parents were mages, similarities could sometimes be observed in the child's powers, but if not, family resemblance was all there was to go by.

However, the royal family of Farsas was an exception to that rule.

"Farsas is home to the royal sword Akashia and the royal family's mystical spirits... Only direct descendants of the throne can inherit them."

"So you're saying that even if—hypothetically speaking—the king were to deny he was the father of a child, the royal sword could prove that they were related to him?"

Everyone knew that Leuticia, the only other direct descendant of the royal family, hadn't been pregnant, so in that case, they'd have to assume that the newborn royal's father was Lars.

Before questioning Ortea, Shizuku had caught Niké and dragged some information out of him. He'd admitted that "the royal sword deems only the legitimate spouses of previous kings or persons within five degrees of kinship to be direct descendants of the throne." His reaction had been incredibly awkward and hesitant, so Niké must have known Vied's true identity as well.

Still, if Shizuku pressed him for any more information, it could literally cost him his head, which left her with no choice but to get confirmation from Ortea.

The Bewitching Princess gracefully feigned ignorance.

"You make a good point, but you're still within the realm of fantasy. Even if Vied is directly related to the Farsasian royal family, it won't mean a thing if that man takes a legitimate wife and fathers a successor."

"You're sure about that? Aren't you trying to instigate a war with Farsas?"

The atmosphere in the room grew even tenser. Shizuku picked up on this but continued nonetheless.

"You've summoned Tigor to your castle, only to continuously ignore his pleas for help. Meanwhile, terrible riots are breaking out near the border of Farsas, and some citizens are even taking refuge in the country."

"'Refuge.' That's amusing. Until just a few decades ago, those people were citizens of the state of Casola...under Farsas's dominion."

"Those who've fled have turned to their compatriots in Farsas for help, and their animosity toward Kisk is being amplified with each passing day."

Ortea covered her mouth with her fan and returned Shizuku's gaze. Her eyes, beautifully outlined by makeup, were the only part of her face that Shizuku could see.

They looked like the eyes of a cat, shining in the darkness of the night.

Concealing both herself and her true intentions, Ortea directed her amused gaze down toward her prey. Supremely arrogant, she wore malice as if it were an accessory, which only added to Shizuku's discomfort.

Since her master was refusing to reply, Shizuku shared her own conclusion.

"Your aim...is to kill the king of Farsas in the midst of a war, isn't it?"

If Akashia could prove that the baby was a direct descendant of the royal family, then there was no need for the father to be alive. In fact, the man currently on the throne was nothing but an obstacle. Ortea had Vied in her possession, so from her perspective there wasn't a single reason to keep Lars alive. All she needed to do was to lure him to his death.

If someone other than Ortea had gotten hold of the baby of the king of Farsas, Shizuku was sure they would have been more cautious and come up with a foolproof plan.

First, they would have made their mark on the baby from a young age, taking on the role of his guardian. Then they'd openly claim that Vied was Lars's eldest child and the heir to the throne, and from there, enter into negotiations with Farsas. That would have been a much more reliable strategy.

Naturally, it would be an issue if Lars or Leuticia had a child while the baby was being raised. Still, that didn't change the fact that forcibly starting a war to kill the two of them was reckless. Even if Ortea succeeded in having them assassinated during the conflict, people wouldn't look too kindly at an heir who was in the care of an enemy nation.

Farsas was supposed to be the most powerful nation on the continent. Any normal person would have searched for a more prudent plan with a better likelihood of success.

Ortea, however, was always impatient.

She wasn't going to wait. She couldn't endure the years it would take for the child to grow up.

Once Seilené had gotten close to her due date, the princess had even asked, "Can't we cut the baby out?"

Shizuku doubted that Ortea would wait until Vied became aware of the world around him. Interfering with Farsas was not something she was doing for any official purpose, but as a source of amusement. All she wanted was to trigger immediate change and chaos.

"What an interesting thing to say."

Ortea stared Shizuku square in the face. Her cat-like eyes looked different depending on what angle you looked at them from and the way the light hit them, revealing a myriad of emotions that seemed to surface from within.

Sometimes, her gaze was like that of a child. At others, it was that of an old woman. It appeared callous in a way, yet innocent at the same time.

Ortea pushed away any effort to understand her, yet she also seemed to hate feeling isolated. She concealed her wounds while rejoicing in others' pain.

While she was a competent administrator and ruthless ruler, her thoughts remained undecided but disorganized. Shizuku wondered whether Ortea realized how unstable her mental state truly was.

The princess reminded Shizuku of distorted glasswork, and suddenly Ortea began to cackle.

“Didn’t that man tell you, Shizuku? Farsas deeply cherishes the direct royal bloodline.”

“I don’t know anything about that. Is it because of Akashia?”

“Yes. Both Akashia and the spirits are relics from the past that were bestowed upon Farsas. They cling onto them, desperate to preserve their bloodline.”

“...”

Shizuku, for one, didn’t see it that way. From her point of view, Lars and Leuticia seemed rather easygoing.

Farsas must have looked different from Kisk’s perspective, although their viewpoint stemmed from prejudices shaped by the times and their environment.

“You want to know something? I’m bored. I’ll spend all my life tied down by this castle, and there’s nothing I can do about it. Even if I went on a trip to try to lift my mood, I wouldn’t be able to stay away for long—there are too many incompetent people here. I’d have no choice but to return to this room, like a bird in a cage.”

The windows were closed, and a stale scent lingered in the air. A sense of gloom was piling up in that room, devoid of a single ray of light.

“Who *wouldn’t* want a little entertainment if they were in my shoes? With just a little effort, I can make something interesting happen. It’s not very often you get to see Farsas flustered. It’ll be quite the show.”

Her master almost looked content, and a lump formed in Shizuku’s throat.

How could Ortea be at peace with who she was?

Was she aware of the contradictions in what she was saying, but choosing to ignore them?

The way in which she deceived herself echoed that of a certain queen—the lonely woman who’d been around at the founding of this country.

Was Ortea like this because of the wounds she harbored?

Festering wounds leaked incessantly and scorched a person’s soul. They made

small distortions in your character and slowly made them bigger and bigger. You could feel like you'd come so far, only to turn around and see the twisted path in your wake, just like the eerily labyrinthine corridors of the castle.

But you couldn't continue down that warped path forever.

Shizuku gave voice to the haze that had settled in her chest.

"You're not stuck in any birdcage, Princess. You can leave whenever you wish."

"What would everyone do without me? The country would be in disarray within days."

"It's *your* mischief that will lead Kisk to ruin. If you lose, the country will fall."

Ortea might have been Kisk's medicine, but she was also its poison.

Without a doubt, some things worked better with Ortea around. However, that didn't mean she could get away with treating the country like her own personal property and run it into the ground. If she hated being bound to the castle, she could leave. Someone would continue to govern the country, even after she was gone.

Shizuku was the only person who would tell her this. She knew she'd end up in Ortea's bad books for doing so, and just as she'd predicted, the princess gave her an icy glare.

"Are you suggesting I'm harming this country?" Ortea asked.

"At this rate, I have no choice but to say yes. Please consider another course of action."

"What would *you* know? You're just an ignorant girl."

"If that's the issue, then ask other people for their opinions. Most seem to believe that if full-scale war were to break out, Kisk would likely suffer defeat..."

A sinister smile appeared on Ortea's face—undeniably dark, yet joyful at the same time.

It was as if she were a flower bud, flourishing in the face of her nation's demise. The childlike delight in her eyes made Shizuku shudder.

That was probably just the kind of person she was.

Ortea's mindset was inconsistent. She was likely torn between her assumption that she couldn't leave the castle and her desire to do exactly that. Despite wanting to believe she was indispensable to her nation, she found that same country a burden.

She was restless, unable to find peace. That was why she'd become lonely and cruel.

Although she claimed she wanted to witness something entertaining, Ortea would never actually be satisfied by anything she saw. At that moment, Shizuku caught a glimpse of the void within the princess—a woman so different from her, despite being the same age.

Ortea erupted with laughter and suddenly threw the fan she was holding. It grazed Shizuku's face and landed behind her. Though it didn't seem targeted at anyone in particular, a sadistic look crossed the princess's face, and she sneered.

"It wouldn't be so bad if this country *did* fall into ruin. Why should I care? All nations perish eventually."

"A country is not your personal plaything. It would be better to let go of it than destroy it."

"Don't get too big for your boots, Shizuku. If you prattle on *too* much, I might consider cutting off your ears as a punishment. Don't worry—you can just hide what's left of them with your hair."

Ortea snorted with laughter. The princess's casual manner of speaking made Shizuku feel even more terrified, and the tension she'd experienced in their first encounter came rushing back.

It seemed unwise to press her any further.

She knew Ortea wouldn't hesitate to cut off her ears. If Shizuku backed down now, however, nothing was going to improve for either of them. Their abnormal day-to-day lives would continue to play out, just the same as before.

Although neither one of them had yet reached their twentieth birthday, their

lives would be destined to remain the same.

Would someone tell them what they were missing?

Or would they continue living their lives, oblivious to the truth?

If that happened, it would just be painful.

“...I don’t enjoy pain,” Shizuku admitted. “If you were to hurt me, I’d find myself begging for your forgiveness.”

Ortea’s threat horrified Shizuku, but at the same time, she felt a sense of calm wash over her.

At that moment, she wasn’t angry—just empty.

“But that wouldn’t mean I agreed with what you were saying. It would just show I’d succumbed to the pain.”

If she couldn’t get through to Ortea, then there was nothing else to do about it.

However, Shizuku wasn’t prepared to give up trying to communicate. She was determined to express how she felt.

Even if the only response she received was a blade against her skin, she was now prepared to resign herself to her fate. Shizuku had suffered the pain of not knowing who she truly was, too. They were one and the same.

Shizuku didn’t want to leave Ortea behind, stuck in the same place. She wanted to try to reach out to her. She didn’t care if it was a mistake or if it was a presumptuous thing to do.

Shizuku’s response caused the other woman to furrow her slender eyebrows. Ortea began to speak, her voice tinged with annoyance.

“You’re such a smart-ass. A submission is a submission, no matter how you try to twist it.”

“That’s not true. You can’t change that way.”

“I changed.”

“No, you haven’t. You can’t change if you don’t want to.”

Shizuku picked up the dagger that was lying on the table and stood right in front of the princess. She knelt on the rug and offered her its handle.

“Here.”

Shizuku was offering someone else a weapon so they could hurt her. Ortea stared at the dagger, her eyes wide.

Which of them was *really* afraid of death?

As she closed her eyes and waited for the blade, Shizuku’s face appeared profoundly sorrowful, perhaps due to the shadow that Ortea was casting over it.

“You...”

Ortea caught her breath—but only for a few seconds.

She quickly came back to her senses and gripped the handle of her dagger, pulling it from its sheath. Then she swung the exposed blade straight down toward Shizuku’s left ear.

The dull knife grazed Shizuku’s ear and cut into her shoulder.

“Aaagh!”

The shock made Shizuku feel like fire was coming from her eyes, and she fell into a heap on the ground, clutching her shoulder. Tears streamed down her face from the pain.

“Let that sink in, you fool,” said Ortea, her voice uncharacteristically monotonous.

As Shizuku huddled over, writhing, the princess tossed the blade onto her back. It made a dull thud, and the well-worn, ornamental dagger tumbled onto the rug. Shizuku bit her lip to stifle a sob, overwhelmed by the agony the blunt blade had inflicted.

It hurt so badly she wanted to pass out.

Still, she knew that wouldn’t happen, so Shizuku mustered all her strength to lift herself up and fixed her gaze on her master.

Ortea, however, simply kept her eyes averted. Realizing the princess wasn’t

going to look at her, Shizuku bowed deeply. She left the room, her trembling legs close to collapse as she dragged them across the floor.

Left alone, Ortea didn't lift her head. She didn't look at Shizuku as she walked away. Instead, the princess just stared intently at the dagger that had fallen to the floor. After a little while, she started hugging her knees like a child.

"What goes on inside that head of yours? Are you a masochist?"

"Not at all. I hate pain. In fact, I hate anything grotesque."

Shizuku rubbed her shoulder, having had her injuries healed by magic.

She still felt a trace of that sharp pain, even though the physical soreness had vanished.

Niké was looking at her as if she were some sort of incomprehensible creature. He'd found Shizuku crouching in the corner of the corridor and almost ended up kicking her, not noticing her at first.

"Think about others for once. If you throw one of your nonsensical tantrums, it's going to leave the princess in a bad mood."

"Oh, whoops. You're not on your way to give her your report, are you?"

"Figure that one out for yourself."

"Sorry."

Shizuku had apologized, but the damage was already done. The man looked extremely annoyed, and she bowed to him, then rose to her feet.

"I'm sort of...depressed by how powerless I feel," Shizuku confessed.

"Don't confront the princess head-on," Niké replied. "It won't get you anywhere. In fact, I'm the one who'll get the worst of it."

"Please accept my sincere apologies."

Shizuku apologized again to Niké, who seemed more worn out than angry, then left. She walked down the corridor by herself, her head slumped dejectedly.

For a second, she'd felt as though she'd gotten through to Ortea.

She'd caught a glimpse of the forgotten child within Ortea's gaze, and at that moment, Shizuku had wondered if the princess was aware of what she was missing. Perhaps it simply bothered her so much that she refused to speak about it.

So Shizuku had hoped that she might be able to reach her. That something could change.

She'd found out the painful way just how naive that was. Still, Shizuku probably would have aired her views at some point anyway.

If this was the extent of her punishment, she considered herself lucky.

A man Shizuku had once encountered on her travels had suggested that she possessed something so innate that she didn't even realize she had it. Now she felt like she understood what he'd meant.

Perhaps the things Shizuku took for granted had always been out of reach for Ortea. Shizuku saw not just herself in the princess, but also a hurt child.

“...I shouldn't get too big for my boots, huh?”

She knew Ortea was right about that, but it still hurt to hear.

Shizuku headed toward Vied's nursery and spotted Faneet standing in front of the door. Seeing her strained smile, he looked puzzled.

“Is something wrong? You look like you've been crying.”

“Oh...”

Now that he mentioned it, she hadn't washed her face. It was mostly the pain that had made her cry, but she still felt sad.

“I complained to the princess, and she got mad at me,” Shizuku explained simply.

Faneet frowned. “She won't listen to anything you tell her, but I do understand why you'd want to say your piece.”

“Well, yeah. Even I think I was too straightforward.”

“You need to be careful. One day, she might not stop at injuring you.”

“I'll bear that in mind... What was the princess like as a child?”

The version of Ortea that Shizuku had met seemed unbalanced. It was as if she'd skipped the childhood phase entirely—either that, or she was still trapped in it.

What had she actually been like as a child? Shizuku's probing question was met with momentary silence from the man who'd served the princess for years, but he replied almost immediately.

"She was very intelligent, even as a young girl. A little stubborn, but that's normal for a princess."

"I can imagine."

Shizuku chuckled softly, picturing a young Ortea issuing commands with regal authority.

In a child, such haughtiness must have seemed endearing. Faneet's gaze was unusually gentle.

"The princess...is kind of similar to Queen Tryphina, isn't she?" Shizuku asked, sensing a certain helplessness in his eyes.

"Tryphina? The first queen? I've never heard anyone make that comparison before."

"They're different in many ways but similar in others. Like how she hates the country but can't bring herself to leave it."

"You think she hates the country?"

"Huh?"

The pair exchanged confused glances.

It was said that Tryphina was a loving and gentle queen, adored by all—a stark contrast to Ortea, who was feared even by foreign nations. People would probably claim that they had nothing in common.

Shizuku ran her fingers through her bangs, then pressed her hand to her head.

"Wait... But Tryphina... Her younger brother... Huh?"

Shizuku vaguely knew the "truth" about the queen, who'd allegedly died

young but led a happy life. That knowledge had entered her mind without her realizing it, and until that moment, she hadn't realized that it differed completely from the widely known version of the story. She couldn't even remember where she'd learned it. When Shizuku realized this, she found herself at a loss for words.

Faneet seemed to interpret Shizuku's change in expression as a reaction to her own off-the-mark comment. He forced a smile, his gaze lacking in emotion.

"Yeah. Believe it or not, the princess used to be a very kind-hearted person."

"She *was*?" Shizuku exclaimed loudly before hastily biting her tongue.

Faneet was probably just trying to smooth things over after Shizuku's blunt remark, yet she'd responded hysterically. What if Vied had heard her in his bedroom? Shizuku held her breath as she listened out for any crying, then apologized to Faneet.

"Sorry. I was just surprised to hear that."

"It's fine. I don't mind."

"Still, it's hard to believe she used to be kind..."

Is that really true? the look in Shizuku's eyes seemed to say.

The expression on Faneet's face almost looked like a smile, and he casually waved his hand as he turned around. It must have been time for him to attend to another job. Shizuku was left alone with her unanswered questions.

Who knew the real truth? Or did the truth vary completely, depending on who you asked?

All of these thoughts seemed to lead to dead ends, so Shizuku put them to the back of her mind and opened the bedroom door.

"Hello. It's me, Shizuku," she said, making her way to Vied's bedside.

The boy was lying in his large crib. He was barely able to move by himself, but he had his eyes open and was gazing blankly up at the ceiling. Shizuku greeted Vied, then sat down beside him. She took out a picture book that was kept inside the room and began to read aloud slowly.

It was impossible to discern Vied's gender from his face alone. He bore a vague resemblance to Seilené, but it was hard to tell if he looked like Lars. As the baby flailed his hands around, Shizuku offered him her finger and let him grab hold of it. The soft feeling reassured her.

Vied had only just been born, yet both of his parents were absent. What kind of life would he lead?

Maybe a checkered future awaited him. Maybe he'd even fight against one of his parents.

However, all Shizuku could do right now was pray that these were nothing more than possibilities. Keeping her increasingly mixed feelings under wraps, she stroked Vied's hair. The fairy tale she was reading ended on a happy note—just as they always did—and she let its magic drift down upon his bed.

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The preparations were complete.

Everyone in the room knew it. Their gazes were fixed on the king, who passed the documents back to a magistrate. These documents detailed the behaviors of the nobles, who'd been conducting themselves in an alarming manner of late.

Their actions had nothing to do with the riots in the neighboring country; in fact, they were unsophisticated and childish—something that reflected the capabilities of the nobles themselves.

With an air of annoyance, Lars ordered for the implementation of blanket surveillance measures. After looking around at his assembled vassals, a fearless smile appeared on his face.

"Well, we've been receiving plea after plea from Casola. Given the recent incursions across the border, I think it's time to act before the chaos escalates any further."

His sister, standing by his side, suspected the chaos was intentionally being escalated. Yet she remained silent, respecting the solemn atmosphere of the assembly, and cast her blue eyes down toward the floor.

"We know who's been planting the seeds of this unrest. It's time we gave the

woman in question a strict punishment,” Lars said casually. “Her childish games have gone too far.”

His words made a few of his men apprehensive. If the situation were to deteriorate further and full-scale war erupted between two of the Great Nations, it would be the first battle of such a scale in centuries. While Farsas was intent on winning, they couldn’t shake the feeling that they were on the verge of a turning point in history.

Despite his vassals’ anxious expressions, the king didn’t seem nervous in the slightest. He turned toward the map of the continent on the wall behind him, his gaze settling on a specific point.

“It’s regrettable that we’re having to clean up the mess left by the disgraced king, but *they* were the ones who dug this all back up. Let’s make sure to emerge victorious in Rosta as well.”

This was virtually a command, and everyone present bowed in response.

For many years, the blade of the royal sword had only been leveled against the members of its own royal family—but now the day when it would be turned toward its hostile neighbor country drew closer.

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A faint pink light softly illuminated the corners of the large space.

Although he couldn’t see the owner of the room, Faneet could sense that she was there.

Standing by the entrance, he called out to her for what felt like the hundredth time.

“Princess.”

There was no reply. He glanced at the incense burning right next to him.

“Princess Ortea,” he called out again, his tone unchanged—but this sound of her name seemed to cause a ripple in the silence.

An ivory-colored hand reached out into the light. With a movement of her slender fingers, the brightness of the light intensified.

Her expression, illuminated by the lamp, didn’t look annoyed. In fact, she

looked rather melancholic.

“What is it?” the princess asked.

“It seems you’re not in the best of spirits,” said Faneet.

“I’m perfectly fine.”

“If that’s true, then I’m glad to hear it.”

“Where’s Shizuku?”

She’d asked the question without a moment’s delay, and a small smile crept across Faneet’s lips. He could tell that something had transpired between them. After all, Shizuku did occasionally admonish Ortea, which caused her mood to sour.

Some of what Shizuku said was naive and narrow-minded, while other things were shrewd and grounded in reality. Ortea took pleasure in hearing them all.

However, whenever her sadistic tendency to view people as toys was criticized, her mood immediately took a turn for the worse. Shizuku not only verbalized what everyone else thought but was too scared to express, she also delivered these critiques mercilessly, perhaps due to her young age and uncompromising nature.

“She’s with Vied. Shall I call for her?” asked Faneet, responding to his master’s inquiry in a muted tone of voice.

“There’s no need for that,” replied Ortea.

“Are you sure?”

Ortea went quiet once again. The ensuing silence was laden with questions she longed to ask but resisted voicing.

Faneet couldn’t work out what Ortea saw in Shizuku. Despite being the same age, their social standings and backgrounds couldn’t be more different. Considering how little they had in common, it was inevitable that they knocked heads from time to time. Perhaps it was wise to drag Shizuku away from the princess before their inescapable differences led to an unfortunate end. This idea had been on Faneet’s mind for some time, but Vied’s birth had delayed any opportunity he had to voice it. And so here he was.

A breeze snuck in through a small gap in the window, weaving between the ornaments and washing away the incense that lingered in the air. Gradually, the atmosphere in the room began to change. As if they were slowly awakening from a dream, the faint scent of rain began to filter into the air.

Noticing this, Faneet walked over to the window, then silently closed and locked it.

"Shizuku seemed the same as always. She did mention she'd incurred your displeasure, however."

Faneet had said it as a casual remark, but Ortea seemed slightly shaken by it. Her hand, illuminated by the light, clenched into a fist.

"...That girl needs to think before she speaks."

"She compared you to Queen Tryphina," said Faneet.

"Tryphina?"

The princess sounded skeptical, but her suspicion was soon replaced by laughter. It echoed around the silent room like a cracked bell.

"Tryphina...? I see. How apt."

"Princess?"

Had being compared to a queen she bore no resemblance to hurt the princess's feelings? Faneet had mentioned it in a light-hearted manner, expecting her to simply laugh it off, but the cackling that followed seemed tinged with self-derision.

Before long, Ortea fell silent again. It was as if a light had gone out.

Countless moments, each one indistinguishable from the last, melded together. By the time Faneet returned to his senses, it felt as if an eternity had gone by—but just then, there was a subtle shift in the stagnant stillness. In the dim light, the princess's eyes seemed to have dark circles under them.

"Faneet...would it matter if I left this castle?" she asked.

There was no light reflected in her eyes. She just sat there in darkness, her gaze focused on the man in front of her.

What was going through her mind? What was she asking him?

That was something nobody knew. Or, at least, Faneet never did.

He directed his calm gaze toward his master.

“This castle is where you belong. Don’t concern yourself with such questions.”

That was his answer.

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The rain had begun that morning and was growing more intense by the hour.

Shizuku had left Vied’s room and was leaning against the gallery railing looking down at the courtyard. She took some sewing equipment out of the tote bag she’d started carrying around lately and began sewing a toy for the baby. She knew that infants were more attracted to colorful objects because their vision was still developing, so she’d decided to make something Vied could grasp onto.

When Shizuku had asked Yura for a needle and thread, she’d been offered a magic implement. She had no idea how to use a magical tool to sew, however, so Shizuku had opted for a completely ordinary needle and thread, which she’d been using to stitch together a red, gourd-shaped pouch.

Once it was more or less done, she embroidered eyes and a nose onto it and stuffed it with cotton.

“Oh, it’s pretty cute.”

And with that, her rather adorable-looking toy was done.

Satisfied, Shizuku started putting away her sewing equipment, which she’d placed on top of the railing.

Yet at that very moment, a hand reached out from behind her and casually picked up the red doll.

“What’s this supposed to be? A netai?”

“Your Majesty.”

Shizuku was so startled by the sudden voice that she almost dropped her bag into the courtyard. The person who’d approached her, however, was intently

examining the toy she'd made.

She straightened her posture and bowed like any good subject would.

"It's a toy that even a baby can grasp hold of... I thought it'd look cuter with eyes."

"Interesting."

Beelhurse responded with a gentle smile and handed it back to her. Then he leaned against the railing beside Shizuku.

"How's Ortea been lately?"

It wasn't the first time he'd asked that question. The king had stopped Shizuku several times to ask how his sister was doing.

As always, Shizuku heavily sugarcoated the truth—but as she was speaking, she suddenly realized it was a good opportunity to learn more about Ortea.

She waited for a juncture in their conversation, then cautiously posed the king a question.

"If you don't mind, may I ask what the princess was like in the past?"

"Hmm? You do ask some interesting questions, don't you?" replied the king.

"Please forgive me if I'm crossing a line..."

"It's fine."

Beelhurse and Ortea had different mothers. The queen who'd given birth to Beelhurse had died of illness when he was twelve years old, after which Ortea's mother was welcomed as the new queen. By the time Ortea had been born, Beelhurse was already sixteen. Thanks to their large age gap, Shizuku suspected he remembered her childhood vividly.

After a moment of contemplation, the king's expression softened, his warm gaze brimming with nostalgia.

"She was a sweet little girl. Bright, confident, a little self-indulgent..."

That was how Shizuku imagined Ortea to be like as a child. She nodded and allowed the king to speak.

"At times, she struggled to be honest with her feelings. I think her pride was to blame for that. Still, she was a kind person deep down. She had a habit of awkwardly apologizing after a tantrum."

Shizuku wondered whether Ortea had only acted like that because Beelhurse was her brother. She recalled how Leuticia was the one person Lars had a soft spot for. Shizuku narrowed her eyes as she unearthed old memories, but it seemed that Beelhurse assumed she was merely skeptical about his claims. He shrugged lightly, then let out a sigh.

"I know... Let me tell you a little fairy tale."

"A fairy tale?"

"Yeah. Think of it as a make-believe story. Once upon a time, there was a little princess. Having been raised as royalty, she'd been given everything she could have ever dreamed of. Blessed with good looks and intelligence, everybody adored her."

Where was this story going? Shizuku found herself becoming slightly nervous and clasped her hands together as she stared at Beelhurse.

"She was happy. She'd lived a sheltered life, oblivious to the hardships of the world. But one day, all that changed. Within the borders of her nation was a town populated by people who'd fled from another country decades earlier. Not everyone felt favorably toward the town—and a certain faction, willing to do anything to get its way, abducted her. They demanded the castle set the town ablaze and refused to give her back until they did."

Shizuku covered her mouth in shock. When she glanced at the king, he smiled, and she could see a sad look in his eyes.

Shizuku suspected she knew which town he was talking about, but she wasn't sure whether or not to mention it. After all, it was supposed to be a made-up story. So she held back her question and urged the king to continue.

"So...what happened next?"

"Well, the king and queen didn't hesitate to make up their minds. They declared that 'royalty must always be ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their people,' and refused the demand that held their daughter's life in

balance. Soon after, the kidnappers were attacked by the army and the princess was fortunately rescued...but her captors had already told her how her parents responded. After that, her personality changed, and she stopped talking to her parents. It was such a pity."

Shizuku felt a shock run through her like a silent thunderbolt.

Naturally, Beelhurse knew whose story this was. Shizuku thought she did as well.

Although she'd been young, as a member of the royal family, the princess had been expected to die. Had she seen her parents' intentions as a form of betrayal? Or had she begun to despise the role she'd been born into?

The answers to those questions were likely within reach. After all, *her* footprints were everywhere.

Hearing this story of the child who hadn't been protected made Shizuku bite her lip. The side profile of her master, still haunted by the darkness of her childhood, came to mind.

"Is that the end of the story?" she asked.

"It is. Oh, come to think of it, you were asking about Ortea."

From side-on, the king bore little resemblance to his half-sister. He wasn't suffering from the same childhood loss.

The king closed his eyes and smiled.

"Yeah. She was such a kind child. Yet she seemed to loathe her mother and father. She never reconciled with them, even though I repeatedly encouraged her to do so. After her parents' passing, Ortea became even more out of control. Her motto became, 'If royalty must sacrifice themselves for the many, then sometimes the few must sacrifice themselves for royalty.'"

"I...heard the princess say the royals and the citizens leech off one another."

"To her, that's probably the way it looks. That's one side to this nation, but everything has its limits; if her whims cause more harm than good, then I doubt the people will remain silent."

The king sounded extremely calm, but his words instilled Shizuku with a sense

of urgency. He might have been warning her about the changes that were currently unfolding.

If his so-called “fairy tale” was about Ortea, she probably harbored a grudge against Rosta and Casola. She might even resent the castle and Kisk as a whole. Still, if she tried to trample over everyone she resented, people would respond against her in kind.

So what was Shizuku supposed to do?

Was she meant to abandon her master or share the same fate? Would she betray her, obey her, or could she change her?

Before she knew it, Shizuku was being forced to make yet another choice. If she were to open this door, where would it lead next?

Shizuku had gone quiet, and the king offered her a bittersweet smile. His expression looked somewhat forlorn, which matched the relentless rain pouring outside. The months and years that he'd never get back were buried just beneath his skin.

“I know I’ve said this before, but I’d like you to stick by Ortea’s side. No matter what anyone else might say, she’s my beloved sister. I’ve always wanted her to have a friend around her own age.”

“...Okay.”

Shizuku’s body felt weirdly heavy inside, almost definitely from mental exhaustion.

She pondered this as she watched the king walk away.

There was only so much she could do. She didn’t know whether her limited capabilities carried any significance.

If only *he* was here with her...

The anxiety she’d been suppressing suddenly came rushing back.

She wanted to call out his name, but she stifled the urge and looked up at the rain-soaked castle instead.

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Thin clouds continued to drift by, obscuring the moonlight.

Beneath the faint light, a small horse-drawn cart traveled down the road, heading toward the border. That was where their relatives were supposed to meet them.

The driver handled the reins, not saying a word. He'd been born into a merchant family in Caribala thirty-eight years ago, about twenty years after the town was established in Kisk.

His grandparents had fled their former homeland and opened up a shop abroad, and on one occasion he'd asked them a rather innocuous question.

"Why don't you go back to your hometown?"

The answer he received was a simple one. His grandfather, who'd escaped from a city that had been devastated during the war, responded with a feeble smile.

"Because Farsas is scary."

Ironically, that was exactly where he—the grandson of that same man—was now seeking refuge.

He glanced back at his wife riding in the cart and at the cargo they'd managed to salvage from the warehouse. He felt like they had enough to restart their business in this new land. All they needed to do was cross the border, and their lives would be back to normal.

At first, the riots in Caribala had involved arson and armed men rampaging through the streets; however, the situation was continually changing. While arson and murders had decreased, people and goods were disappearing from the city at an alarming rate.

Of course, some had chosen to flee Caribala, but that definitely wasn't the whole story.

The man had left the city under the cover of night, worried that they might someday suffer the same fate if they stayed. Luckily, no one had pursued them.

The sky was dark, and everything seemed to be melting into the shadows, as if collectively holding their breath. Planning on letting the horse rest once they'd crossed the border, he tugged on the reins—but just as he was about to

breathe a sigh of relief, he heard the sound of hooves approaching.

“Stop the cart!” a voice yelled angrily from behind him.

The man tensed up. When he looked over his shoulder, he spotted five riders fiercely pursuing them.

It seemed unlikely that they had peaceful intentions. He could sense their hostility all too keenly, and the man made up his mind and whipped the reins. He sped up the cart, aiming farther down the road.

He just needed to make it to the border gate on the highway, where the Farsasian soldiers were stationed. Due to the rise in the number of people fleeing, soldiers had been deployed from a nearby fortress to man the gate at the border.

Heading for the land his grandparents had fled sixty years ago, the man drove his cart as fast as it would go.

The chase, however, was short-lived. Weighed down with cargo as it was, the cart couldn’t outpace the horses.

As soon as the shadow of the gate came into view in the distance, two horsemen appeared on either side of the carriage. One of them, a thug with coarse features, brandished his sword at the man in the driver’s seat.

“...I guess this is it.”

He started to close his eyes, when all of a sudden, the thug wordlessly toppled off his horse, leaving the man stunned. Soon after, the thug on his other side was *also* thrown to the ground.

Although he didn’t understand what had happened, the man wasn’t stupid enough to stop the cart. Instead, he continued his frantic rush to the gate.

“You’re as skilled as ever, Azulia.”

“Not really. I mean, I almost hit the horse. The horses have done nothing wrong.”

The woman was sitting on top of the border gate. As she removed the magic implement that had allowed her to see in the dark, she added, “They’re super-cute, actually.”

With her beloved bow in hand, she leaped down from the wall, her long blond hair shimmering in the wan moonlight. She would be twenty-two that year, but her stern features almost made her look like a young man.

Azulia instructed her subordinate waiting nearby to fetch the bodies and the horses, then went back to the meeting room, the only room at the border gate. There, a magistrate and a mage, who were responsible for communicating with the fort, waited on standby.

“How are your preparations going?” she asked.

“Almost complete. The troops have been deployed. We should be able to make our move at dawn.”

“Right. Where’s Leuticia?”

“She’s gone back to the castle. Apparently, the king will take the lead instead.”

“...What? How come?”

Having served as Lars’s personal guard in the past, Azulia couldn’t help but let out a cry of astonishment, and the magistrate looked like he was about to sigh.

Their victory was almost guaranteed, yet she felt like this stress was just as unavoidable.

Azulia almost voiced the numerous thoughts spinning inside her mind, but in the end, she just shook her head.

“I’ll sleep while I have the chance,” she declared—and with that, she went on her way.

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The wind had changed.

Shizuku sensed it as the cool breeze blew in through the open window. It was late at night, and having finished work, she’d been reading under the light of her desk lamp. She put on an extra layer over her loungewear to keep herself warm.

The rain that had persisted for several days had come to an abrupt stop, and the moon was now visible, veiled by thin clouds. Feeling cold, Shizuku closed

the window and picked up her empty teapot. She decided to have one more cup before going to bed.

The journey from her room to the kitchenette wasn't a long one. Unlike in Farsas, people in Kisk had to boil water themselves, but with magical tools at their disposal, it didn't take very long. Since she wouldn't be gone for long, she didn't bother changing her clothes before leaving her room.

Shizuku walked through the complicated hallways, taking two turns to get where she was going. Once she reached the door to the kitchenette, she placed her hand on it—but just then, she felt another gust of wind.

There was a hint of something else mixed with the cool air. The familiarity of it made her frown.

Shizuku looked around, holding her breath, then heard something fall to the ground. It sounded as if someone had dropped a cloth bag, and though it wasn't very loud, it still made her suspicious.

“What was that? Ghosts...don’t exist here.”

She probably should have just boiled the water and returned to her room, but if she had, her curiosity would have continued to gnaw at her. In the end, Shizuku filled a pot with water, set it on the magical heater, and went to investigate the source of the noise.

It didn't take long for her to find the cause.

Right around the corner, halfway down the long corridor, was a man sitting slumped against the wall. Judging by the way he was dressed, it seemed he was a soldier who'd been on patrol.

Shizuku hurried over to him and peered down into his face.

“Are you okay...?”

But the moment the question passed her lips, she realized how meaningless it was. She froze, her mouth agape.

Protruding from the soldier's chest was something that looked like a rod—the hilt of a dagger pierced deep into his flesh.

The familiar, unmistakable stench of blood filled the air. The soldier's chest

gradually darkened as his blood seeped out.

“...Is he dead?”

Shizuku’s own words made her shudder. She jumped back from the corpse but immediately lost her balance and fell to the ground.

However, in hindsight, this was a lucky break. As she tripped, a knife whizzed silently over her head.

“Wha...?!”

Shizuku realized she was in danger before the knife that had missed her even hit the ground. She had no combat skills to speak of, but she’d been in plenty of perilous situations before.

The atmosphere had felt wrong, and there was a corpse lying on the floor. That told Shizuku all she really needed to know about what was going on.

She leaped to her feet and dashed behind a pillar, hiding from her unseen foe. She wasn’t sure how to get out of the situation, especially since she was unarmed and dressed in nothing but loungewear. Shizuku held her breath, sensing her blood rapidly running cold.

She prayed her assailant would leave. If they came any closer, it’d all be over for her.

Shizuku assessed the distance to the hallway’s next corner, then waited for the right moment to run—but before she got the chance, her attacker unexpectedly thrust the point of their sword toward her.

The weapon skimmed past her shocked face and stopped just in front of the wall behind her.

“I have something I want to ask you,” the person said.

They sounded cool and composed. It was clear that they were threatening her, which made Shizuku stiffen up. Tentatively, she lifted her gaze to see who was speaking to her.

He must have recognized her, too. They exchanged looks and then weary exclamations of surprise.

“Huh?”

“What?”

The boy’s features were so clear-cut that he looked like he was wearing a mask. They’d only met once before, but Shizuku could never have forgotten him. It had been just before Candela Castle was gripped by a forbidden curse. This boy, along with the sight of all those corpses and the sense of bewilderment Shizuku had felt, was seared into her memory.

“You’re...”

“You were one of Tarkis’s clients, weren’t you? What’re you doing in a place like this?”

Keeping his sword steady, the boy stared at Shizuku, his eyes as clear as glass. Neither of them knew the other’s name, and they exchanged puzzled looks, but the boy seemed to take it in his stride. After checking to make sure they were alone, he asked her a question.

“Hey, could you tell me which building the king is in? This castle’s more confusing than I thought it’d be.”

“The king...? Why do you want to know that?”

“I have a job to do. Do you know where it is?”

Shizuku returned his gaze, holding back her answer. Beelhurse was in the third building to the northwest, but she had no intention of revealing the truth to this boy. He’d already killed a soldier on patrol; his “job” was likely of a dangerous nature. Shizuku noticed that his blade, still positioned next to her face, was smeared with blood.

“I—I don’t know,” she said.

“You’re lying. This isn’t something you should hide,” the boy replied.

He quietly narrowed his eyes, his cold gaze hinting that he’d seen right through her. Growing more fearful by the second, Shizuku hurriedly changed the subject.

“Uhh, what kind of job is it?”

“It’s a secret. I can tell you if you answer my question, though.”

“Is it...another forbidden curse?”

“Nope.”

Did the boy’s presence mean that Tarkis was nearby, too? Shizuku wanted to look around for help, but he’d probably kill her if she made any unnecessary movements. She drew in a shallow breath, aware of the sword touching her hair.

“The king has tight security. I think you’ll be arrested if you get too close.”

“I know, but I took the job anyway. So where is it? Tell me.”

“I don’t think so...”

Shizuku’s half-hearted denial seemed to slightly offend the boy. With one eyebrow raised, he rotated the wrist of his sword hand.

“If you tell me, I’ll let you live. Tarkis wouldn’t be happy if I killed you.”

“...It’s dangerous. You shouldn’t go there.”

“I didn’t ask you for advice. You’re so annoying.”

The hand he was holding his sword with moved, and Shizuku instinctively squeezed her eyes shut. It turned out, though, that he’d just lowered it because he was tired. He moved the blade away from her face without hurting her, then ran his free hand through his hair with an annoyed look.

“We don’t have any time to waste here. Oh yeah, I remember now... You’re pretty naive. Let me put it this way, then: If we let the king live, this country will be destroyed. We need to act now before it’s too late... You got that?”

“Huh?”

It sounded like he was talking about Ortea, but he’d definitely said, “the king.”

Shizuku’s eyes widened, and he looked down at her with irritation.

The scent of blood wafted through the dark corridor. Unable to comprehend the situation, Shizuku broke the brief silence.

“What do you mean...‘if we let the king live’?”

“Didn’t you hear me? Are you deaf, or just stupid?”

Are you sure you don’t mean the princess? Shizuku wanted to say, but she immediately clamped her mouth shut. She shook her head at the boy, who was observing her suspiciously.

The boy—Kaito Dicis—tutted, suspecting that Shizuku hadn’t understood him.

“If the king stays alive, it won’t be pretty. That’s why it’s my job is to eliminate him. Nobody else would do it, so I thought I’d give it a try.”

“But the king hasn’t done anything wrong!”

“Don’t raise your voice. I’ll kill you.”

Kaito’s immediate warning made Shizuku bite her lip.

She was still struggling to understand, though. Why would anyone try to assassinate Beelhurse? Ortea was the root cause of this turmoil—if anyone was going to be killed, she was the obvious choice. Shizuku wasn’t sure that *she*’d want to do the honors, but objectively speaking, the princess was the more blameworthy of the two royal siblings.

Or was the king the one who was truly guilty? As the ruler of the nation, *he* was the one who’d allowed her to behave this way.

As Shizuku stood there in confusion, the boy pointed a dagger at the tip of her nose.

“Like I said, we have no time to waste. Hurry up and spill the beans.”

“But if I tell you, you’ll go and assassinate him, won’t you?”

“That’s my job. Last time we met, you said that sacrificing a few to save many was a pointless hypothetical to discuss, but how do you feel about it now? It’s not hypothetical anymore. Allowing the king to live will lead this country to ruin, and lots of people are going to die as a result.”

“No, wait. We don’t know that for sure. Maybe it’s a groundless allegation...”

Shizuku waved her hands in front of her face. She was being pressured to tell him, yet she couldn’t offer any kind of answer until she organized her own thoughts. The boy in front of her, however, had a dismayed look, as if to say

that worrying about these things was meaningless.

“Listen,” Kaito continued. “In situations like this, nothing’s categorically right or wrong. It all comes down to advantages and disadvantages, and the relationship between the hostile parties. I’m only simplifying it and talking about the number of casualties because I know you’re an idiot. Farsas is about to invade Rosta.”

“Oh...”

So it had finally come to that.

Shizuku had been cut off from outside information, and she stood there motionless as the news sank in.

Although Kisk and Farsas were both powerful countries, Shizuku didn’t know how they compared in terms of military might. Still, Ortea had originally set her plan in motion with the intention of sacrificing Rosta. Would the princess be satisfied when she heard about Farsas’s invasion? And how would this war beginning in Rosta play out?

Shizuku shuddered. It was beyond the scope of her imagination.

“Would the king’s death...really mean anything?”

“It’d throw the castle into chaos for a while. If Kisk’s authority weakens during that time, Rosta will surrender to Farsas. They might also capture that town on the border—Caribala, right? But that was never really Rosta anyway, so who cares?”

The boy’s client on the opposing side was claiming that this was the least chaotic solution.

The castle didn’t care about Rosta. That meant that someone else was planning to spurn the castle in order to protect the region.

“...Is your client Tigor?”

Shizuku let out a deep sigh. Although it wasn’t directed at anybody in particular, she felt a kind of sadness similar to disappointment settle into her chest.

There’d been no sign of Tigor inside the castle since Beelhurse had decided to

sort things out and speak to Tigor himself. Had the capable lord chosen to turn his back on the king to protect his people?

Kaito frowned.

"I can't tell you that—not because I'm not allowed, but because I don't actually know who my client is. The person who came to me was just a messenger."

"Stop this."

"Huh?"

"Stop what you're doing. This is no way to solve a problem as big as this one. Just give me some time. I'll do some negotiating..."

During their long journey to Farsas, Erik had told Shizuku several stories about the so-called Dark Age. It was an era that had spanned hundreds of years and engulfed the entire continent in war and betrayal, during which assassination was viewed as a tactic that only caused further turmoil. That was distant history, so why strive to resurrect such methods now?

Shizuku felt an overwhelming desire to bury her face in her hands. At the end of the day, people's personal troubles never really melded together in harmony. Instead, they just spread like a virus.

The boy didn't look at the dagger he was pointing at Shizuku's nose, but straight at her. It felt like he was staring at an inanimate object, as though she wasn't there at all.

"What would *you* be able to do?" he said. "If your negotiations don't lead us anywhere, can you kill the king in my place?"

"No. But—"

"Everything you're saying is meaningless, then. Nothing's going to change."

"But you *enjoy* killing people."

Her voice—not authoritative enough to be called dismissive—glided over the blade between them.

The boy snorted.

“So what? It’s the action itself that matters. Do you think it’s excusable to kill someone as long as you’re torn up over it? Isn’t that more infuriating? I kill because it amuses me. I take jobs because they pay me. You can say what you want about how I carry out my work, but you have no right to criticize my preferences.”

“I’m not criticizing them,” Shizuku replied. “I just don’t want to help you.”

Shizuku didn’t want to be criticized, either.

She hated the fact that he took pleasure in other people’s deaths. Nothing could change the way she felt about that.

Regardless of whether it was Ortea or this boy she was dealing with, Shizuku had no desire to condone such twisted forms of enjoyment. The outcomes of their actions and whether they were part of some sort of bigger picture were irrelevant.

People who reveled in the deaths of others had no qualms offering them up for the slaughter. Shizuku didn’t want to debate the morality of that; she simply detested the way they dismissed people, cutting them down before even considering their potential.

Kaito sighed, retracting the dagger slightly. He was poised to attack Shizuku.

“Are you outright admitting that you don’t want to cooperate? You really are dumb, aren’t you? Just looking at you annoys me.”

Shizuku shifted her gaze. The kitchenette was right around the corner. By now, the water she’d left there would have boiled. It was the only form of resistance she could think of.

“It’s honestly ridiculous. How can someone who cares so little about their own life tell me not to kill? Isn’t that a contradiction?”

Shizuku didn’t catch the entirety of his cold remark. She crouched down, away from the tip of his sword, then launched herself off the floor and started running. She could hear him click his tongue behind her.

She wouldn’t be able to dodge it if he threw a weapon at her back.

The corner was right in front of her, yet it felt so far away. Right at that

moment, however, Shizuku heard a shout coming from the direction of the abandoned corpse.

“Who’s there?! What’s going on?!“

It was the voice of a patrolling soldier. Shizuku turned her head to see Kaito standing in the shadow of a pillar, preparing to throw his dagger at the man who’d just shown up.

“Watch out!” Shizuku yelled, prompting the man to immediately crouch down.

The dagger flew over the top of his head. As Kaito whipped out another knife, Shizuku turned around and tackled him.

The impact caused the boy to lose his footing, but he still managed to reach out and grab Shizuku’s hair. He pressed his knife against her exposed throat.

“Honestly...”

At that moment, Shizuku could see the anger in Kaito’s eyes; it was the first time he’d shown any strong emotion. The atmosphere surrounding him was closer to hostility than murderous intent, and it prickled her skin.

“I hate you,” he said.

Shizuku didn’t respond. She just closed her eyes, resigning herself to her fate.

She’d been in the same position countless times before. It was far from the first time that she’d had to choose between bending to someone’s will or surrendering her own life.

In most of those situations, she felt like she’d chosen the latter. Whether out of anger or sorrow, she’d prioritized her own morals.

“How can someone who cares so little about their own life tell me not to kill?”

The boy’s mocking words echoed deep inside her ears. As Shizuku waited for the end to arrive, she momentarily reflected on the short life she’d lived. She wondered whether her death would mean anything.

Shizuku was frozen with fear—but the next thing she knew, someone had pulled her by the arm, almost making her fall over.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that the boy was dragging her farther down the hallway. She could hear voices coming from behind them; the soldier from before must have called for backup. A look of panic appeared on Kaito's face as he pulled her around a corner, but they could hear voices coming from that way, too. The alert must have reached others.

"Damn..."

Under siege from both directions, the boy didn't hesitate to fling open a nearby door. The small room, which was usually used as a storeroom, had only one window.

Shizuku figured Kaito was planning on using her as a hostage. Scowling, he attempted to pull Shizuku by the arm—but before he had the chance to drag her into the room, she slipped effortlessly out of his grip, leaving her jacket behind in the process.

Shizuku leaped back to distance herself from him. For a moment, Kaito looked stunned, but then a sneer appeared on his face.

"This is such a nuisance. I should have killed you sooner."

"...You should escape," she told him.

"Well, duh. I've wasted too much time. You'll come to regret this, you know."

Kaito spun around and dove into the room, then pushed open the window and jumped out, almost as if he were a bird.

Shizuku stood there, astonished, as she watched him disappear into the darkness. The soldiers soon ran up to her and grabbed her by the arm.

"What's the matter?! What happened?!" they said.

"Oh, there was an intruder..."

"Where'd he go?!"

Shizuku glanced around at the frenzied soldiers, then pointed toward the open door. The men immediately stormed into the small room.

Her ordeal with the boy already felt like ancient history. She slumped to the floor, her tense mental state refusing to return to normal. As she clutched onto

her jacket, which someone had kindly picked up, a stony-faced soldier called out to her.

“Did you see the insurgent’s face? What’d he look like?”

It was a question she had to answer, but for some reason, Shizuku found herself unable to find the words. Her conversation with the boy—whose name she didn’t even know—came flooding back.

What was she supposed to take to heart, and what could she disregard?

Why did she stop people, or protect them, or refuse them?

Shizuku looked up at the soldier, her big eyes open wide.

This was no time to hesitate, yet her mind had gone blank.

She cast her gaze downward, her face drained of blood, and replied in a hoarse voice.

“I don’t know.”

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The spacious room was slightly chilly.

It was enough to make Shizuku shiver in her nightclothes, but she couldn’t make it obvious that it bothered her. The cold seeped in through her knees, pressed against the stone floor, and spread throughout her body, but she tolerated it and kept her expression as neutral as possible. She bowed toward the king, who was presumably on the other side of the curtain.

“The intruder killed seven people, and you were the only one left unharmed. Why is that?”

“The insurgent...asked where he could find your room, Your Majesty. I just told him I didn’t know.”

“Hmm? And you claim you don’t know what he looks like?”

“...Yes.”

Beelhurse sounded serious. Shizuku scolded her body for being so sleepy and cold that it was trying to topple over.

She’d only met the intruder who’d fled once before, yet she’d found herself

falsifying her testimony. Shizuku wasn't entirely sure why. In retrospect, she might have been afraid of causing problems for Tarkis and Lydia, but she couldn't say for certain.

The soldiers, however, seemed to think Shizuku was acting questionably. Some began to suspect that she'd helped the insurgent, which was why she'd been taken straight to the king.

King Beelhurse had remained inside his bedchamber and listened to the reports from his vassals before hearing what Shizuku had to say for herself. Her answers, however, had been uncharacteristically imprecise.

The king let out a sigh at her peculiar behavior.

"Shizuku, you said you went to check on a suspicious noise after putting some water on to boil."

"That's right."

"But wasn't there an extended period of time before the patrolling soldiers found and secured you? I hear that most of your water had evaporated by that point. If he was just asking you about my room, why would it take that long?"

"He asked me the same thing over and over again...and we weren't talking for that long."

In fact, her conversation with the boy had probably lasted no longer than five minutes. The king might be asking leading questions. Shizuku put her hazy mind into focus.

"Did the insurgent say anything else?"

"Nothing. He just asked where your room was."

"Are you sure you're not lying, Shizuku? I don't want to force the answers out of you."

King Beelhurse's voice was gentle yet admonishing, making Shizuku frown.

How much should she reveal? She wasn't even sure what was safe to disclose. The assassination attempt could very well have been the work of Tigor. The boy claimed he didn't know his client's name, but if Shizuku told the king about the assassination plan, there was a high chance that Tigor would become the prime

suspect.

Shizuku wasn't even sure that Tigor was the culprit, though. Was it *really* okay to tell Beelhurse the whole story?

By no means for the first time, Shizuku was plagued by uncertainty...but then she suddenly remembered something.

She'd told the boy who claimed he'd kill the king that she'd negotiate on his behalf.

This might be her chance to do just that.

Having made up her mind, Shizuku looked up and stared straight at the curtain obscuring her view of the king.

"I've just remembered something, Your Majesty. The intruder said Farsas is about to invade Rosta."

"Farsas?"

The nearby staff began to murmur restively to one another. Shizuku felt a wave of relief wash over her as she observed their reactions.

If this news spurred Beelhurse to take action, the whole issue could be resolved.

If the castle intervened to save Rosta, there would be no need to assassinate the king. The only remaining problem would be Ortea—but there was no reason why Shizuku couldn't try and deal with the princess herself.

Shizuku gazed intently at the curtain, awaiting the king's response.

A few moments later, Beelhurse ordered everyone but Shizuku and two men who seemed to be his closest aides to leave the room. One of these men, a middle-aged mage, had been staring at her for some time. Wearing nothing but her nightwear, Shizuku felt incredibly uncomfortable, so she kept her gaze focused straight ahead.

The curtain was pulled back, revealing Beelhurse sitting at the back of his bedchamber.

"Now then, Shizuku. Does this make it easier for you to talk? This time, I want

you to be honest with me. Was it Tigor who arranged for me to be assassinated?"

The king had gone straight to the heart of the matter. His question sent a shiver down Shizuku's spine. She gulped, feeling flustered.

The king flashed her an intimidating smile, his usual placidness still lurking in the background.

"Please don't betray me, Shizuku. Just tell the truth. Did Tigor ask you to bring the insurgent into the castle?"

"No...! It's not what you're thinking! I really did just run into him by chance..."

"Then why would he bring up Rosta? It doesn't make any sense. You've seen Tigor inside the castle. Did you let someone suspicious in for him without knowing?"

Things weren't going the way Shizuku wanted them to. She felt the piercing gazes of the men around her, which sent a chill down her spine.

If this continued, she might end up taking the blame for things she hadn't even done. Within seconds, Shizuku reached a tough decision: She was going to place her trust in Beelhurse and, as far as she could, tell him exactly what she'd heard.

"I swear, it wasn't me who brought the insurgent in. He did share several other pieces of information with me, but I don't know whether or not they're true. That's why I'm hesitant to direct my suspicion toward him..."

"That's okay. I know you're a kind-hearted girl. Just tell me what he said."

Shizuku nodded, then began carefully selecting her words. She explained that the intruder had broken in with the aim of assassinating the king, who he said would negatively impact the nation. He'd also claimed that Farsas was planning to invade Rosta soon, and that if the king died, Rosta would surrender to Farsas in the midst of that chaos.

She kept the fact that she'd encountered the intruder before to herself, knowing that it wouldn't make any difference either way. After Shizuku concluded her explanation, Beelhurse nodded gravely, seeming satisfied with

her account.

“I see. That must have been a frightening ordeal.”

“Not at all, Your Majesty.”

“That’ll do for tonight. You can go and get some proper rest.”

Shizuku bowed deeply in response to the king’s kind words. She straightened out her frozen knees and rose to her feet.

While it was still unclear who’d hired the assassin, the situation seemed to be moving in the right direction. Pinning her faint hopes on the king, Shizuku turned to leave. As she headed toward the door, however, she overheard the mage speaking to the king in hushed tones.

“Your Majesty. If things have gotten to this stage, maybe we should send Ortea to Farsas sooner than—”

“Jired,” the king snapped in warning. But it was too late—Shizuku had already stopped in her tracks.

Slowly, she turned back toward the king.

“...Your Majesty?”

What were they planning on doing with Ortea? Shizuku stared at the king, a vague feeling of distrust in her gut.

The king smiled in his usual manner, but Shizuku spotted something odd behind his gaze.

Why did the client who’d ordered the king’s assassination think that allowing the king to live would lead to the nation’s ruin?

If their intention was solely to create chaos in the castle by killing the king, why would they bother to make such a claim? Under normal circumstances, it was Ortea who’d be accused of plotting to bring about the nation’s demise. If Tigor were the perpetrator, though, that made even less sense—the princess was the one that he’d wanted to speak to.

Yet the culprit hadn’t pointed the finger at the princess prepared to sacrifice Rosta, but at her older brother as the person planning on bringing his own

nation down.

Was he being targeted because of the significance of his status, or was there more to it?

"Your Majesty. What are you doing with the princess?" Shizuku asked.

"What do you mean? What's the matter, Shizuku?"

"I heard what that man said about your plan. It has something to do with the princess and Farsas."

Beelhurse smiled. This time, however, his expression looked like a mask. The fact that he was smiling during a conversation like this was already peculiar enough.

There was something strange about the atmosphere in the room.

Alarm bells were ringing in the back of Shizuku's mind; she might've been better off just pretending she hadn't heard that and left.

It wasn't smart to dig any deeper into the matter. She might be putting herself in danger.

That said, she got the feeling that if she had covered her ears and fled, she'd never have been able to reach Ortea.

"Shizuku? That's a scary look on your face."

"...Your Majesty, what are you planning to do with the princess?"

"With Ortea? Well, that's a good question."

The king motioned to his two aides with his chin, and at his signal, they headed for Shizuku. Instantly sensing that something bad was going to happen, she leaped back—but a short magical incantation made something coil itself around her legs. Shizuku found herself about to trip over, when the man who looked like a magistrate seized her by the arm.

"What are you doing...?"

"Silence, girl. Don't make a scene."

The mage grabbed hold of her other arm, a faint smile on his face. Flanked by the two men, Shizuku was dragged back to the king. She was being treated like

a criminal. Beelhurse looked down at her, narrowing his eyes.

“You’re loyal to Ortea. I told you not to betray her, and you’ve done well by obeying my command.”

“What’s going on, Your Majesty?”

“This time, I want you not to betray me. That girl has nothing ahead of her.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku couldn’t sense any agitation in the king’s eyes, nor any sympathy. It had taken her long enough to realize, but that gaze told her everything she needed to know.

The expression on Beelhurse’s face wasn’t that of a loving brother. It wasn’t the face of someone who’d lost their childhood, like Ortea, but the face of a man who’d lost *himself*. His gaze was that of a sadist contemplating which pawn to sacrifice next.

Seeing that look on his face left Shizuku thunderstruck.

“But the princess...”

“I do care about her. She’s grown into the person I hoped she’d become: my precious little doll.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who told me about her past!”

What had happened to the love he’d once shown to Ortea? The love that had motivated him to try to ease the pain of her past and advise her to reconcile with her parents? Shizuku yelled at the king, her eyes as wide as they’d go, but he just cocked his head slightly in response.

Beelhurse smiled as serenely as he had when he’d first shared the story.

“Didn’t I tell you that story was make-believe? At the end of the day, it’s nothing more than a fairy tale.”

“The reality of the matter is simple: I orchestrated Ortea’s abduction, and I persuaded her parents to sacrifice her.”

“...Huh?”

What did he just say?

Shizuku didn't know whether to believe what she was hearing. Beelhurse was Ortea's own brother, and he carried on speaking with a smile on his face.

"I was the one who betrayed her, but I told her it was her parents' decision. When she came back, I continued to instill distrust in her. That's why she is the way she is."

Sometimes, all it took to distort someone's mind were words.

It must have been easy for Beelhurse, who was sixteen years Ortea's senior, to plant thoughts in her head and shape her according to his whims.

Shizuku's lip trembled. She felt like a hole had burned open in her stomach. Ortea's shadowy profile came to mind, and she felt a stab of pain.

"What...did you do...?!"

"Only what anyone in my shoes would have done. Our interests aligned, you could say; I wanted to do something about that girl, and Tigor wanted to quell the conflict within his region, so we arranged for the princess to be abducted. By executing the perpetrators at the castle, we could silence those who were dissatisfied with the state of Rosta. The people who believe Tigor to be a noble lord are foolish. All he's done is make an example without dirtying his own hands."

Beelhurse leaned on the arm of his chair, resting his amused face in his palm.

"Ortea's recent recklessness must have compelled Tigor to tell her the truth, which was a pain. It was such a nuisance, in fact, that I had to lock him up, but he somehow managed to escape. If I'd known he was going to hire an assassin, I would have just disposed of him then and there."

Shizuku was dismayed. If Tigor had set a trap for Ortea in an effort to bring stability to his region, then that was unforgivable. Regardless of the goal he had in mind, it couldn't be justified.

But why had her brother gone along with the plan? Why hadn't he protected his sister?

Beelhurse noticed Shizuku's unspoken question and smiled, but his expression didn't look genuine.

“I simply wanted to cut her off from her parents. At the time, the pair of them had come up with the plan of getting her engaged to the current king of Farsas. I, on the other hand, wasn’t a particularly gifted individual. I couldn’t afford to lose her if I was going to be king.”

“Then you should have said something! Why hurt her with lies?!”

“Because I was jealous of her,” he replied smoothly.

What had really motivated his actions? Beelhurse stopped smiling and directed his somewhat vacant eyes toward Shizuku. Perhaps through her, he could see the shadow of his sister.

His lips contorted slightly.

“Unlike me—born to a mother married off for political reasons—she was born to a beloved queen. Ortea was beautiful and clever; her mere presence was enough to attract the attention of those around her. Whether she was being praised or scolded, everything was directed toward her. In comparison, I have nothing. I may be a royal in name...but I’m just a mediocre guy. That’s why I was always so envious of her.”

He spoke in an impassive tone of voice, yet every word he spoke resonated deeply with Shizuku. She, too, had felt inferior to her siblings. She, too, had felt isolated, as if she was the only one who had nothing going for her.

But Shizuku hadn’t gone off the rails. She’d chosen to distance herself from her sisters to forge her own identity because she loved them more than she envied them.

She glared at Beelhurse, an unbearable thought stuck in her throat.

“How can you say you have nothing? At the very least, you could have been a good king and a kind brother. *You’re* the one looking down on yourself—more than anyone else ever did.”

He was the one who’d allowed himself to succumb to those dark temptations. His behavior had turned Ortea into the twisted woman she was, leading her to inflict her own depraved actions on other people—but she was acting of her own volition, too. Neither of them could stop themselves. Their emotions had become too big to handle, and they’d ended up using other people as an outlet.

Shizuku's accusation didn't change Beelhurse's expression. In fact, the smile returned to his face.

"This is just how the Kisk royal family is. If it's in Farsas's nature to fight with your nearest and dearest, then ours is inclined toward deceit and manipulation."

"Is that because you're descendants of Tryphina?" Shizuku asked.

"...I'm surprised. I didn't think she'd tell you *that* story. It seems she's taken quite a liking to you."

Shizuku hadn't actually learned it from Ortea, but she kept silent, reluctant to stray off topic.

The king's two closest aides wore puzzled expressions. The truth about the queen who'd unified the country and married the princes of two nations must have been concealed from everyone outside of the royal family.

She hadn't had children with either one of her husbands.

Tryphina was the name of the first queen of Kisk. Filled with beauty and benevolence, she was also the princess of Kiaph, one of the three countries that had merged to form Kisk.

As one of the conditions for this unification, Kiaph had agreed to offer Tryphina to the other two nations. Officially, she was a queen, but it was her beauty and obedience that were truly sought after.

In the end, however, Tryphina followed her younger brother's instructions and deceived the two men who wanted to take ownership of her.

The five children she bore were all fathered by a male relative in the Kiaph royal family. Thanks to the sacrifices of this one woman, Kiaph succeeded in taking over the other two nations without a struggle.

Tryphina had been a kind-hearted princess, and she was tormented by this scheme and suffered in silence throughout her brief life. Her love for Kiaph; her sense of duty to Kisk; her guilt toward her husbands; her frustration and trust toward her brother; her longing for freedom—all of these emotions played a part in destroying her spirit. After delivering her fifth child, Tryphina, burdened

by all these secrets, took her own life. Her suicide note contained just one line: "It's time for me to leave this place."

Shizuku felt like Ortea bore some resemblance to the tortured princess. They both had the same compulsive sense of duty to their country, while resenting it at the same time. The disdain they felt for their royal status was coupled with an irrepressible sense of pride.

In Ortea's case, however, half of those feelings had been brought on by Beelhurse.

"She's been very useful, just as I'd hoped," Beelhurse said. "She hasn't let compassion toward her people affect her governing of the nation, and she's been extremely thorough. She may be a bit cruel...but that bad reputation is hers and hers alone. The worst you could say about me is that I'm incompetent."

"Incompetent? You mean cowardly," Shizuku snapped back.

"Do you think so? At the end of the day, isn't her reputation the consequence of her own choices? It's not as though I've failed to admonish her for her actions in the past," Beelhurse retorted shamelessly, acting as if he was stating the obvious.

He may have reprimanded her, but he'd obviously never actually tried to stop her. Instead, he'd taken advantage of her nature, maintaining the facade of the easily manipulated elder brother as he did.

Shizuku frowned, so uncomfortable it made her feel dizzy. The mage, still holding her arm, took half a step forward.

"Let me deal with this girl, Your Majesty," he said.

"You can't. She's a friend of Ortea's and the tutor of that child. As long as the boy remains useful, we need to keep her around."

Shizuku realized that when he'd asked her to tell him how Ortea was, it hadn't been out of concern for his sister—he'd just wanted to keep an eye on her. Shizuku had been tricked into passing on information about her. She hadn't told him everything, but she'd still unwittingly become one of his pawns.

But now that she knew the truth, she had no intention of cooperating with him any longer.

With a rebellious look in her eyes, Shizuku stared intently at the king.

“...Since we were on the topic of Tryphina,” the king said, “perhaps we should cast a spell in her name. Jired!”

“Yes, Your Majesty!”

“Give her a taste of Trasphy.”

Upon hearing this order, the mage exuded a sinister joy. Shizuku, meanwhile, shuddered with disgust.

The magistrate wrapped his arms around her to restrain her. Stepping in front of her, Jired looked down at Shizuku with a repulsive smile on his face. He reached out with his bony hand toward her stomach, covered only by her thin nightclothes.

“Stop! Don’t touch me!”

Her resistance was futile. The man’s palm touched the area right below her navel, and he began to chant a spell.

“You’ll only have to endure it for a few moments, Shizuku. This spell is kind of like a pact. It’s usually used on women who serve the king. It imprints commands onto them, using their organs as the medium. ‘Do not commit adultery,’ for example. It usually lies dormant inside her abdomen—but should any command be broken, it causes the woman to die.”

“What?!”

“The commands for you shall be...‘Do not divulge anything you’ve learned in this room to anyone else,’ and ‘Answer my questions honestly from now on.’”

“Wait...!”

“I can’t imprint her with two commands, Your Majesty. Which do you choose?”

“Just the one about not telling anybody anything, then.”

“Understood.”

Shizuku's own intentions weren't even considered during this brief exchange. She felt the urge to curse everything and everyone, but just as she opened her mouth to scream, the spell entered her body.

"Arghhhhhhhh!"

Her insides burned. It squirmed through her, causing excruciating pain to her organs.

As soon as she was let go, Shizuku collapsed to the floor, her body folded over in agony. Jired looked down at her with a smirk on his face as she screamed, clutching onto her stomach.

"It appears this girl is still a virgin, Your Majesty," he told the king.

"Oh, is that so? I was under the impression that the king of Farsas had already had his way with her... Unlucky for her."

Shizuku couldn't comprehend what the men were saying. The pain was too intense for her to think clearly. Down on her hands and knees, she curled herself into a ball and began to sob.

"This spell is meant for the king's women; it's ill-suited to someone so chaste. The pain might ease once the spell adapts to your body, but you'll still suffer waves of intense agony every now and then," Beelhurse explained.

As if to confirm he was telling the truth, the pain lessened slightly. This gave Shizuku a chance to think again, but it hadn't vanished completely. The pain lingered, making her feel as though she was being stabbed with hot needles from the inside.

Shizuku only managed to lift her upper body slightly before a sharp pain coursed through her, leaving her gasping in silence. She heard one of the king's aides snicker at her.

Her vision blurred as her eyes welled up with tears. She wanted to run away and leave everything behind—but that laughter had reminded her of how angry she was.

She clenched her fists and looked up at King Beelhurse, who flashed her a faint smile.

"So, Shizuku...what's it going to be? Will you tell Ortea and die? Try to escape somewhere? Or if you can't handle the pain, why don't you let *me* have you?"

The king extended a hand toward her, his voice marked by feigned kindness.

Her answer was already set in stone. She didn't even need to think about it.

Shizuku pushed the agony she was experiencing to the back of her mind. With eyes wet from tears and lips smeared with blood, she smiled sweetly at the king.

"I'd rather die."

Shizuku refused to submit.

"Then you should leave," the king commanded simply, sounding amused.

Perhaps he thought there was little she could do. After all, she'd been muzzled by magic.

His complacency was infuriating, but for the time being, Shizuku was powerless to do anything about it. Carrying her pain, humiliation, and anger with her, she left the king's chamber and dragged her uncooperative body back to her own room. She was terrified of the pain—so much so that her fingertips would begin to tremble if she wasn't careful. The anticipation of another wave was hard to bear. The thing that was squirming slowly around in her abdomen could lash out at any moment.

All she wanted to do right now was curl up in bed. She might not be able to sleep, but she still wanted to relax and try to rest.

Her wish, however, would not be granted. Footsteps were approaching from behind.

Someone was running toward her, so fast that she couldn't shake them off. It was Jired, the mage who'd cast the spell on her. Shizuku was leaning against the wall for support, and he stared at her, his gaze unreserved and his forehead sweaty.

"You seem to be in a good deal of agony, miss," he said.

"What? Unless you're here to beg forgiveness, I don't want to hear it," Shizuku snapped.

"Want me to ease your pain?" Jired asked, completely ignoring her sharp retort.

Shizuku scowled—not from pain, but in disgust at his overt lecherousness—and rejected him with a contemptuous look.

"No... Don't touch me."

"Hmph. You don't always have to put up a strong front. You'll struggle even going about your daily business like that."

Without waiting for her response, Jired grabbed Shizuku's hand pressed against the wall. He pulled her forcefully by the arm, causing her to tumble into his clutches.

The sensation of his breath against her ear instantly made her skin crawl.

"Let go of me...!"

"The pain will go away immediately if you comply."

Infuriated by his mocking words, Shizuku gritted her teeth, then kicked Jired as hard as she could in the shin.

Caught off guard by her direct retaliation, Jired screamed and staggered over. Seeing him in this pitiful state brought Shizuku a certain amount of satisfaction, and she couldn't help but smirk.

"Why don't you go take a good, hard look at yourself in the mirror, pervert!"

"You stupid little girl!" Jired exclaimed.

"What are you doing?"

Red-faced with anger, the man had been attempting to grab hold of Shizuku when another voice called out, causing him to freeze.

A young man was standing farther down the hallway, his figure obscured by the darkness. Light emanated from his fingertips as he looked up at the pair. He was someone they'd both met before.

As Niké emerged from the shadows, he cast a cold glance toward Shizuku and Jired, who'd clearly been having some sort of scuffle.

"An intruder broke in and this woman was taken away to give testimony, so

the princess ordered me to come and see what was going on... It seems as though you've been getting up to mischief, Jired. Were you aware that she belongs to the princess?"

Jired glared at the mage twenty years his junior, angered by the man's calm remarks.

"...You damn lapdog. Who do you think you are, talking down to me like that...?"

"If you'd prefer I taught you a lesson with my skills rather than my words, then you only need to ask," Niké said, not losing his composure.

Jired's mouth fell open in dismay, but then he shut it again. He glared at Shizuku instead.

"Next time you cross me, you're going to regret it," he told her.

With that clichéd parting shot, Jired turned on his heel. Shizuku watched him disappear, then sat down on the floor, clutching her stomach.

"You saved me there... Thanks..."

"What trouble did you cause now?" Niké asked. "I'm exhausted. The princess summoned me in the middle of the night."

"Sorry. But my stomach's...killing me."

"Did you eat something you picked up off the floor?"

Niké wasn't at fault. He knew nothing about the situation, yet he'd come to her rescue. Shizuku had no reason to be angry with him.

She knew that full well. But at that moment, she genuinely wanted to punch him.

Apparently, Ortea had ordered Niké to check on the situation and bring Shizuku back with him.

"Hurry up," he said, pulling her by the arm.

"I won't make it all the way to her room," Shizuku muttered, the words slipping out of her mouth. So Niké reluctantly created a transit gate right then and there leading to the princess's chamber.

Once Shizuku entered the room, she knelt before the princess, who was sitting cross-legged on the bed. She mustered all of her strength to stop the pain from showing on her face, then told Ortea about the intruder, just as she had told Beelhurse.

“An assassination attempt... Is Tigor behind this? That’s another bold move on his part. At the very least, he should have set the assassin on me.”

Ortea’s fearless attitude made Shizuku’s expression cloud over. She didn’t know a thing.

If Tigor really was the true culprit, then there was no doubt Beelhurse was the one he’d wanted to kill. The king was Tigor’s one-time conspirator and the cause of everything that had happened. Perhaps Tigor couldn’t bring himself to send an assassin after Ortea. After all, it was his fault she’d turned out the way she had.

“Either way, it seems like war’s finally here. I’ve got no complaints if they come to us; I’ll have to go and graciously welcome them.”

“Princess.”

“What is it, Shizuku?”

Shizuku was bound by magic. She couldn’t afford to be careless with her words.

However, if she was precise with what she said, she also had the power to change the situation.

Frightened of the burning sensation writhing inside her body, she opened her mouth to suggest a truce with Farsas—but just before the words could slip out, an unbearable pain shot through her lower abdomen.

“Gahhhh...!”

Ortea and Niké looked on in astonishment as Shizuku collapsed on the floor. The princess had been sitting languidly up until that point, but she stood up and peered down below her bed.

“What’s wrong, Shizuku?”

“P-Princess...”

"Are you injured? Why didn't you tell me?"

Shizuku couldn't tell Ortea why she was suffering. She looked up at the princess through a thin veil of tears.

The woman's beautiful face displayed a mixture of bemusement, annoyance, and concern. It was the first time Shizuku had seen the princess make such an expression, and she looked almost like a young girl.

It might be impossible to say who was to blame anymore.

Ortea was already a wrongdoer. She'd caused numerous tragedies that could never be undone. It was impossible to pretend they'd never happened, nor could things be put back to the way they once were.

Yet despite this, Shizuku pitied her. She couldn't help but think that life could have been different for her.

Her country was incredibly twisted, maddening, and sad. No one had anything they could rely on—much like Shizuku herself, who'd ended up there alone.

She felt awful.

Her insides really hurt, but Ortea's situation pained her more than anything... and Shizuku silently shed a tear.

Her subordinate's sudden change in demeanor brought a stern look to Ortea's face. Niké, who'd encountered her bizarre behavior in the hallway, reacted similarly.

The princess stepped down from the bed and examined Shizuku's face.

"Shizuku? What's wrong? Stop crying and talk to me. Where are you injured?"

"I'm not injured, Princess. It's something else..."

"You *must* be. Show me your stomach."

The princess extended her hand. Shizuku tried to stop her, but Niké appeared behind her and grabbed her by the shoulders to keep her from resisting. Ortea used the opportunity to peer down Shizuku's collar at her skin.

She went completely silent.

The next thing Shizuku knew, the princess had grabbed hold of her ankle-

length nightgown and yanked it up, exposing her pale stomach. An intricate blue pattern with a circle at its center was etched onto it, extending from just below her chest to her lower abdomen. It was clearly a magic inscription, and the sight of it left the princess stunned.

“...What’s that?”

“Princess... I’m fine.”

“I’m asking what it is!” the princess exclaimed. “Niké!”

Niké had respectfully averted his eyes, but at Ortea’s shrill cry, he looked down at Shizuku’s body. She could sense his shock even without turning around.

“Is that...Trasphy...?” said Niké.

“Don’t be absurd,” snapped the princess. “Shizuku works for me...”

Both Niké, a mage, and Ortea, a member of the royal family, would have known about the spell. Feebly shaking her head, Shizuku escaped from the pair and curled up on the floor, trying to steady her heavy breathing.

She stayed that way for a while until the pain eventually faded. It felt as though she’d been trying to endure labor pains. Relieved that her agony had dissipated, Shizuku raised her face and met Ortea’s gaze.

“Who did this to you?” the princess asked. “...My brother?”

The spell could only be placed on a woman who served the king. Only one person in the entire country was authorized to allow its use.

Ortea hadn’t needed to ask the question, and her face quickly turned red. Audibly grinding her teeth, she stood up. “Wait here a moment. I’m going to ask him what he was trying to achieve.”

“You can’t...Princess.”

As the princess attempted to stride past her, Shizuku grabbed the hem of her robe with as much strength as she could muster.

She didn’t want to let Ortea see Beelhurse.

The king had been willing to resort to this incredibly direct measure with

Shizuku. Considering Jired's ominous warning, there was a high likelihood that Beelhurse thought Ortea had exhausted her use. Who knew what would happen if she went to see him? If she was killed and her death was declared to be her own fault, nobody would argue with it.

In fact, Shizuku was like a farewell letter from Beelhurse to Ortea.

That was precisely why Shizuku didn't want to let the princess go.

She couldn't keep clinging onto the hope that someday someone might reach out and heal Ortea's hidden wounds, either.

Shizuku needed to reach the princess *now*.

It was something she'd wanted to do for some time now.

Ortea's gaze overflowed with rage as she looked down at Shizuku clutching onto her robe.

"Let go, Shizuku," she said, her intense emotions making her voice tremble.

"I can't. Pretend you didn't see me..."

"You're *mine*! To harm you is as good as harming me! I can't let him get away with this—even if he is my brother!"

"No...I'm the one who had this spell placed on me, not you."

Her voice was feeble, but her words were clear and distinct.

Ortea regained a degree of composure. The truth was, she didn't even know what had led to the restraining spell being cast on Shizuku. If she was going to take a stand against her brother, she needed to get the full story first.

Ortea pulled her robe out of Shizuku's hand, then went back to her bed and sat down violently. She gazed down at Shizuku with a restless, angry look in her eyes.

"What happened, then?" she asked.

"I can't tell you."

"*Shizuku!*"

"He *made* it so I can't tell you."

It was a roundabout way of putting things, but Ortea immediately realized that Shizuku's statement was connected to the spell she'd been put under. She shifted her gaze to the nearby mage.

"Does Trasphy cause that kind of mark to appear? Why is she in pain?"

The man she'd asked seemed to know the reason. He looked at Shizuku, reluctant to share it, but he couldn't risk upsetting the princess. With a bitter look on his face, he agreed to explain.

"It's probably because she's chaste," Niké explained. "The spell would usually adapt to her body and lie dormant, but instead it's rebounded and risen to the surface, causing her pain."

"If she can't tell me what happened, then...did he imprint it with a command that forces her to stay silent? Niké, can you break this spell?"

"It's impossible. There's no way to undo it. Though the princess of Farsas might be able to find a solution."

"Will the pain continue until she loses her virginity?"

"Yes, but only the pain and the mark will go away. She'll still die if she breaks the command."

Shizuku listened to the pair discussing the situation as she organized her own thoughts.

She thought about what she needed to do right now and her best course of action for what came next. Although she could come up with a few immediate possibilities, the fatigue and pain prevented her thoughts from extending any further. Shizuku shook her dazed head in an effort to remain conscious, but as she did, she heard her master issue a horrific command.

"In that case, Niké—I give you my permission. Violate Shizuku."

"A-are you stupid?!"

It was such an unexpected command that Shizuku hadn't been able to stop herself from crying out. She'd completely forgotten that Ortea was her superior.

Ortea being Ortea, she was probably just trying to help, but she'd taken the

wrong approach entirely. When Shizuku turned around, she noticed that Niké was also at a loss for words. The look on his face was one she'd never seen before.

"Can't bring yourself to do it, coward?" said the princess. "I'll call Faneet instead!"

"Just wait a minute!"

The absurdity of the situation angered Shizuku so much that she momentarily managed to forget the pain. She placed her hands on the floor and pushed herself up, then turned to face Ortea, who was starting to get angry. She didn't like people objecting to her ideas.

"What's the problem?! Your pain's so severe that you can't function normally, right?! This is a small price to pay to get rid of it!"

"I'm the one in pain here! Please respect my wishes!"

"In times of crisis, you should let me decide what's best for you!"

Ortea raised her hand to strike Shizuku across the cheek, but Shizuku managed to grab hold of it.

The pair pushed and shoved one another as Niké watched on for a little while, concealing his emotions, but eventually he realized that their childish fight was never going to end without his intervention. Ortea swung her arm up into the air, ready to yell at both Shizuku and Niké, but her shout was stifled when Shizuku collapsed back onto the floor.

Ortea looked down at her suffering subordinate, a pained expression on her face.

"...Just looking at you infuriates me. Why are you so stubborn?"

"What do you mean?"

Shizuku recalled the young assassin she'd encountered making a similar remark. She thought back to their exchange, which already felt like so long ago.

She'd been bluntly reprimanded by two people in one night. That was probably why her stubbornness had turned up a notch.

Feeling as though she'd had the energy sapped from her, Shizuku mulled over Ortea's comment.

"You're always like this," the princess continued. "Why can't you just give up? You could *pretend* to give in, at least. If your stubbornness kills you, you'll have nothing left to show for it."

What was the point of dying? What would happen if she threw away her life out of sheer stubbornness?

Wouldn't it be wiser to guarantee survival by obeying her enemies? She could always look for another path further down the line. Wasn't it best to save her own life and pin her hopes on the opportunities to come?

On occasion, Shizuku had been able to take that approach. It was something that happened from time to time. However, there *were* times when yielding was the last thing she wanted to do.

"Princess."

Shizuku's pain subsided. She breathed out and looked up at Ortea. Her beautiful face looked almost childlike, perhaps from the sorrow written across it.

If they'd met in another time, in another world, could they have become friends?

Shizuku gave her a bittersweet smile as she entertained that fantasy. Her expression prompted Ortea to raise her eyebrows.

"What is it, Shizuku? Do you have an excuse for me?"

"I do. It's not always that I put my life on the line, Princess. I don't want to die. But sometimes...it just happens. Sometimes, I feel that if I run away, there'll be no going back."

"Are you dumb? There's no coming back from death, either."

"That's true. It's just, there are times...when running away makes me feel as though I'll lose something I'll regret for the rest of my life."

Shizuku didn't have a constant death wish. She wasn't that fed up with the world.

Occasionally, though, an unavoidable crossroads presented itself.

If she were to concede in those sorts of situations, she felt like it would change who she was on the inside.

At the end of the day, she was just a powerless human. She could flee and pin her hopes on the potential that the future held, but there was no guarantee that the chances she was holding out for would come her way.

Even if she managed to seize those opportunities, it was uncertain whether she'd be able to recover what she'd already lost.

And even if she *did* retrieve those missing things, they probably wouldn't be the same as they were before.

That was why she wouldn't back down.

The true essence of who a person was existed in their mind. She couldn't let her dignity be stomped down that easily.

"Compared to that kind of a situation, Princess, this is hardly anything. It's just pain—it doesn't mean I'm going to die."

Her face was pale, but Shizuku mustered a grin nonetheless. Ortea didn't say a word.

With that, a sigh left someone's lips and drifted into the nighttime air.

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He knocked on the door, but no matter how many times he knocked, there was no response from inside.

It was past midnight, which might have helped explain why nobody was answering, but in a situation like this, that shouldn't be an issue. After thinking things over for a moment, the man configured his coordinates and used short-range teleportation to enter the room. Once there, he looked over at the bed in the corner.

He could hear the faint sound of a woman sobbing. It didn't seem as though she was going to rise from her bed. Either she hadn't heard him, or she was asleep.

He approached her, trying not to make a sound, but as he did, he started to

hear murmurs in between her sobs.

“Umi... Mio... It hurts...”

Her black hair, peeking out from the blanket, was trembling. She must have been curled up in the fetal position.

The sound of her crying made the man frown. He sat himself down on the bed and peered at her half-hidden face. Her youthful features contrasted with the somewhat tense, charmless expression she tended to wear.

Now, though, her brows were furrowed in pain, and she looked helpless as she slept lightly. Sobs escaped her small, trembling lips.

“Save me, Erik...”

That man wasn’t around. Hearing her call his name instantly put Shizuku’s visitor in a bad mood.

He stopped gazing intently at her and moved his face away, then pulled hard on her ear.

“Wake up, stupid woman.”

“...O-owww!”

She must have been dozing off, drifting in and out of sleep. The woman sprang up, and as soon as she realized who was there, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Oh... Niké? Why are you in my room?”

She didn’t sound wary of the sudden intruder. She was simply asking a question.

“Because you refused to get up,” he responded, clicking his tongue softly.

“You mages are pretty crafty, huh? Locked-room mysteries would never work with people like you around,” Shizuku commented.

“A locked-room mystery? Is that like when someone jams a door shut?”

“If you mean with a dead body, then sure,” Shizuku replied.

Niké looked as if he’d seen something he couldn’t comprehend.

Shizuku had expected the pain to keep her awake, but apparently, she'd fallen into a brief slumber without realizing it. After being awoken by her colleague, she tied her loose hair back up and groggily shook her slightly feverish head.

As bad as her stomach pains were, the fatigue she'd accumulated was even worse.

Shizuku kept one hand on her abdomen as she stifled a yawn.

"There aren't many mages who can teleport. Only about twenty percent of those affiliated with the castle have that ability," explained Niké.

"The suspects could be narrowed down pretty quickly, then. Anyway, what do you need from me?"

Ortea had sent Shizuku away, telling her that if she had anything more to say, she could leave it until the morning.

It was already the early hours of the morning by that point, so the princess had either been sleepy or concerned about Shizuku's own health. Either way, Shizuku was completely drained, so she'd returned to her room and gone to bed. That had been about four hours ago.

Had Niké paid her a visit for any particular reason? Shizuku shook her head, dazed.

"Does it hurt?" he asked.

"It hurts. It *really* hurts, actually. I don't think I've ever regretted being born as a woman this much before."

"If you were a man, he probably would have just killed you."

"That's not funny, but you're probably not wrong."

Both Niké and Ortea seemed to know that something had happened between Shizuku and the king, and that he was the cause of her plight. This was not how one should treat their sister's subordinate.

Shizuku struggled to connect the mediocre yet mild-mannered king that she'd first met to her current predicament. Despite this, both Niké and Ortea seemed to trust Shizuku over the king—a testament to the hard work she'd put in. Was it she allowed to feel happy about that?

"Did you come here just to ask whether I was in pain?" Shizuku asked Niké.

"No. I thought you might want to relieve it with me."

"Absolutely not," she responded immediately.

"..."

Niké gave a grimace that almost made Shizuku burst out laughing. She held back, though, knowing it would anger him and come across as rude.

After taking a few deep breaths to overcome the small waves of pain she was experiencing, Shizuku gave him a serious answer.

"I know you mean well—though you do show it at the strangest of times—but you don't need to trouble yourself over this. I'll be fine."

"You're being stupid," said Niké. "You can't even walk properly. Jired's going to catch you in no time."

"Geh..."

He made a good point. Niké had used his teleportation skills to transport Shizuku to her room after leaving Ortea's chamber. She hadn't been strong enough to make it back by herself. She felt bad about that; transporting her from one part of the castle to another was a waste of Niké's magical power. However, it was apparently easier for him to use magic than to carry her.

The unshakeable gaze of Jired came to mind, and Shizuku's mood plummeted.

"...Y-yeah, but it's okay. If I gave in, I'd feel like I'd lost. And then I'd just be frustrated."

"*That's* the issue here?" Niké asked. "Don't you feel pain or fear?"

"I do. I've let people push me around because I was scared of being hurt before."

"Then what's the problem? Is there something wrong with me?"

Niké sounded so offended that it took a moment for her to process his words. As soon as they sank in, however, Shizuku burst out laughing. She was still clutching onto her stomach, but this time, it was for a very different reason.

Niké stared at her in dismay, the whites of his eyes showing. When she finally

managed to rein in her laughter, she apologized to him.

“Sorry,” she said. “I haven’t given it much thought, but it’s not you that’s the problem. It wouldn’t matter who it was. I just don’t want anyone to think that I surrendered to the pain. That’s how mad I am about this.”

“...You really are an idiot.”

“Shut up.”

“Open your mouth.”

Shizuku didn’t understand what was going on, but she opened her mouth anyway. Niké pushed something into the back of her throat, causing Shizuku to swallow as a reflex.

“What the heck?” she exclaimed.

“It’s a magic remedy.”

Niké tossed her a small bottle filled with white pills, each about half the size of a marble.

“These will dull the pain. The effects last for precisely three hours, but don’t take another dose just because it’s wearing off, or they’ll affect more than just your ability to feel pain. It’s not just abdominal pain it works on, either. You’d really have to be in agony to still feel it while taking these. Be careful you don’t injure yourself.”

“Oh, thanks... Where’d you get these?”

“I made them. Let me know when you’re running low.”

With that, Niké stood up, seemingly intending to leave. Shizuku smiled wanly at him as he headed for the door.

“Sorry for the bother,” she said.

If he’d made the pills himself, then he’d done so in the four hours since they parted. She’d unwittingly inconvenienced him with her own stubbornness. Shizuku bowed her head in gratitude.

“Don’t feel too indebted to me, or you’ll end up dragging me down, you stupid woman.”

“Okay, I won’t. I’ll try not to anyway.”

“Besides, I’m not a nice guy,” Niké said.

Shizuku couldn’t tell what he’d meant by that, and whether it was just an offhand remark. Once she’d been left by herself, she stood up to check how she was feeling.

“...I guess the pain’s gone?”

Everything felt kind of hazy. Maybe the medicine was like a magical anesthetic. Shizuku’s abdominal pain hadn’t vanished completely, but the dull ache that remained was bearable.

Shizuku did a few squats to check that she could move properly, then nodded to herself.

“Good... Just you wait, you brute.”

Assuming she was powerless because she’d been silenced was a big mistake. She wasn’t going to dance on his palm any longer. As much as he wanted to revel in the joy of manipulating people and sending them into madness, there had to be a limit to how far his influence reached.

People who warped the wills of others for no real reason needed to be shown that they were crossing a line.

Not all caged birds gave in and accepted defeat.

4. Gentle Fingers



As the sun began to rise, the surrounding area brightened slightly. The faint sunlight brought color to the forests and meadows, letting all the living things know that morning was on its way.

The air was serene. The birds chirped. Despite having played out a million times before, the process remained unchanged.

As constant as nature was, however, not everything in the world stayed the same. In fact, something unusual was happening.

That unusual event was taking place in the Rosta region, in southwest Kisk. With no prior warning, an army of thirty thousand had appeared on the plain near the Farsasian border.

Armed with magical technology that made them impossible to track, the army had teleported into their neighboring country with precision, and at sunrise, they swiftly leaped into action. They traversed the area just north of Caribala, where all the trouble had started, heading northeast toward a fortress on the border.

“All you need to do is give the town a bit of a fright. If the people are intimidated, it’ll be easier to control once Azulia gets there,” Lars informed his generals during their meeting. “The fortress is what really matters. There’s no need for us to conquer it—just attack it a little to silence them.”

The king, having decided on the route that his army would take, pointed out Weisuz Fortress. It was located along the highway that began in the castle city and was a strategic point in the southwest where troops from Kisk were stationed. If Farsas made a move, that fortress would be the first to fight back, and they had the military strength to do so, too.

A large army wouldn't be necessary in Caribala; there were nothing but rioters and petty criminals there. It was the nation and the castle itself that Farsas wanted to apply pressure on.

And so the prelude to war between the two Great Nations began with just a small number of troops. The king of Farsas had decided to bypass Caribala, the expected focus of the conflict, and begin by threatening Weisuz Fortress instead.

Learning of the Farsasian invasion, a hint of panic appeared on the face of General Dolfa, the man in charge of the fortress.

"I'd expected them to teleport here, but I didn't expect them to bypass the town completely... Will our defense spells be ready?"

"They'll take another five hours to complete. By that stage, the Farsasian army might have already reached us..."

"We'll have to buy ourselves some time, then. I'll engage them in battle, so use that time to finish constructing the spells," Dolfa swiftly decided, before ordering his army to deploy.

He'd prepared this strategy in advance, but they needed to make it look like it had been conceived *after* they'd learned of Farsas's invasion. As per the king's orders, Weisuz Fortress needed to signal to Farsas that this *wasn't* a meticulously planned provocation.

Beelhurse hadn't given a clear explanation, so nobody knew the purpose behind his orders, but it sounded as though he was reluctant to engage in a full-scale war with the mighty Magic Kingdom.

Nevertheless, Farsas was not an opponent to be underestimated. Dolfa spread out a map of the area surrounding the fortress on the table and finalized the deployment of his forty thousand troops, then donned his armor.

"There are only thirty thousand men in Farsas's army. As long as we focus on defending ourselves, they shouldn't be able to break through our fortress," Dolfa said, encouraging the fearful troops he'd be leading in the vanguard.

The highway ran through a hilly area in the central region, so the troops from Kisk hid there. Concealed by the sloping peaks, they finished getting into

formation only thirty minutes before the Farsasian army arrived.

A gentle breeze blew toward Lars, tickling his hair as he listened to the scout's report. He knew that following the highway stretching out before him would eventually lead to Weisuz Fortress, but it seemed like they'd get trapped before they reached it.

Looking up at the hills covered in lush green grass, the king spoke in a carefree tone:

"So what should we do, Truce? Teleport past Kisk's army and land straight in front of the fortress?"

"That's easier said than done," replied Truce. "We're in the middle of a foreign country—we can't get the coordinates for a large-scale transit gate. Not to mention, unauthorized teleportation might be forbidden around the fortress."

"Good point. We don't want to get cornered from both directions. We'll have to breach the fortress head-on."

The highway itself seemed to cut through the hills. The wide road before them curved gently along the flat ground, with large slopes flanking it on either side. Kisk's troops, presumably waiting for them farther down the path, had skillfully hidden themselves behind those hills.

After a moment of contemplation, Lars ordered his troops to advance over the westernmost of the two large hills. As he watched his army leap into action, a mischievous grin appeared on his face.

"Well, then... Let's have a little fun here. It's not every day you get to go to battle."

The grass swaying in the breeze was trampled by horses' hooves. There was a tension in the air, and the chirping birds had fallen silent.

Only the clanging of iron and the murmur of incantations spread across the hills—and shortly after sunrise, the first battle commenced.

Having emerged over the top of the hill, the Farsasian army was immediately targeted by the Kisk archers.

While Farsas had the height advantage, the wind was in Kisk's favor.

Dolfa had figured that his army's head start would work in their favor, but as he'd partially anticipated, most of the arrows were blocked by magic. Stroking his beard, he instructed his troops to deploy their magical barriers.

"Putting their mages on the front line... What is Farsas thinking?"

It seemed that more than half of the troops in Farsas's vanguard were mages; their attire made them easy to identify, even from a distance. Typically, mages weren't placed at the forefront of an army, but at the rear, tasked with defense and healing. However, the fact that they'd been deliberately positioned at the front suggested that Farsas's strategy would be heavily reliant on magical firepower.

Dolfa frowned as he watched the Farsasian army rain fire down on his troops, then asked one of his nearby subordinates, Isal, for his opinion of the situation.

"What do you think? Will we be able to defend ourselves?"

"This level of attack shouldn't be a problem. They might be called the Magic Kingdom, but they don't seem *that* impressive."

Dolfa could tell by the young man's face that he was being overconfident, but that was better than being pessimistic. He ordered Isal to launch a counterattack, then withdrew to the rear of the army. When the general got in touch with the fortress, he was informed that the defensive spells that would shield the fortress would be completed in about three hours, which seemed to bring him some relief.

"All right... Let's just hope we can last that long."

Dolfa was known for his cautious nature, and he had no desire to become a hero by crushing Farsas's army. His only goal was to fulfill the king's command by stopping the enemy's advance toward Weisuz Fortress and redirecting them toward the city of Caribala.

Farsas's decision to invade Kisk had probably been strongly influenced by the pleas of the Casola people.

In that case, why not surrender Caribala, where the majority of the people

from Casola lived? There were hardly any pure-blooded Kisk people who lived there anyway.

If it became apparent that they couldn't capture the fortress, Farsas would likely turn back the way they'd come.

Beelhurse had told Dolfa to hold them off for two weeks, but he couldn't help but feel like that was far too long.

"What are you doing, Isal?!" Dolfa exclaimed in anger, glaring fiercely at the hill in front of him. But his subordinate didn't hear him.

The general watched Isal, whom he'd put in command of the troops, chase after the retreating Farsasian mages. Riding his horse, he personally led the charge, pushing Kisk's front line forward. As the mages on the enemy side panicked and turned their horses around, he ordered his own troops to launch magical attacks.

However, the effects of these attacks were neutralized by the enemy's barriers, and Isal failed to achieve the outcome he was hoping for. Despite this, Kisk held onto its momentum and continued to drive the already retreating Farsasian army away. Before long, his army started going down the other side of the slope on the hunt for their enemy.

As his troops disappeared over the hill blinded by the potential of victory, Dolfa raised his voice, desperate to bring them back.

"Contact the mages! Order them to pull back the front line!"

But the order wasn't needed. At the same time that Dolfa had reprimanded his subordinate, Isal had brought the troops' charge to a halt, met by an astounding sight.

Isal had assumed that Farsas's main army, which mostly consisted of cavalry, was positioned on the other side of the hill—but unbeknownst to him, the troops had chosen to take the opposite direction from the highway, circumventing the hill altogether.

Lars had sent mages to the front line and made them *pretend* to retreat to distract Kisk's army. While Farsas's reputation nowadays was that of the Magic Kingdom, it had been a nation of warriors for most of its history. Yet Farsas's

formation centered around their mages had made Isal forget about the nation's military strength. Instead, he'd hastily convinced himself that if he could defeat the mages, Kisk's victory would be assured.

Mages were good at fighting and defending themselves from a distance, but they struggled with close combat. This knowledge had driven Isal to pounce on the retreating mages, but in doing so, he'd broken his own army's formation. This was all part of Farsas's plan.

As he watched the Farsasian troops come around the hill and attack the core of his army, Isal looked at the messenger mage behind him—but before he had the chance to speak, he and his horse went up in flames. A beastly scream erupted from the blaze.

In his thirties, Truce was Farsas's head mage, and the one who'd set fire to Kisk's commander.

He let out a small sigh.

"Okay. Turn and attack. Reduce them to ashes."

Following his orders, the mages who'd been retreating stopped in their tracks and started to chant, while Farsas's lancers used this as an opportunity to charge ahead.

Shocked by their commander's sudden death, Kisk's men were suddenly gripped by an uncontrollable fear as they watched the cavalry charge up the hill.

In the forest near the right flank of their army, a mage from Kisk had set up a magic barrier and was surveying the situation. At that moment, however, he noticed something infiltrate the area he was in charge of. As he focused his senses, he cast a detection spell.

The mage was receiving updates of the battle via magic communication, and it sounded like things were becoming fairly chaotic around the hilltop. For the time being, Kisk seemed to be holding on, but if this was a decoy and Farsas was mobilizing a separate force, they'd need to change their formation as soon as possible. He began to form a communication spell.

However, just before he completed it, something rushed into his field of

vision.

An instant after he noticed the large, dark shadow, his head was separated from his body.

Riding his horse with such ease that it may as well have been an extra limb, the man who'd taken the mage's life with a single swing of his sword smiled gently. It was an expression that seemed unsuited to a battlefield.

He looked down at the severed head, the mage's eyes still wide with shock.

"Don't rely too much on magic. You need to look at what's happening around you. Consider this a lesson learned."

The king of Farsas, armed with the royal sword, pulled on his horse's reins again. It was only then that Harve, responsible for the king's protective barrier and communication, finally caught up with him.

"Your Majesty! Please don't go off alone! Leuticia will be furious with me!"

"Don't worry about that. Just let her scold you. Rather you than me."

"If you want to kill the spies, get an archer or mage to do it for you!"

"I like to do things myself every now and then. I didn't force Lettie to take over my official duties for nothing."

Harve wanted to ask the king to swap places with her right away, but he stayed quiet. Ultimately unable to express most of what he wanted to say, he followed Lars's orders and relayed the command to begin the attack on the main force of Kisk's army.

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With every step she took, Shizuku could feel her stomach aching.

She assumed that most of this was her imagination, but the agony had left too much of a mark on her memory for her to forget it. Shizuku recalled her reflection she'd seen in the mirror.

"I'll never be able to wear a swimsuit looking like this... If we can't heal it, I won't even be able to go home."

For the time being, she was using a magic remedy to curb the pain, but she didn't know how she'd get relief in a world without magic. Shizuku let out a sigh

as she came to a stop in front of Ortea's room.

Faneet was standing there, and he gave her a concerned look.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh. Did the princess tell you what happened?"

"Yeah."

"I'm fine. That aside, there are a few things I want you to do for me."

"What?"

Shizuku collected her thoughts and gave Faneet the general rundown of her requests. At first, he looked suspicious, but he soon worked out her intentions.

"I'll get on that," he said with a nod. Not even a hint of a smile crossed his lips.

Next, Shizuku had to speak to Niké, then Ortea.

Shizuku took a deep breath in front of the door.

"Farsas has begun its invasion," Faneet said from beside her, his voice even. "General Dolfa met them in battle, but his men were quickly overpowered and it seems they've retreated to the fortress."

"...Okay. Doesn't sound like we have much time, then."

Shizuku had suspected that something like that would happen, but being confronted with the reality was incredibly nerve-racking.

Even so, escaping wasn't an option for her anymore. No matter how difficult her situation was, she was determined to get through it somehow.

Shizuku stood up straight and stepped through the open door. Reflected in Faneet's eyes, her profile looked abnormally calm, as if she'd worked for the princess for decades.

How did it feel not to be able to trust your family?

Shizuku had no idea. It was a feeling beyond her comprehension.

Unbeknownst to her, Ortea had been betrayed by her own brother. Since that incident, she'd lost her family. How much turmoil had she been through?

Shizuku could try to imagine it and sympathize with her, but that would only hurt the princess's feelings.

Not to mention, the people that Ortea had trampled over were just as deserving of sympathy.

The situation had already become very serious. The fates of Beelhurse and Ortea would soon be determined, and the country would be forced into action. Shizuku knew that the turning point was just around the corner.

So she couldn't ask for much.

There was just one thing she wanted: for this mayhem to come to an end.

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Yes. There's barely any time to spare. Please act on my advice right away," Shizuku responded unflinchingly.

Ortea glared at her, but Shizuku kept her face completely still and accepted her master's stare. The expression on her face seemed to ask, "Can you not do that?" making Ortea grit her teeth a little. She seemed like a completely different person from the woman who's been screaming in pain only the night before.

Shizuku appeared as if she had nerves of steel. All her proposals were urging Ortea to take a drastic, unsparing change of course. Also present were Niké and Faneet, who had nervous looks on their faces.

"Why do I need to do something like *that*? Can't you at least give me a reason?"

"No—but I'm sure you'll be able to work it out."

Shizuku's confident proclamation made Ortea frown.

She was right, though. Ortea didn't need it explained to her.

The majority of the tactics Shizuku had proposed would lead to one outcome: the usurpation of the throne.

Shizuku was suggesting that Ortea depose her half-brother. It was a bold proposition for a subject to make, and rather unsurprisingly, the princess

couldn't hide her dismay.

"Why would I target my older brother? Do you have a personal vendetta against him?"

"I do have a grudge against him, but that's not the whole story. As one of your vassals, it is my humble opinion that these plans are necessary. The details should become clear in due course."

"You're being absurd. I'm not fit to be queen."

"Do you lack confidence in your own abilities?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's simply that everybody's scared of me."

Ortea gave Shizuku a sad smile. Nobody in the castle would question how capable she was, but her reputation for cruelty extended past her country's borders.

If the infamous princess were to take the throne, people both within and outside the country would come together against her out of fear.

Ortea had only been able to demonstrate her own abilities because her position was inferior to her brother's. She wasn't the kind of person herself who could represent a nation.

However, the princess's argument didn't make Shizuku change her opinion. She responded to Ortea in a voice that was neither devoid of emotion nor filled with it.

"That's why we need to make the king shoulder some of your bad reputation. Everything else will be determined by your actions. You don't need to gain overwhelming support. As long as you show that you're competent and generous toward your citizens, people are sure to accept you."

"Are you suggesting I suddenly reinvent myself and show my generosity? Can I really beg for forgiveness after everything I've done?"

"If you want people to forgive you, you need to come up with a way to redeem yourself. I'm talking about the future, not the past."

Some people would never forgive Ortea, no matter what she did.

As much as it pained her, Shizuku couldn't do anything about that. Inevitably, there was no changing the past. If they both continued raking over what came before, they'd never make any progress. If Ortea really regretted what she'd done, then it was up to her to do something about that.

Besides, there probably weren't that many citizens who genuinely loathed the princess. The majority of those who frowned upon her behavior had only heard of the princess's actions secondhand. If Ortea improved those people's impressions of her, she'd be fully capable of serving as queen—or at least, that was how Shizuku felt. As long as her reputation was better than Beelhurse's, that was all that mattered.

It would take some scheming to overcome the current situation, but once they did, everything else would depend on Ortea's mindset. The princess was far more politically savvy than Shizuku, so surely she realized that.

Yet even if she did, the princess didn't agree with it.

She raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow and fixed her gaze on Shizuku.

"Why do *I* have to do all that?"

It was a childish protest, but at least it was honest.

Why did she have to put herself on the line for her country?

Until that point, her royal status had afforded her a life of leisure, fulfilling minimal obligations while enjoying maximum authority. For Ortea, who'd been cast aside during her childhood, this approach must have seemed like her only option in the country that had once sacrificed her.

She knew she was supposed to be useful to the kingdom, but she'd always despised the country itself. That wasn't something that could be changed overnight.

"Why do *I* have to give in? I've always done everything my brother asked me to do. I've fulfilled my royal duties. Why do I have to do even *more* for this country...? That's not what I want, nor what our citizens want!"

A great deal of emotion was imbued in her cries, but Shizuku showed no sign of backing down.

"Princess. You're the only one with the right to ascend the throne. No one else can become ruler."

"Then what's wrong with my brother staying king?! I don't want to rule!"

"So you're willing to cast aside your own country?"

Ortea looked up, taken aback.

This woman, who claimed to be from another world, didn't seem angered by Ortea's fit of rage. She just kept her eyes on her, with the same calm gaze that a mother would give a child.

She wasn't going to lecture the princess or scold her. Speaking as though she was reading out a list of facts, Shizuku continued making her point.

"You're not chained to this castle or this country, Princess. You can escape. However, we don't have much time. If you're going to leave the castle, you need to start preparing immediately. And, of course, you have to make sure His Majesty doesn't find out."

"Shizuku."

Faneet stepped forward, attempting to stop Shizuku's speech, but she just blocked him with a hand and kept her gaze fixed on Ortea. Shizuku's unexpected suggestion made Ortea's jaw gape open in amazement.

"You're telling me...to leave the castle? *Me*?"

"If that's what you wish. It's not impossible."

That would be another way to end things.

Beelhurse was planning on sacrificing his sister, but Ortea could still escape from his grip and disappear. The king would be annoyed to lose one of his pawns, but with Farsas's ongoing invasion, he wouldn't be able to devote all his energy to looking for her.

Plus, escaping might be the easier route for the princess. She'd be freed of all her duties and could carve out a new life for herself. She was still young. She could start over and leave her past behind. Fighting her brother wasn't her only option.

There was a long silence.

Shizuku stayed frozen to the spot, Faneet maintained his stony gaze, and Niké stood up straight, stifling his emotions.

Ortea kept her eyes fixed on her lap. She looked apprehensive, like a bird that had only just realized that the door to its cage had been open all along.

She smiled, her expression filled with equal amounts of lonely emptiness and self-derision.

“Are you telling me...I can escape from here?”

“If you don’t want to become queen, then you should run away right away.”

“Is that what you want for me?”

The two young women had walked completely different paths in their lives, but at times they saw one another as a different version of themselves.

If Shizuku had been born a royal, and Ortea had been a commoner...

How would they have turned out? What would they have done?

They saw the answers inside each other, like gazing into a mirror where the reflection didn’t quite match up.

Shizuku returned the princess’s gaze. She spent a moment thinking about her journey so far, then turned her thoughts toward the unknown future.

It wasn’t all going to be smooth sailing, but she probably wouldn’t have to do it alone.

She straightened her back, then fixed her gaze on her master.

“If I may express my own wishes, then...”

Shizuku opened her mouth, her voice filled with emotion that not even a thousand words could convey.

“Please become queen. Throughout history, there have been benevolent rulers who ended up as tyrants; I want you to go in the opposite direction. If you see this country with your own eyes—rather than through the bars of a cage—you’ll soon start to see the truth. It’s true that the world of men is filled with injustice...but at the same time, it can be surprisingly kind.”

Shizuku knew that better than anybody.

Human kindness had been her salvation. It had allowed her to travel across a world she knew nothing about.

She wanted Ortea to find out what that was like.

She wanted her to interact with and learn about the outside world, not just from the inside of the twisted birdcage her brother had shut her in.

She wanted Ortea to realize that most people cared about others—and that included Ortea herself.

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“Do you really want to make the princess queen?”

Niké’s question sounded more skeptical than appalled. Without saying a word, Shizuku shrugged her shoulders. Taking that as affirmation, the mage reacted with disgust.

Shizuku poured some tea into his cup.

The two of them were the only people inside the small break room. After listening to everything Shizuku had to say, Ortea had asked for a chance to think things over and dismissed her aides.

They were short on time, so Shizuku wanted her to make up her mind quickly, but if the princess wasn’t convinced, there was nothing she could do about it. Shizuku had done everything she could for the time being, so she’d called out to Niké to stop him from leaving and given him a few of the requests she had in mind.

And so he’d responded with that question. Shizuku cocked her head as she served some tea cakes.

“Why do you ask? Are you against the idea?”

“You know full well what kind of person she is. Do you realize how many people she’s executed on a whim?”

“Uhh, sure.”

Shizuku had expected people to take that stance. It was true that she knew very little about what Ortea had done. She’d heard that the princess had

committed numerous atrocious acts, but she'd never witnessed any with her own eyes. She didn't really have a leg to stand on when people accused her of being ignorant.

Shizuku stared at the man. As the princess's helper, Niké was frequently sent to foreign countries on secret missions.

Shizuku didn't know much about how he'd ended up as the princess's aide, either. Nor how he felt about her.

As Shizuku glared at him in silence, Niké furrowed his brow.

"Stop looking at me," he said, waving his hand in front of his face.

"What...? Well, fine. But yeah, at the end of the day, I guess I am pretty naive."

"You must be. It's pretty obvious."

"Yeah. No matter how annoyed I am with them, when I see a different side to someone, I tend to assume they're kind deep down. I think I want to believe that. It makes me feel better."

"You're an idiot... At this rate, someone's going to trick you."

"They already have," Shizuku admitted cheerfully, making Niké frown even more.

He must have known that the mark etched onto her body was a result of her naïveté. He clicked his tongue and took a sip of his tea. Shizuku smiled at her coworker, who now looked very mean.

"You leave a terrible first impression, but I know that you have a kind side to you, too," Shizuku told him. "If the princess is the same way—and I sometimes get the feeling that she is—then she might be able to lead a different life."

"Don't use me as an example."

"You shouldn't turn a blind eye to your faults. You're one of the princess's retainers."

"She gives me plenty of work *because* she knows that I'm not a faithful subject."

"Huh? Wouldn't it usually be the other way around?" Shizuku asked with surprise.

Niké shoved a snack into her mouth, looking irritated, then rolled up the paper packaging and set fire to it in his hand.

"The princess knows that deep down, I want to rebel. That's why she uses me. She knows that I wouldn't dare turn my back on her, no matter how I feel. Sometimes, she issues me with orders just to test me. She enjoys seeing how I react... I know what she's doing, so I don't let my feelings show."

"Wow."

Come to think of it, Shizuku remembered Faneet pointing at Niké soon after she arrived and saying that he was the princess's favorite *because* he was two-faced. Maybe this was what he meant by that. Shizuku's sudden shift in perspective made it hard for her to articulate a clever response.

She ate the food that had been thrust into her mouth.

"You're like a miserable member of middle management," Shizuku said—but not even she really understood what she meant.

With a bitter expression, Niké picked up his mug.

"Regardless of whether she's kind or not, she has *that* kind of personality. I doubt being queen would suit her," he mused.

"Hmm... She's still young, though," replied Shizuku.

"Under normal circumstances, she would have been married by now. She's far from young."

"Huh? Really?"

From Shizuku's point of view, nineteen sounded plenty young to be getting married.

"For a royal, I mean," Niké clarified, noting Shizuku's dumbfounded expression.

Shizuku let out a deep breath.

"You know how a super-impactful event can alter someone's trajectory?

Sometimes I wonder whether a person's life could have been even *more* different if that event hadn't happened."

"...Maybe."

"I think people like that can still change. If they truly want to start over, it's probably achievable, to a certain extent anyway."

Were people really that malleable?

If somebody could be influenced by other people, then why couldn't they decide to change themselves if they were given a chance?

Shizuku was probably incredibly naive for thinking that way. She felt like she expected too much from people. Still, dismissing someone's potential didn't seem like the correct approach, either.

Shizuku smoothed out her wrinkled brow with her fingers.

Niké watched her, his face devoid of expression—but then, unexpectedly, he began to mutter something.

"You seem serious about this, so let me tell you something. She didn't kill any of the children who failed the experiments."

"Huh?"

"It might be more accurate to say I set them free, in a town far away from here. She probably knows that, but she didn't condemn me for doing it. I let the princess of Anneli go for that same reason. She knows that I do things in secret, and to a certain degree, she turns a blind eye to it."

"What...?"

If Ortea gave Niké important jobs to do because he was unfaithful, did that mean she also valued his habit of secretly sparing the weak? The princess knew how Niké conducted himself, which must be why she gave him so many tasks to carry out alone. Was that the hidden side to the so-called Bewitching Princess?

As Shizuku pondered this, Niké confidently set her straight.

"Don't get the wrong idea. That doesn't change what she's done. The princess is still a cold-blooded person."

“...Yeah.”

The fact remained that Ortea was cruel and unsparing. Shizuku could never let herself forget that.

Niké watched as Shizuku offered him a meek nod. Then he let out a tremendous sigh and got up from his seat.

“Well, whatever. It’s not like I can ever go back to being an ordinary mage. I’ll support you in your plan.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“So what will you do if the princess’s personality stays the same when she ascends the throne? Will you still stick by her?”

This was a possibility that Shizuku had to bear in mind. The notion brought an uncertain smile to Shizuku’s face. She looked through the room’s only window, which faced southwest; the sky was blue, without a cloud in sight, and looked as flat as if it had been painted with a brush. It must have stretched all the way to the battlefield—the thought of which made Shizuku shut her eyes.

“Good point... That’d lead to even more friction. It might even result in the end of the Kisk royal family.”

The royal family had descended from Tryphina’s dishonesty. Perhaps Ortea would witness the line come to an end, as queen. That scenario seemed fairly likely; Farsas’s reach had already expanded within the kingdom’s borders. If Kisk failed to halt their advances, there’d be no future for the royals.

“Ah, this is so much pressure,” Shizuku said. “Why am I a royal aide?”

“Like I know. Just hurry up and get to work.”

Shizuku complied with Niké’s blunt reply and left the break room.

By the time she took one step out of the room, her face no longer looked like that of the young woman who complained of the pressure of her station, but that of an experienced vassal to the princess.

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The baby felt so small and helpless in Shizuku’s arms.

She moved the lightweight child into a more comfortable position and smiled.

Yura, standing by her side, wore a gentle look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Yura. This is a dangerous thing for me to ask you to do.”

“It’s okay. I’m happy I can help.”

The court lady was around Shizuku’s age, and her voice sounded warm and reassuring. Relieved by the strength of her words, Shizuku placed Vied back in Yura’s arms and looked around the small room.

Moving Vied into a different room had been the first thing Shizuku had done upon learning the king’s true intentions.

Now that Farsas had invaded, the baby’s existence was quite significant. He was part of the reason why Beelhurse had let Shizuku live. She needed to make sure the king couldn’t get his hands on the boy, no matter what it took.

Shizuku had left the task of moving him in the middle of the night to Yura and Willett, the two women in the castle that Shizuku trusted the most. She’d had them look after Vied while she picked out new, trustworthy wet nurses and maids. It had been a hassle, but it was necessary for her peace of mind.

Willett was busy using a magic heating pad to warm up the breast milk another wet nurse had given her, but she’d received no explanation.

Neither Yura nor Willett had known about Vied before being entrusted with him, but they didn’t dare ask who his parents were. Shizuku had insisted that they stay silent about the matter, so they’d probably realized how serious it was.

Despite how young she was, Willett was surprisingly adept at caring for Vied, saying that she used to look after the babies in her town. Having made quick work of warming up the milk, she gave it to Yura and moved on to folding up Vied’s many washed blankets with a smile.

“That reminds me, Shizuku. You and our esteemed colleague Niké seem to be getting along well lately!” Willett said.

“Whoa, that ‘esteemed’ title doesn’t suit him. We don’t *not* get along, but we don’t have the best relationship, either. You must just see us talking about work.”

“Oh, that’s a shame. What kind of person do you like again? I’m so eager to know.”

“Eager about what...?”

Shizuku didn’t want her to get enthusiastic about anything other than taking care of Vied. A pained look appeared on her face. But then she remembered something.

“Ah...,” Shizuku said without any enthusiasm. “I know... I want someone who doesn’t care if I have a weird mark on my body. Did I include that in my list of requirements?”

“What are you talking about?” Yura said from behind her, sounding surprisingly serious.

Noticing the probing concern in her expression, Shizuku hastily smoothed things over.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Everything’s fine.”

“Are you sure? No one’s done anything to you, have they?”

“Absolutely not! There’s no need to beat anyone to a pulp!”

“If you say so...”

Yura backed down, looking somewhat disappointed. Shizuku felt flustered, as though she’d come close to getting beaten up herself.

If she’d told her the truth, Yura might have confronted Jired.

Regaining her composure, Shizuku waved at the other girl, who was busily folding laundry.

“Hey, Willett. Do you want to hear about my ideal type of guy?”

“Oh! I’d love to!”

Willett’s eyes lit up immediately, and she rushed over to Shizuku, who flashed her a grin.

All the while, Shizuku wondered whether one day this conversation would actually lead to anything.



Over the past few days, the small backstreet tavern had gradually been losing customers. Its main clientele were mercenaries, and they'd caught wind of the Farsasian invasion before it even happened.

Initially, skilled mercenaries from all over the land had gathered there, hoping for more employment opportunities. However, once it became clear that Kisk wasn't going to budge, they went abroad to avoid the ensuing hassle. Some had been hired by nobles who wanted to know what was going on, but those people were staying with their employers, primed for action. They weren't going to visit one of the city's bars.

The conspicuously vacant tavern did, however, receive one guest just before noon.

His imposing build clearly indicated that he earned his living by the sword, yet he lacked the mean demeanor of a typical mercenary. The man—Faneet—locked eyes with a group of men who'd gathered in the corner of the room.

"I'm looking for a mercenary named Tarkis," he said in his usual tone of voice.
"Does anyone know him?"

"Tarkis? What about him?"

"Someone recommended that I hire him for a job. If any of you know where to find him, I'd appreciate it if you told me."

"Sorry, but he left Kisk a few days ago. Said he was heading to Medial."

"...I see."

They'd only just missed one other, but that couldn't be helped. Shizuku had originally recommended Tarkis to Faneet, saying that he was trustworthy and well-connected. In reality, however, Faneet had always had his sights set elsewhere.

"In that case, I'd like to hire some other people. You'll be handsomely compensated, and I don't care how many of you are involved so long as you're able to keep a secret."

"What's the job?"

"Tracking someone down. And it needs to be done urgently."

The reward Faneet offered was exceptionally generous, considering it was a simple person-finding mission. The men's expressions visibly changed when they heard it.

"That's incredible. You must work for a member of the upper classes. Another guy like you came around not too long ago."

"Don't pry into who I am. If I can't trust you to keep a secret, the deal's off the table."

"Our lips are sealed. So who're we looking for?" the mercenary cheerfully inquired.

Faneet told them the man's name.

At that point, nobody knew that this action would change Ortea's fate.

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Ortea's brother sat across from her wearing his usual smile. The atmosphere in the room was no different from before—but that in itself filled Ortea with an inescapable sense of dread.

She observed her brother as he picked up an ivory game piece between his fingers.

When the king summoned her, she initially suspected that it had to do with Shizuku, but instead, he brought up Farsas.

Around eight hours had passed since Farsas had first invaded, and the armies had reached a stalemate in front of Weisuz Fortress. When Ortea suggested that they send out reinforcements, the king smiled awkwardly.

"Are you confident that we can win, Ortea?" he asked.

"I wouldn't trust anyone who claimed to be confident."

"But you were the one who started this game, were you not?"

The king's voice became quieter—so quiet, in fact, that Ortea had to concentrate to understand what he was saying.

He didn't sound like he was reproaching the person who'd caused the crisis; in fact, it was as if he was looking down at the game piece in his grip, watching it struggle.

Pretending not to notice his change in tone, Ortea placed her piece on the board.

"There's no need to wipe out the entire Farsasian army; we just need to get rid of the king. If he's personally commanding the army, wouldn't it be enough to turn the tide if we rely on our numerical advantage?"

Truth be told, Ortea didn't care how the battle ended. As long as it threw both Kisk and Farsas into a frenzy and exacerbated the chaos, she would be satisfied. Just the thought of confronting the king with the child he had no knowledge of brought a smile to her face.

Or at least, that's how she'd felt up until the previous night. Now the color seemed to have drained from everything, and nothing sparked her interest.

Beelhurse knocked over the piece that Ortea had placed on the board.

"But if we went that far, there'd be no turning back for us," said the king. "People will think we started this fight with Farsas because we have a royal descendant in our possession."

"Were you planning on 'turning back'? Our father always insisted that he wanted to do something about Farsas."

"I still share that view; however, there are a few things that give me pause. If you have anything to say, though, I'd be happy to hear you out."

It was a very wishy-washy response; the king was just as vague as ever.

Why had Shizuku told Ortea to flee the castle if she wasn't willing to become queen?

Whatever the case, Ortea kept her mistrust under wraps. She stared at the piece that Beelhurse had taken from her, then parted her red lips to speak.

"Then grant me authority over the military. At the end of the day, we can't suppress Farsas if we're half-hearted about this."

Beelhurse was incapable of making drastic decisions. As the most powerful individual in the country, the king had the authority to mobilize his entire army, yet he was unable to determine the right time to act.

Although Ortea wasn't well-versed in the art of war, she knew that when you

were faced with a formidable enemy, holding back military strength was not an option. Once you'd decided how many troops to mobilize and when and where to deploy them, the rest was up to the generals.

Ortea's request brought a strained smile to the king's face.

"I can't do that," he said.

"You'll miss your chance."

"That's fine. Just wait a little longer... That's all you need to do."

Ortea gave up arguing with her brother, who was unusually calm.

A few moments later, having moved a piece across the board, the king looked up.

"That reminds me. Did that girl say anything to you?"

Her brother's casual, unfazed query brought a slight frown to the princess's face.

"Which girl?" she asked.

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Why had Shizuku suggested that Ortea oust the king? The reason was simple: He was incompetent.

Of course, his treatment of Shizuku and Ortea was unforgivable, but if he'd been a competent ruler like Lars, Shizuku would have urged the princess to flee the castle rather than overthrow him.

However, for better or for worse, the king didn't possess such talents. If both siblings were twisted, then it was best to have the more capable one of the pair on the throne. That was the realistic calculation that Shizuku had made.

Ortea was much younger than her brother. She had the potential to become a great leader in the future. Shizuku was also running the risk of creating a frightening tyrant, but the citizens wouldn't stay quiet if that were to happen. Shizuku felt it was her job to stay by Ortea's side and keep admonishing her for bad behavior to ensure that her fear didn't become a reality.

"You called for me, Princess?"

Shizuku knelt on the stone floor, her head bowed.

Ortea had summoned her immediately after Shizuku had finished lunch. Faneet and Niké were both out doing their respective jobs, so the two girls were the only people in the princess's private chamber. Ortea wasn't sprawled across her chaise longue this time; instead, she was sitting on it with her legs hanging down. She looked down at her subordinate's black hair.

"Shizuku, I met with my brother."

"Is that right?"

"He's planning on offering me up to stop Farsas's invasion."

The princess's words descended on Shizuku from above. There was a coldness to them, as if this idea was one that Ortea herself had agreed to.

Trembling a little, Shizuku lifted her head. Her dark, brownish-black eyes clashed with Ortea's amber ones, which looked like real jewels.

A silent ripple cascaded through the room.

Shizuku had never seen Ortea look so calm. Her face was beautiful, reminiscent of a clear, calm sea.

She couldn't discern any sadness or pain from the princess's expression. So why did the sight of it make Shizuku's chest hurt?

Words began to spill from Ortea's crimson lips, her voice as clear as a bell.

"He's planning on handing me over to Farsas, saying that I caused this conflict. And he'll probably pay off part of Rosta to get them to back down. Once I'm out of the way, he can get his hands on that child and wait for his opportunity to come along. He never wanted war. He'd rather employ a different method."

"...Did he say that himself?"

"No. But I could just tell. If he isn't going to mobilize the troops, the only way he can stop Farsas is by negotiating with a considerable bargaining chip. Land and money aren't going to cut it. He'll need to give them someone who can shoulder the blame."

"Princess."

“There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s true that I’m at fault. This is what happens when you take your games too far. My brother’s not the forgiving type.”

Her voice was flat, but she also sounded a little downtrodden. Ortea averted her gaze and stared out of the slightly ajar window.

How did Ortea view her older brother?

Was she reassured by their relationship, even if she looked down on him? Did she suspect that he’d thrown her to the wolves? Shizuku had never even seen them together, so she couldn’t imagine.

When Ortea had declared that there was nothing she could do about the situation, her words had lacked their usual arrogance. Shizuku found this disconcerting; she didn’t want the princess to become discouraged and surrender to Beelhurse’s plans. Shizuku, for one, had no desire to let him win, and she didn’t want to hand Vied over to him, either.

Shizuku frowned as she attempted to read Ortea’s facial expression, but the princess just glanced at her, dry-eyed.

“Is there something else you’re not telling me, Shizuku?”

“You’ll find out the truth soon enough, if you so wish.”

“...I see.”

Did Ortea think she was the only person in the wrong?

If Beelhurse had acted the way he had today on the assumption that Ortea would feel this way, then his audacity truly knew no bounds. Shizuku felt the urge to confess everything she knew. Annoyed, she gritted her teeth.

“Shizuku.”

“Yes?”

“You’re naive. You spout nothing but immature ideals, and every single thing you say sounds like a lecture.”

“That’s true.”

What was Ortea talking about all of a sudden? Whatever the case, she wasn’t

wrong, so Shizuku couldn't interrupt her with any counterarguments.

Ortea continued. It didn't seem like she was ridiculing Shizuku.

"And to make matters worse, you're stupid. I almost killed you, yet you're suggesting that I become queen. You can't be thinking straight."

"...Well, I am."

"There are way too many holes in your plan. Do you mean to let me destroy myself?"

"I'm very sorry."

Shizuku had spent all night devising her scheme, but it undeniably had its fair share of problems. Since they were so short on time, she'd started implementing some of her ideas, but her plan still needed to be fleshed out. She stared at the floor, thinking things over.

Ortea's stern voice, however, interrupted her thoughts.

"That's enough. I never had high hopes for your scheme anyway. Just leave the rest to me."

For a moment, Shizuku felt like she was hearing things.

Her head bounced back up.

"Princess..."

She'd thought that her master had surrendered to her brother's betrayal, but her eyes had suddenly lit up again. She looked like a beast lurking in the dark—an agile, ruthless, yet captivating creature that had assumed human form. Her voice began to resonate, her words fluid.

"You get deserted because you're powerless. That's why you suffer such a fate."

With those words, the beautiful princess renounced her old self that had been betrayed.

"But now, I'm different," she continued coolly. "I have no interest in taking the throne, but if my brother is planning on doing away with me, then I'll do what I have to do... Even my own people fear me. I can't let anyone forsake me

without putting up a fight.”

Ortea abruptly turned her gaze toward Shizuku as she spoke.

“I can’t stand the idea of being handed over to that man, either... I’m going to take a page out of your book and find a way to wriggle out of this.”

The first time Shizuku had seen her amber eyes, they’d been bewitching, overflowing with confidence. They were enchanting, capable of making anyone fear her. Now, though, they seemed to waver, like those of a hesitant child.

Ortea followed the breeze that was gradually slipping in through the window and looked around.

The smell of incense had disappeared. The air was slowly changing. This room, once weighed down by numerous people’s hatred and resentment, now looked bare, as if all pretense had been stripped away.

The woman seated at the center of it fixed her gaze on her kneeling subject.

“Shizuku. This...*is* the right thing to do...isn’t it?”

Ortea was hesitating. She was wondering if her own actions had led her brother to make the decisions he had. This uncertainty made her reluctant to target Beelhurse with her schemes.

Even so, she was determined to decide on a course of action. It was necessary to protect herself and to keep her dignity. She was placing her trust in Shizuku, who always combatted her with idealistic notions. She was directing the twisted cruelty that her brother had instilled in her right back at him, attempting to seize the very country she’d wanted to flee. Would this defection bring intense pressure in Ortea’s life? For now, all Shizuku could do was to support her.

“Just follow your heart. Move forward without hesitating, Princess.”

Perhaps the battle that lay ahead would lead Ortea to uncover her past. Shizuku wasn’t sure if the truths that came to light would destroy her, or give her the chance to change.

Either way, there was still potential there. She had to choose to fight, not run away. It might take a lot of effort, but it was the only path that would let her carve out her own future.

"If this plan fails, you will pay with your life," she told Shizuku.

"It took you long enough to threaten me," Shizuku said. "Of course, I don't plan on holding back my criticism, either."

"But your lectures are seriously depressing."

"Nobody *enjoys* being lectured."

Shizuku had experienced a fair amount of deception herself, and she readied herself for the next chapter in her story. This choice could put her in danger one day. She was well aware of that.

But right now, she couldn't stop. She continued making her way forward, eager to keep moving.

After all, she'd come to the realization that *this* was the kind of person she wanted to be.

※

There were, broadly speaking, two ways to oust the king in Kisk's royal court: You could either resort to violence, or you could do it by legitimate means.

When Faneet first explained this to Shizuku, she had, quite reasonably, asked what he meant by a "legitimate" ousting. It seemed that in Kisk there still existed a body of nobles that decided whether the monarch should vacate the throne.

"It includes a total of twelve families, the most powerful of which are the royal lineages of the three countries that formed Kisk: Kiaph, Tylga, and Ladmai. These families have the authority to depose the king if they can secure a majority vote."

"Huh? That's all it takes?" Shizuku remarked, sounding relieved.

Faneet nodded, his face expressionless.

"Yes. This system has only been used to dethrone a king at one point in history. In truth, it's a half-forgotten system, and it can only really be implemented if the heads of those three families come to a consensus. That's the part you need to be cautious about."

"Cautious? In what way?"

"It's the heads of those three families who decide on how royalty is disciplined. If the king grants his permission and two of the three heads agree, a member of the royal family can be punished. If His Majesty were to hand Princess Ortea over to Farsas, it would have to go through that three-family council first."

"Oh... So we need to stop that from happening."

Shizuku couldn't read the documents Faneet had spread out in front of him, but she was aware of about half of the news manipulation and persuasion strategies that were being employed. It seemed like Ortea was miles better than Shizuku when it came to handling these sorts of affairs. The princess had been covertly bringing magistrates into her fold and swiftly expanding her schemes to include nobles and lords.

Faneet tapped one of the papers with his rugged finger.

"It's practically impossible to win over the Marquis of Tylga, so we'll have to find a way to get the other two on our side."

"Why is it impossible?" Shizuku asked.

"The princess had the Marquis of Tylga's nephew executed."

"...Oh."

Shizuku got the urge to face-plant into the sea of papers, but she resisted, aware that she wasn't in a position to do so. She was so disappointed that her jaw almost dropped.

Faneet expanded on the story.

"He was the one in the wrong, though. Despite his uncle getting him a job as a magistrate, he embezzled money from the castle."

"So the princess wasn't really at fault."

"He kicked up a fuss and begged her to summon his uncle, but she ignored his pleas and ordered his execution, having received barely any input from anyone else."

"Yeah, I doubt his uncle's going to budge, then. Let's pin our hopes on the other two."

This was just one of a number of similar conversations they'd had, and Shizuku's head hurt. She heaved a deep sigh and got Faneet to look for the documents regarding the other two families. Once he found them, she picked them up.

"Ideally, we want to find this missing person," Shizuku said.

"People are out searching for him. Will he *really* be able to sort things out?"

"I think so. If all goes well, he'll be able to turn this situation around. For now, just trust me."

Shizuku flashed Faneet a confident smile, to which he responded with a silent nod.

He must have had plenty of opinions of his own, so Shizuku was simply grateful that he was willing to trust her.

Faneet didn't exactly excel at scheming. Unlike Niké, who'd come up with his own schemes after hearing Shizuku's general plan, Faneet stayed glued to Ortea's side. Shizuku couldn't imagine that Beelhurse would harm Ortea before handing her over to Farsas, but given that the princess was at the center of everything, she couldn't be left unguarded. For the time being, having the right people in the right places was key.

Shizuku looked back toward the room where Ortea was.

"And Farsas is in the picture now, too... Won't they just go home?"

"The Farsasian army hasn't even made it out of Rosta yet. Extricating themselves and advancing toward the castle city won't be an easy feat, though. Weisuz Fortress is beside the highway, and it's manned by people who specialize in anti-magic defense. Not even Farsas will be able to defeat it easily," Faneet explained. "...Still, I hope they don't call for reinforcements. In truth, I'd like us to form a proper army, but without the king's permission, that's not going to happen."

"Ah, if only the king or His Majesty were on our side."

Shizuku was talking about both Beelhurse and Lars, but Faneet didn't respond. It didn't seem like he'd understood what she'd meant.

She returned her attention to the documents. Having picked out a certain word, a thoughtful expression appeared on her face.

"Hey. Can't we make use of this guy?"

"Who?" asked Faneet.

Both of them settled their gazes on a particular line in the report about the Marquis of Ladmai.

Faneet's eyes widened. It seemed as though he'd cottoned on to her idea.

The two rose to their feet, seemingly having reached similar conclusions, and headed over to Ortea.

Just three days later, Beelhurse would have formulated his views on Farsas's invasion and suggested to the leaders of the three families that Ortea was to blame.

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The breeze had been blowing steadily for several days, yet it seemed to have gotten even stronger.

The Farsasian army had set up camp in a forest, from which the distant Weisuz Fortress was visible to the north. In an effort to illuminate their dim early-morning surroundings, they decided to fuel their lights using magic rather than fire.

It had been seven days since Farsas invaded Kisk territory. Farsas had triumphed in the early stages of the battle, but Kisk's army had taken refuge in Weisuz Fortress, leading Farsas to temporarily halt its advance.

Farsas had started by attacking Kisk's army for two reasons: to prove that it was stronger, even with a comparable number of troops, and to immobilize them for a while.

Kisk had launched attacks from its fortress base on four occasions, which Lars had handled by getting his main army to retreat. During these periods, he'd assigned a separate squadron to Azulia and had her occupy Caribala. At the same time, he had people track the movements of noble lords within the Rosta region.

Although Rosta was part of Kisk's territory, the country had abandoned it like a sacrificial pawn. There was a chance that Rosta would decide to fight back of its own accord. With this suspicion in mind, Farsas investigated the situation, but even those who'd been openly pressuring the people of Casola before the Farsasian invasion remained silent. It was as if half of them were dead.

"We've come all this way just to be ignored," Lars remarked, having heard some brief updates. "Perhaps we should go somewhere they can't avoid us, like the castle city."

"I'd advise against that. You'd need another hundred thousand troops."

"It'd cost money. And the magistrates wouldn't like it."

Farsas wanted to force Kisk, or perhaps Rosta, to surrender without mobilizing any more troops. If Farsas took over Caribala and made it part of its own territory, they could eliminate any future concerns.

Lars, however, also wanted to punish the castle. After all, he knew that Kisk was behind the recent attempts to assassinate him.

Sitting on a tree stump, the king drew an indecipherable picture on the ground using a stick. Had he been a child, someone might have scolded him for not paying attention, but given his status, no one dared to admonish him.

After finishing his drawing of a four-legged bird, the king suddenly looked up.

"What's the status of the fortress?"

"There's a protective barrier covering the whole thing, and it's just as tough as ever. Unauthorized mages can't formulate spells while they're within its range."

"What if they formulate the spell outside it and *then* enter?"

"The moment they cross the boundary, the spell is rendered futile. Essentially, our forces cannot use any magic, be it defensive or healing, in the vicinity of the fortress."

"Right."

This was a defense spell of the highest grade, and it took far too much manpower and magical energy to maintain it consistently. Days had passed since they'd confirmed the existence of the barrier, and the strain was probably

increasing with each passing day.

Still, considering Farsas's forces were stationed nearby, the fortress couldn't simply abandon its defensive formation. It was Kisk's lifeline.

Lars twirled his dead branch in the air.

"Shall we bomb them from outside the area?"

"It's highly likely that they'd be able to protect themselves against the bombs, considering how far away we'd be. Why don't we call Leuticia instead?"

"No way. She'll get mad at me."

The king's council members weren't sure why she'd get angry at him, but they got the impression that it didn't stop at just one reason. As silence was threatening to descend on the area, the king suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, I know something that might work. Sitting around waiting is so boring. I guess we'll have to topple that fortress after all."

"Huh?!"

Ignoring his ministers' shocked reactions, the king began to issue rough instructions. A few of them glanced apprehensively at him, disconcerted by the sudden improvement of his mood, but none of them dared say a word.

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"There's nothing even remotely endearing about that girl... What's the point of her serving the princess...?" Jired muttered cantankerously as he turned a corner in the corridor.

Over a week had passed since he'd let Shizuku slip through his fingers, and he still hadn't gotten over his frustration.

Having shown up out of the blue, Shizuku had carried out an experiment related to the epidemic. Her arrival had elicited both jealousy and relief from the mages, and their curiosity had prompted them to take a closer look at her. When they did, they'd noticed she seemed remarkably young for her age.

Her small face and big, dark eyes reminded them of a doll from a foreign land. She tended to dress plainly, but if she were to wear a fancy dress, let down her hair, and put on some lipstick, he figured she wouldn't be *that* much of an

eyesore.

It occurred to Jired that he might as well give her a “helping hand.” For now, she was busy teaching children how to communicate and testing out teaching materials, but once she had outlived her usefulness, the princess was sure to dispose of her.

That seemed like a bit of a waste. If she was going to be deemed unnecessary, Jired reasoned that he might be able to have her for himself.

However, contrary to his expectations, Ortea showed no signs of letting go of Shizuku. When Beelhurse had told him that Shizuku had been appointed a certain child’s tutor, he was honestly disappointed.

By the time she was freed from Ortea’s clutches, she would have turned into a fully grown woman. For the time being, it was hard to tell how old she was, and it was her dangerously youthful appearance that drew him in. Once she grew out of it, she’d lose all value.

The opportunity Jired had been hoping for, however, arrived surprisingly quickly.

In a self-destructive act, Ortea had called Farsas into her nation’s borders, prompting the king to decide to disown his sister. With the princess gone, Jired could do whatever he liked with the girl, and there’d be no one to reprimand him for it. In fact, he figured that Beelhurse must have ordered the spell to be cast on Shizuku because he was aware of his aide’s desires.

However...she’d fled just at the pivotal moment.

Being reined in by the princess’s detestable aide was infuriating enough, but the look Shizuku had given him only intensified his anger. Her glare was too grown-up. There was nothing remotely girlish about it.

“That wench... Just you wait.”

Beelhurse had called the three most influential families in the country for a meeting. Soon Ortea would be arrested as a criminal and handed over to Farsas. Then there would be no one left to protect Shizuku. She wasn’t exceptionally beautiful, so he doubted he’d have to fight for her.

Smirking at the thoughts swirling in his mind, Jired spotted a door opening farther down the hallway and slowed his pace.

Out stepped none other than Shizuku. When she spotted Jired, she appeared momentarily startled, but she standoffishly turned her back to him.

Her defiant attitude made Jired raise his voice.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“None of your business,” Shizuku snapped.

The moment the words left her lips, she started charging in the opposite direction. Jired hurriedly followed her. He grabbed hold of her wrist just as she was turning the corner, and Shizuku looked up at him, glowering.

“What?”

“What happened to your pain?” said Jired. “Did you give your body to that lapdog?”

“...‘Lapdog’?”

Shizuku brushed his hand away, but Jired had no intention of letting go.

She frowned and placed her opposite hand on her hip. Grasping the hem of her white tunic, she lifted it slightly to reveal her slender waist. Her skin was pale, untouched by the light of the sun, and looked as fresh as a new sapling. The magic sigil he’d etched into her was still there.

Jired gulped.

That kind of spell was typically reserved for the king’s own women.

The combination of the restrictive sigil and her youthful skin emitted the kind of irresistible allure that only something secret could.

“Happy now?” she asked, her voice tinged with mockery.

As soon as Jired relaxed his grip, she pulled herself free and leaped away.

Her guarded demeanor resembled that of a wild animal, ready to flee at any instant. Then Jired recalled a rumor he’d heard and posed Shizuku a question.

“Wait. You like men with money, don’t you?”

He'd overheard some court ladies gossiping about her in the castle. She must have been on the hunt for an older, wealthy man who could support her when Ortea, her master, fell from grace.

Jired's impolite inquiry made Shizuku's face contort with anger for a moment...but she soon answered back with a defiant retort.

"So what if I do? You're nothing more than a royal court mage."

"Don't lump me with that lapdog. Taking care of you wouldn't be a big strain on my finances."

"Prove it, then," said Shizuku. "Give me something that proves you're telling the truth."

She seemed to be putting up a brave front. Her refusal to reject him outright was evidence of that.

Jired smiled, realizing that he had the upper hand. "Very well. How about I give you some jewels?"

"A cast-off from His Majesty? That won't prove anything."

"I'll have your name engraved on them. That should make it clear."

Engraving someone's name on expensive jewelry required a skilled craftsman, as well as a considerable sum of money.

Hearing that, Shizuku's expression softened a little.

"If you bring something that fancy, I might give it some consideration."

Although she maintained her stubborn attitude, Jired found her words quite charming.

He nodded arrogantly and turned on his heel.

"Look forward to it. I'll have it done right away."

He'd been planning on dolling her up anyway; a single piece of jewelry was nothing.

Jired left, unable to conceal his delight, and Shizuku watched with undisguised contempt as he disappeared down the hallway.



“The Marquis of Tylga has arrived.”

The magistrate’s announcement elicited a deep nod from Beelhurse.

The patriarchs of the three royal lineages that had birthed Kisk were all present. Just one week had passed since the king arranged for them to be summoned. Their discussions would be conducted according to protocol, but it was obvious what conclusion they would come to: The princess would be blamed for Farsas’s sudden invasion.

The Marquis of Tylga, whose nephew had been executed by the princess, wasn’t the only person who knew of Ortea’s proclivities—it was something most of the kingdom was aware of. She’d thoughtlessly summoned Lord Tigor of Rosta to the royal court, leading not only to internal conflict but also to the Farsasian invasion. This unruliness was too much for even her older brother to ignore.

It had all gone according to plan.

The king signed the documents he’d prepared and handed them to a magistrate.

While the Marquis of Tylga had only just arrived, the other two marquises had secretly been staying in the castle for the past two days. Now that they were all present, the king wanted to begin their discussions immediately. It would be a nuisance if Ortea got wind of their gathering, and more importantly, urgent action was required if they wanted to stop Farsas.

“Gather the three marquises. We’ll start our discussions in one hour.”

There was another matter that wasn’t on the king’s agenda but troubled him nonetheless: the issue of the commoner who worked for his sister.

From what he’d heard over the last few days, it sounded like she’d already found someone else to take care of her. Perhaps the pain had become too much to bear, or she had realized that she had no future with her previous master. Either way, she’d distanced herself from Ortea.

The king still didn’t know where to find the child she’d been tasked with educating, but she had probably hidden him, either because she’d learned of Ortea’s role in Farsas’s invasion or to protect herself. In any case, he’d have

plenty of time to search for the boy once Ortea was gone.

He'd known his sister for so many years—all her life—yet abandoning her didn't give him any distress.

He'd considered killing her before he handed her over, but Ortea was a beautiful young woman. She'd be more valuable alive. If he were dealing with a different country, he might have second-guessed his decision, but the king of Farsas wasn't the type to be swayed by a woman's flattery.

Beelhurse didn't know the full details, but the man had once banished a beloved concubine whose company he'd kept for many years because she'd tried to interfere with the governing of the kingdom. If Ortea was handed over as a criminal, he doubted she'd be treated any better than one.

The king stood up, lifting his long, royal robe off the ground. He looked up arrogantly as he began striding ahead.

This was his chance to create a nation of his own—one that belonged to him and *only* him. It wouldn't be an easy task without Ortea around to help, but at least he'd be able to rid himself of the inferiority complex that had tormented him for so many years.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

As soon as Beelhurse stepped into the discussion room, the three marquises stood up and bowed. Beelhurse glanced at them, maintaining his regal demeanor.

The Marquis of Kiaph—who, like Tryphina, was a descendant of Kiaph's royal family—was a calm man in his mid-fifties. Exuding a generous air, he always wore a gentle smile, and his judgments were spot-on. He had studied politics alongside the previous king in his youth, and Beelhurse had always trusted him like a real uncle. Until three years earlier, the Marquis of Kiaph had frequently offered his candid advice to Ortea—albeit with a frown—however, due to his wife's declining health, he'd retreated to his domain and had seldom been seen at the castle since. Nonetheless, recent events had likely soured his opinion of Ortea. He was sure to believe it was time for her to be distanced from the governing of the country.

The same age as the Marquis of Kiaph, the Marquis of Ladmai always appeared self-important, but beneath that facade, he was always nervously assessing the situation. He'd never stood up to Ortea, but that was only because she was such a formidable ruler and he was cowed by her authority. If he realized Ortea had no future ahead of her, he'd naturally align with Beelhurse. He was, in a sense, an easy man to manage, always siding with the stronger party.

The youngest and most intimidating of the three, the Marquis of Tylga was an unsmiling, hard-faced individual. Fearless—or more accurately, outspoken, no matter whom he was talking to—he often rebuked Beelhurse for letting Ortea have too much freedom. This annoyed Ortea, and it was suspected that she'd executed his nephew partly to spite him. He was the last person who'd support Ortea—in both public and private matters.

As long as Beelhurse could get two of the three to agree with him, Ortea's disposal would be decided.

That said, Beelhurse felt like he'd be able to get all three of them on his side; Ortea had become more of a poison than a remedy.

Once the king took his seat, the others resumed theirs. A magistrate who was one of the king's closest aides bowed and began reading out the agenda. Everybody listened in silence as he outlined the current situation and pointed out Ortea's wrongdoings.

After the reading concluded, Beelhurse let out a deep sigh, his eyes filled with a somber light as he looked around at his audience.

"For the reasons you've just heard, I, Beelhurse Neuskys Noid Kisk, have decided to strip Ortea Stiss Lyn Kisk of her royal status and hand her over to Farsas as a criminal. I am abiding by protocol by requesting your endorsement."

His voice shook at the end of every word he uttered—not from guilt, but from exultation. It was only then that he realized he'd wanted to do away with her for a long, long time.

If he'd known how things would play out, he wouldn't have hesitated to order her killed when she'd been kidnapped as a child. Perhaps then, he would have led a different life, not this wretched life of a figurehead king who was

exasperatingly dependent on his sister.

But it was too late for regrets now. Beelhurse's lips turned downward, giving a sorrowful cast to his face. To the other men, he just seemed sad that he had to punish his sister.

The first person to speak before the outwardly mournful king was the moderate Marquis of Kiaph.

"Did Her Highness truly intend to go that far? What if she hadn't expected Farsas to invade?"

"If that were the case, I don't understand why she'd summon Tigor. It was clear that dragging him away from Rosta would only increase the tension around Casola," rebutted the Marquis of Tylga.

This brought a frown to the Marquis of Kiaph's face. Known for being a loving husband, he turned to Beelhurse, a steadfast look in his kind eyes.

"If the situation in Rosta deteriorated due to Tigor's absence, the fault lies with Tigor for neglecting to raise a decent successor. Farsas's invasion is in no way beneficial to Her Highness, so there's little proof that it was intentional."

The Marquis of Kiaph had taken issue with the lack of apparent benefits for the princess—but the advantages were unclear only because Beelhurse was keeping Vied's existence secret. If he were to reveal that a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal lineage was under the castle's roof, there was a risk the men would demand that the baby be offered to Farsas to stop the war. Beelhurse, however, wanted to keep Vied as an extra form of insurance.

For the time being, not even Farsas knew about the baby. It would be possible to continue concealing him. No matter what Ortea said to Farsas, Beelhurse could keep feigning ignorance. After all, the king of Farsas didn't know a thing about the child.

Beelhurse couldn't respond to the Marquis of Kiaph's counterargument. The Marquis of Tylga, interpreting his anxious reaction as proof of his desire to protect his sister, shared his view:

"I consent to the punishment of Her Highness. I want to make it clear who's to blame."

“I’m against the idea. Whether it’s right to punish her or not, I can’t consent to the princess of Kisk being handed over to Farsas as a criminal. That would be akin to surrendering to Farsas’s army.”

The Marquis of Tylga’s and the Marquis of Kiaph’s opinions were split right down the middle. On the inside, Beelhurse lamented their reactions.

It was a shame that they were on opposite sides of the debate, but this situation wasn’t entirely unexpected. If anything, the king should have been happy that he’d received a definitive yes from the Marquis of Tylga.

The decision rested with the Marquis of Ladmai. He was sure to support the king over the princess. He was the one with the most authority, after all; in the past, he’d felt obliged to comply with Ortea’s demands out of pure fear, so he wouldn’t pass up the chance to have her expelled.

As the room’s focus naturally shifted toward the Marquis of Ladmai, the portly man looked around nervously. Then he uttered a quiet, breathy statement.

“I-I’m against it...”

“What?!”

Beelhurse couldn’t help raising his voice, so he was grateful that the Marquis of Tylga let out a similar yell a moment before he did. Once the king had collected his thoughts, which were dominated by surprise, he cast an imposing gaze upon the Marquis of Ladmai.

“Go on, then. Let us hear your opinions, not just your conclusion.”

“His opinions on what, dear brother?”

Her voice rang out clearly.

Its bewitching sound resonated throughout the room, causing a shift in the atmosphere.

It was immediately obvious who the voice belonged to. There was only one person who could call Beelhurse her brother.

The king looked at the open door, his eyes wide.

The three influential noblemen turned around in surprise. Behind them stood the princess—the focus of their discussion. Even the magistrates and guards were staring at her.

“What’s this all about?” she asked.

Ortea flashed an enchanting smile, then strode elegantly into the room. She walked past the other three men who were seated and came to a stop in front of the king. Beelhurse trembled with fear as he looked at the princess’s beautiful face.

“...Why are you here? Who told you about this?”

“What a strange thing to say. You’re deciding *my* fate, are you not? You should have invited me.”

Dressed in a gray dress rather than her usual fine silks, Ortea gave her brother a dazzling smile. Only the king, seated right in front of her, could tell that it wasn’t genuine.

How much had been leaked to her? How long had she known?

All he knew was that she was already aware of the whole story. Gritting his teeth, he narrowed his eyes at her.

“I am no criminal,” she said to the room. “It seems as though you three have already come to the same conclusion. I doubt this was how my brother hoped things would play out...”

The king glanced past his sister at the Marquis of Ladmai, who hurriedly averted his gaze. The fact that Ortea already knew the outcome suggested that she’d already meddled in the discussion. Beelhurse, who’d been convinced that Ortea was oblivious to his plans, felt a bitter taste in his mouth that he couldn’t swallow. His tongue felt rough, as though it was covered in sand.

“What have you done, Ortea?” he asked.

“Nothing. I have some ideas I’d like to pursue, though.”

“...What ideas?”

Ortea was a beautiful woman.

The gap between her appearance and her personality gave her an unsettling allure. It invoked fear in people, but it was powerful enough to stop them from looking away. It was the kind of twisted beauty that women who brought countries to ruin supposedly possessed.

Even those who had perished at her capricious whims wouldn't have been able to deny her beauty. That was how powerful her mysterious charm was.

That was not the Ortea before him now.

She exuded a different aura, like a flower blooming proudly on a clear day, and the sight of her confident smile made Beelhurse shudder. The selfish and callous princess who he'd known for so long—the one he'd assumed was wrapped around his little finger—now seemed like his equal or even his superior.

He could sense defiance in those amber eyes that looked at him as if he was her enemy. His thin lips began to quiver.

Without waiting for the king's response, Ortea turned around, the hem of her dress fluttering as she moved.

Ortea, the Bewitching Princess of Kisk, adopted a self-assured stance and stood next to her brother, placing a hand on his shoulder. With the youthful, passionate gaze of someone who wasn't afraid of a challenge, she looked at the three noble patriarchs.

"I...Ortea Stiss Lyn Kisk, demand the abdication of the current king, Beelhurse, as first in line to the throne. As such, in accordance with ancient law, I wish to hold a Twelve Family Council. Summon the heads of the families."

Beelhurse could hardly believe what he was hearing. As soon as the meaning of her words sank in, the king kicked his chair away and jumped to his feet. He looked at his sister. His right hand was clenched into a fist, as if he was about to punch her.

"You...! What do you think you're doing...?"

"Despite the urgency of the situation, Beelhurse, you haven't even bothered mobilizing your army. Instead, you've chosen to lie low and wait for Farsas to go past. Your actions do not befit the image of a king entrusted with a Great

Nation. If you will not wield your military authority, then I will gladly take it off your hands—along with your crown.”

“What nonsense! You were the one who started this...”

“Or perhaps you remained idle because you wanted the opportunity to expel me?” Ortea continued. “There’s someone who claims to have imprisoned Tigor under your orders. Which one of us *really* caused the Casola uprising?”

At these final words, everybody in the room fell silent. They directed their confused, suspicious looks toward Beelhurse.

If Beelhurse were the kind of person who could handle the unexpected in a composed manner, the atmosphere could have calmed down, and Ortea’s words would have been dismissed as mere slander.

Unfortunately for him, however, he wasn’t the type. The feeling of inferiority he’d harbored for years had left him so shaken up that he couldn’t even defend himself against Ortea’s provocation.

Instead, he just let out a groan-like murmur, inviting a fleeting look of pity from Ortea.

Before long, though, she shifted her gaze away from the king and turned her attention to the bewildered trio. Speaking in the kind of authoritative tone that one would expect from a royal, she made a declaration.

“As the heir to the throne, I formally request the council be summoned. Until the discussion reaches its conclusion, the king and the marquises shall serve as the decision-making body of our nation.”

Ortea was implementing an ancient system that dated back to the founding of Kisk. While this emergency governing body was legally binding, it had never been put into practice before. Realizing they’d be the ones to shoulder the responsibility, the three men gulped.

Ortea’s elegant smile, however, eased their tension.

“Let’s start by addressing the matter of Farsas. Their troops are currently in Rosta...and I intend to confront them with military force. Kisk is not a timid nation that stays silent when it’s being encroached upon. That stance remains

unchanged, no matter who we're up against. Anyone who attempts to invade must be pushed away, even if their attempts aren't completely serious. Now then, nobles, tell me whether you consent."

They were entering an interim period before the next ruler was officially chosen. Eventually, the heads of the three families, tasked with defending their nation's pride against the impending attack from a rival nation, agreed to Ortea's plans.

"You have a good...*attendant* looking out for you," the Marquis of Kiaph said to the princess as they exited the room, leaving Beelhurse to dwell in his despondency.

Realizing who he was talking about, Ortea hemmed and hawed.

Shizuku had followed Ortea's orders and negotiated with the two marquises who'd arrived early. Although she'd instructed Shizuku to "expose Beelhurse's faults," Ortea wasn't sure what she'd actually discussed with them. The Marquis of Kiaph seemed to look at her like a father watching his daughter grow up, which made Ortea feel uncomfortable.

"Your Highness, I'll pass on your invitation right away, but it'll be at least a week until the council can get together. There will be a lot of talk around you, so take care until then."

"I will. Thank you," Ortea replied, surprised at how meekly she'd responded.

The Marquis of Kiaph smiled gently and started to walk away.

"He's a nice man," Shizuku had told her. "When you talk to him face to face, you'll see what I mean."

Ortea watched him until he was out of sight.

The first words he'd shared with her had been punctuated by a pause. The princess, however, knew what he *really* meant.

"You have a good friend looking out for you."

At least, that's what it had sounded like to Ortea.

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The three most important marquises held their council meeting earlier than

anticipated, which unnerved Ortea, but it sounded like they'd navigated the situation without any issues. Relieved to hear Faneet's message, Shizuku headed straight to Vied.

On her way there, she ran into Willett in the corridor.

"Have you received some good news, Shizuku?" she asked.

"I have, actually. It feels like I've passed all my classes for this semester."

"What does that mean?"

The Twelve Family Council—what could be called the main event—was yet to convene, but it still felt like a celebration was in order. Willett, who'd never seen Shizuku so happy, cocked her head to one side.

"You don't have someone special in your life, do you? Your taste in men was pretty unexpected, though. I mean, a guy over forty with money to burn? Sounds like you want a provider, not a boyfriend!"

"Well, I guess. But I'm done with that stuff now."

"Someone like you should go for a someone a bit younger... Huh?!"

The girl, who'd spread the news of Shizuku's dating requirements around the entire castle, leaped into the air.

"What?! You're 'done with it'?"

"Yeah. I got what I wanted."

Willett tilted her head suspiciously, but Shizuku couldn't put it any other way. Shizuku's professed "preferences" had just been bait, and there was no one else she needed to lure in. All she had to do now was wait for it to bear fruit.

Shizuku raised both of her hands in the air and stretched wide. Then she continued marching down the corridor with a spring in her step.

How had things come to this?

All he knew for certain was that Ortea and that girl had set him up. Several hours had passed since the meeting of the three noble families had ended in failure, and Jired, who'd been summoned by the king, groveled on his hands and knees in front of him.

“Y-Your Majesty... You’re mistaken! It’s nothing more than a rumor!”

“A rumor, you say? We both know it’s the truth. You were colluding with that girl. I was impressed that you’d managed to win her over. Little did I know you were actually committing an act of treason. Betraying your own king—what an interesting choice.”

The first time Jired had realized that something was off was immediately after the discussion, when the Marquis of Ladmai had asked him to give his regards to the princess. He didn’t have a clue what he’d meant by that. When the king made the same comment, he expressed his bewilderment and fled.

Jired couldn’t understand why people were asking him to pass on their greetings to Ortea, but those doubts were cleared up when the king summoned him. As it turned out, people assumed *he* was the one leaking information to Ortea through Shizuku.

Allegedly, Shizuku had spoken to the two marquises before the meeting and convinced them that disposing of Ortea was unjust and ill-advised. People suspected that he’d been the one to notify Shizuku of the two key marquises’ arrival and told her where they were staying.

“D-don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “I haven’t done a thing...”

“Someone saw you talking to that girl near the room where she and the Marquis of Ladmai had met.”

“I-it’s not what you think...”

Jired hadn’t realized that Shizuku and the marquis had been *negotiating* when he’d stumbled across her. Upon learning of this, Jired desperately tried to defend himself. However, the king was in a rage after the unsuccessful meeting and had no intention of listening.

“Do you recognize this? Or do you want to come up with even more excuses?”

“H-how did you get that?! That’s preposterous! Why...?”

Jired had seen the piece of jewelry in front of him before. The necklace, which had been kept in his house, had both his and Ortea’s names engraved on it—

alongside a pledge of loyalty.

Jired stared at it in disbelief. He'd asked to have Shizuku's name carved into it—not Ortea's. Yet the engraving undoubtedly bore the princess's name.

"Y-Your Majesty, y-you're mistaken. I..."

"A witness from your own residence claims that you summoned the artisan yourself and had it engraved."

"No! It wasn't Ortea's name I had engraved. It was..."

Before Jired could finish his sentence, Beelhurse picked up the necklace and threw it at his subordinate's face.

The man let out a shriek.

"Get out of here," the king spat in disdain as the man prostrated in front of him. "And don't ever show yourself in front of me again!"

"Y-Your Majesty... Wait..."

Beelhurse didn't respond to Jired's pleas. Seething with anger, the king stormed out of the room.

Ejected from the royal chamber, Jired walked through the castle corridors, each step heavy with frustration and shame.

All he could think about was the woman who'd pretended to bargain with him. In reality, she'd just been deceiving him.

"That wench. How dare she..."

She must have threatened or sweet-talked the craftsman to get him to change the name on the engraving. Only someone who knew the necklace was being gifted could have done such a thing. She'd undoubtedly picked a time when Beelhurse was too angry to make any calm decisions to reveal it; Jired had ended up incurring the king's wrath and being expelled, exactly as his adversary had planned.

Regaining the king's trust would take more than just dispelling his doubts. He'd need to do something constructive if he wanted to get back in the king's good graces. His first plan of action was to make Shizuku suffer and force her to

divulge the full story.

As he was searching for Shizuku, hoping to put this plan into action, a mage appeared with a sly smile on his face.

Niké, clearly aware of all that had transpired, made no effort to conceal his derision. His attitude caused Jired to grit his teeth.

“What are you doing here?” said Jired.

“Nothing much. Just came to catch a glimpse of the man who was destroyed by a woman’s tricks.”

“You bastard...”

Jired instinctively began formulating an attack spell—but he stopped the moment he remembered the person he was dealing with. A former child prodigy, Niké had become a royal mage at an early age. Somewhere along the line, he’d been lured over to Ortea’s side, but the abilities he’d demonstrated up until that point had been far superior to Jired’s. Rumor had it that he’d specialized in assassination after becoming the princess’s aide. If Jired succumbed to the mage’s cheap attempt to provoke him and ended up in a fight, he’d be the one to suffer.

Even so, Jired couldn’t bring himself to back down. He followed Niké, who’d turned around with a grin.

Niké had started ascending one of the castle’s spires, and he glanced back at Jired with a sneer.

“Did you like those jewels?” he asked.

“That was *your* doing?!”

“I don’t know—was it? I’ve been so busy, I can’t even remember. I doubt the princess would appreciate that kind of jewelry, though. She *hates* anything mediocre.”

Niké had basically admitted his guilt. As he ascended the spiral staircase that ran along the outside of the tower, Jired gave the other mage a hateful look. He swiftly closed the distance between them and grabbed Niké by the shoulder.

“You... I won’t let you get away with this... I won’t forgive either of you!”

“What are you going to do about it, then?”

Niké abruptly turned around, the intimidating look in his eyes making Jired momentarily catch his breath.

The young mage had been to different places and taken on different jobs throughout his life. Niké was in his early twenties—so he’d only been alive for about half of Jired’s life—but he’d experienced far more than the older man, who’d made himself all too comfortable inside the royal court.

Niké’s strong, confrontational gaze made Jired take a half step back. When he looked over the railing, he suddenly realized they were much higher up than he’d thought.

There was no one around. Looking down into the abyss below, Jired froze, and Niké smirked coldly at him.

“Well, which do you prefer: killing yourself over being abandoned by the king, or killing yourself because a woman rejected you? Oh, and don’t forget being murdered for angering the king. That’s also an option.”

“W-wait. What?”

“You’re a mage. Use your magic.”

Before Jared could even cast a spell to resist, he was thrown into the air.

All of a sudden, it felt like he was floating.

His mind turned blank.

I need to use my magic, he thought—but all he could muster was a pointless scream.

“What? He killed himself? Really?”

“Seems so. Not that I care.”

Shizuku had covered the large meeting room desk with papers, and when Niké told her about Jired’s death, mixed feelings reflected on her face. She’d hoped that he’d be demoted to a meaningless post within the castle so that everyone could burden him with annoying tasks he’d hate doing. She’d never expected him to *kill* himself. Feeling responsible, Shizuku frowned.

"Hmm. I can't bring myself to feel any sympathy toward him, but I hope he rests easy."

"What are you talking about? Ah well. It is what it is. He would have tried to sabotage us as long as he was alive anyway."

"You might be right there. Still, jumping to your death is scary. I should know—I have firsthand experience."

"You do, huh?"

Niké clicked his tongue, casually swiping the teacup that Shizuku had been about to take a sip from out of her hand.

Shizuku almost protested, but in the end, she gave her busy colleague the benefit of the doubt and stood up to brew herself some more.

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The heads of the twelve families were summoned without problem.

All that was left to do was win them over and contend with Farsas.

An army of thirty thousand was still stationed at Weisuz Fortress. Ortea decided to send another fifty thousand troops as reinforcements and chose three generals to lead them. Since Kisk now had more than double the troops they had before, it was wise to demand that they push Farsas back to the border.

Immediately after this command was issued, however, the castle received the news that Weisuz Fortress had fallen.

General Dolfa, the commander of the fortress, couldn't hide the bitter look on his face as he contemplated the situation. Eleven days had passed since Farsas had invaded, and his troops had been left with no choice but to hunker down and rely on magic to protect them.

Kisk had been outwitted in the first stages of the conflict. The country's army had attempted to strike out from the fortress on several occasions, but Farsas's army repelled them every time, leaving Kisk unable to inflict any significant damage. While Kisk's defensive barrier stopped them from being completely annihilated, the road ahead still looked uncertain.

The deadline imposed by Beelhurse was only three days away, and General Dolfa was unsure what the next step would be. Still, as long as nothing eventful happened, he'd probably be able to follow the king's orders. That alone gave him some solace.

Dolfa asked for one of his regular updates to be sent to the castle, then gazed restlessly out the window.

It was an ordinary, pleasant day. Just an hour later, however, reports arrived indicating that Farsas had begun sending its forces toward the fortress.

"Farsas has lined up behind the defensive barrier. They're probably trying to drag our army out of it."

"I don't see what other explanation there could be."

The barrier was about twenty times the size of the fortress it centered around. Inside it, Farsas's forces were unable to wield magic, which meant they couldn't protect themselves from any of Kisk's magic attacks or heal the wounds inflicted on them. As mighty as the nation was, it seemed unlikely that they'd confront Kisk head-on in such a situation. Until that point, Kisk's troops had managed to evade relentless pursuit by hiding behind their protective barrier.

Dolfa instructed his officers to prepare for combat at a moment's notice, but he waited for the opportune moment to initiate the assault.

Meanwhile, Farsas advanced toward the fortress with their king leading the charge. It was like they were provoking Kisk's army, which was refusing to come out.

If the king was killed, the conflict would come to an end.

It was an obvious trap, but the temptation was too much to resist. Despite his qualms, Dolfa led his troops out of the fortress and toward Farsas's army, making sure they didn't leave the barrier.

The Farsasian troops had a forest behind them, while Kisk's army stood in front of the fortress. Desolate, open plains stretched out on either side. The twenty-thousand-strong Farsasian army had come head-to-head with the thirty thousand soldiers from Kisk. Unlike their previous skirmish, there were no hills

in sight to hinder either army's view.

While Farsas's troops stretched out in a loose arc along the edge of the barrier, the troops from the fortress clustered tightly together, anxious not to get separated.

In this situation, however, Kisk's defensive barrier made a bigger difference than the army's formation.

Kisk initially tried to target their enemy from a distance, but since King Lars was outside the barrier, all their attacks were deflected by the magic barrier protecting him. Even when their arrows landed right in front of him, the rival king looked unperturbed.

A sour expression appeared on the face of one of Kisk's mages.

"What shall we do, General?" he asked.

"...Don't move yet."

Farsas wanted to lure Kisk's forces out beyond the barrier, while Kisk wanted the opposite. Both sides were aware of each other's intentions—hence their reluctance to make a move.

In the end, it was Farsas that broke the stalemate.

Until that point, the Farsasian army refused to step over the boundary line—aware that doing so would result in the suppression of their magic powers. Now they'd crossed it as if it was nothing and begun their advance. Dolfa was caught by surprise, unsure whether to interpret this as a heroic decision or reckless bravery. Still, he quickly regained his composure and gave his envoy mage an order.

"Use magic to shoot the king down."

This could be Kisk's chance to win. Although he wasn't overly optimistic, Dolfa wasn't going to let the opportunity pass him by.

A team of mages created a giant fireball and launched it immediately. At that moment, however, their focus was solely on the defensive barrier. Kisk's army, which had repressed Farsas's magic abilities to gain the upper hand, had forgotten that Farsas had a similar trick up its sleeve.

As the fireball rushed toward him, Lars's double-edged sword flashed.

It seemed like an innocuous action, but the next moment, the flames vanished as if they'd never been there at all. Dolfa had never seen anything like it before, and he looked on in astonishment.

"Was that...Akashia?!"

Akashia was a sword that could nullify all magic. Dolfa, having witnessed the power of the one-of-a-kind sword with his own eyes, couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration. This was no time to be marveling at the king's weapon, though. Just as Dolfa was about to order another attack, in the distance, Lars raised Akashia into the air.

He drove the sword into the ground from atop his horse. Dolfa trembled at the sight.

"Akashia can't dispel the barrier, can it?"

"No... Not a chance. That barrier covers a huge area. Even if one part of it were to tear, the mages at the fortress could repair the damage before a hole had the chance to open up."

"Why is he doing that, then?" Dolfa asked.

He found out the answer right away.

Yet even after, he still couldn't grasp how it had happened.

Dolfa and his men froze, their eyes fixed on Farsas's army. Countless flaming arrows created by magic filled the air. Lars, standing with his back to them, pulled out his sword that he'd thrust into the ground and got to his feet.

With the eyes of a mischievous child, he smiled.

A single swing of Akashia wouldn't be enough to neutralize the vast defensive barrier.

That was what Truce, the head mage, had said when he sensed the barrier. Even if Akashia nullified a section of it, the inference caused would be minor. Like a drop of water in the ocean.

Truce's assessment, however, only applied if Akashia was the only weapon

used. Lars turned toward the mages behind him.

“Is this going to work?”

The king’s straightforward question garnered a nod from one mage, who had a sapphire magic implement attached to his right ear.

“If you’re happy with that area becoming a battlefield, then yes.”

“That’s fine.”

Success wasn’t guaranteed, but Lars just smiled, relaxed about the opportunity ahead of him.

The leader of the “most powerful kingdom on the continent” ordered his army to charge into Kisk’s barrier, leading from the front. He repelled the fireball aimed at him with one swing of the royal sword.

His sights were set on the core of the spell formation. A small crack would suffice—even if it *was* just a drop in the ocean. Lars held his sword aloft, then thrust it point-down into the structure of the spell.

With that, the barrier started to erode away.

“You idiot! I thought they couldn’t use magic!” Dolfa exclaimed in astonishment, having asked for a defensive wall to shield him from the downpour of flaming arrows.

Kisk had only been able to compete with Farsas because their magic abilities were suppressed. If that advantage was lost, simply having troops deployed outside their fortress would be risky for Kisk. Dolfa deliberated whether to retreat or attack as the enemy cavalry closed in.

Then he heard a mage say something in a raspy voice.

“The spell...is losing its effect. Their mages have infiltrated its structure...”

“What do you mean? Can’t you fix it?”

“I’ll try and contact the fortress...b-but they’re working at an extraordinary speed. More and more of the barrier is becoming ineffective, and at this rate—”

“I’ve heard enough!”

Dolfa didn’t understand the intricacies of magic. He ordered the mage to

attempt to repair the barrier, then went back to command his troops. He directed his entire army to focus their attacks on the main central part of Farsas's army where the king was located.

Kisk began advancing by mobilizing their troops, who had been stuck in one place, and charging directly at their enemy. When Lars worked out what they were doing, he got the central part of his army to slow down and boosted the speed of the troops on either side. Due to this difference in speed, the originally arc-shaped formation of Farsas's troops gradually bent out at the edges and took on a concave form. Aiming for the core of the enemy's forces, they were trying to lure Kisk's army into their midst.

Dolfa wasn't completely oblivious to Farsas's intentions. He initially began to slow down his troops' advance, but after having second thoughts, he urged them to speed up instead.

Right now, suddenly stopping their charge or changing direction would only cause confusion. Rather than doing that, he decided to attack the core of the opposing army and do away with the king, even if it meant running into Farsas's trap.

Letting out murderous yells, Kisk's forces began their assault. The flanks of Farsas's army swiftly attacked the sides of Kisk's, almost surrounding them in a semicircle. The metallic sound of swords colliding with shields immediately filled the grassland.

That was how Farsas's unexpected breach of the barrier marked the inception of the battle—one that would later become known as the Battle of Weisuz.

The protective barrier had been infiltrated. Even those who were keeping an eye on the spell from the fortress's many rooms picked up on this.

The mage in command turned pale but still ordered the spell formation to be repaired. Magic Kingdom or not, Kisk hadn't expected Farsas to do *that*. The king had used Akashia to destroy the barrier at its most vital point, then allowed magic power to seep in. This technology rewrote the formation itself, bit by bit, and instilled in the mages fear rather than admiration.

“Stop the infiltration of the barrier! Don't let it spread any further!”

It would likely be impossible to restore sections of the barrier that had lost their functionality, but if they let things continue as they were, Kisk's army would completely lose the upper hand.

When the mages heard how the battle was progressing, it made them even more apprehensive. Having failed to crush the main force of Farsas's army with their initial attacks, Kisk's army had broken through the enemy's left flank and were now attempting to retreat.

If the troops could make it back to an area where the barrier was still in effect, they could still turn the tide. Essentially, the fate of Kisk's army rested on the mages themselves.

Over thirty mages focused intently on the spell, sweating from the stress.

It was at that point that a message from the battlefield arrived at the fortress.

"Magic-enabled communication has been cut off, but I could tell this is a matter of grave concern," shouted a soldier who tumbled in through the open gate, followed by another ten or so soldiers and mages.

They weaved past the fortress's own troops, who seemed particularly tense about something, and asked to speak to the mages responsible for the protective barrier, then dashed to the office.

When the mages saw their guests, the battered appearance of the injured messenger filled them with panic.

"What's the news?" one of them asked. "Do you know a way of fixing the spell?"

"N-no... At this rate, it seems like the entire protective barrier is going to become ineffective."

"What?! How come? What are we supposed to do?"

"It's too late now..."

Hearing those words, the mage who'd been tasked with keeping the situation under control let out a groan—and immediately collapsed onto the floor.

"Huh?"

The mages behind him were stunned. A short dagger had been thrust deep into the fallen mage's chest.

The man, who'd been disguised as a messenger soldier, tossed the Kisk emblem he'd been wearing on his shoulder aside and gave an order to his underlings.

"Kill them."

"You scoundrels! You're from Farsas..." said one mage, who'd quickly worked out what was happening—but a dagger flew at his throat, silencing him.

With that, the room instantly transformed into the scene of a tragedy.

"It sounds like all the mages have been assassinated. The barrier is no more."

Lars had been wielding his sword on the front line when Harve gave him the news, and he responded with a simple nod.

"Good."

Letting out a maddened scream, a man lunged forward with his blade, only to be struck down by the king's next blow.

"Then take over the fortress as planned. Tell Truce to use a transit gate from inside to let in the other troops," instructed the king.

"Understood," replied Harve.

As Harve retreated to pass along the message, Lars skillfully handled the reins of his horse, charging ahead. He rode into a crowd of men and horses and swung his sword again. He struck down one of Kisk's soldiers without even giving him the chance to fight back—when suddenly, a battle-ax swung at him from the side with alarming speed, and he parried it with Akashia.

Dolfa had put all of his strength into that strike, yet it had been deflected. Brimming with fighting spirit, he fixed his gaze on Lars.

"King of Farsas. I challenge you to a duel!"

"Okay, but are you sure you're ready to die?"

This impudent remark prompted Dolfa to take a big, sideways swing of his axe. If the blow had landed, even the king's armor wouldn't have stopped his

insides from being crushed.

However, Lars took a step back, letting the axe cut through the air instead.

When the king realized that his opponent was the commander of Kisk's army, a fearless smile appeared on his face.

The Kisk army had started to retreat to the fortress, having sensed that their formation was at a disadvantage, but Dolfa had hastily ordered a counterattack, hoping that they could recover from their tragic situation.

Communication from within the fortress had become sporadic, and something seemed amiss. Dolfa's instincts, forged by years on the front line, told him that they'd never recover if they turned back now.

If General Dolfa were somewhat more inclined to look at the bigger picture, he might have chosen to abandon the fortress and withdraw from battle altogether. However, the gloom that had built up inside him after spending several days cooped up inside the fortress, as well as the deadline that Beelhurse had imposed on him, had taken that option away from him. Instead, Dolfa had attacked the king himself, brandishing his own battle-ax.

Each strike from the axe was weighty, and any one of them could have been fatal if it had landed, but Lars effortlessly parried them all. Lars wasn't scared of death. His blue eyes were impossible to read, which Dolfa found vaguely disquieting.

But then the king of Farsas quickly shifted his gaze to his left-hand side.

What had he seen? Dolfa didn't waste any time wondering—the fact that he'd looked away was an opportunity. Aiming for his opponent's neck, he struck with his axe.

Dolfa's weapon, however, never touched Lars.

With his eyes still directed in a different direction, the owner of Akashia swung his sword, severing Dolfa's right arm at the elbow. A heavy sound resonated as both axe and arm fell on the grassy field.

"Gahhhhhh!"

Dolfa's scream roared across the battlefield.

Immediately, magic flew toward them from the direction the king had been looking in, engulfing Dolfa. With one swift strike of Akashia, the protective barrier cast on the general shattered and red flames consumed him, reducing Dolfa's body to ashes.

The magic was so ferocious that flames spread to the surrounding area, and Lars grumbled to himself as he neutralized what was left of the spell.

"Who could that be, lashing out so recklessly even though I'm here? Someone with a long-standing grudge?"

The king's invincibility was a regular topic of hushed conversation among his staff. He readied his blood-stained sword and surveyed the battlefield.

With the stench of blood hanging in the air, it was becoming clear to anyone watching who was going to win.

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When Niké and Shizuku heard the news in the meeting room that Weisuz Fortress had fallen to Farsas, they were—unsurprisingly—too astonished to speak. A few moments later, Shizuku questioned the magistrate who'd brought them the news.

"Huh? How? Faneet said they had people there to maintain the magic defenses."

"About that... It seems Farsas was able to rewrite the barrier," answered the magistrate.

"Really? That's incredible," said Niké. "I didn't realize something like that was possible."

It might have been an incredible achievement—but right now, it was a serious problem. When Niké asked whether the princess had already heard the report, the magistrate told him she had. Apparently, Ortea had issued orders to recover soldiers who'd escaped from the battlefield and asked for the area around the fortress to be surveyed.

Once the magistrate had left, the pair exchanged looks.

"What are we going to do...? This is bad, right?" said Shizuku.

"It certainly is," agreed Niké. "The fortress is our strategic point in the southwest. Even in terms of fatalities, the losses are huge. Plus, if they create a transit ring in the fortress to help them replenish their forces, we're out of options."

"Maybe it's time to beg for their forgiveness," suggested Shizuku.

Niké's expression soured. It was as if he wanted to say, "If that was in the cards, we would have already done it."

Although it was hard for someone like Shizuku to comprehend, neither of the Great Nations could give in that easily. Shizuku had gotten into an argument with the princess after declaring her opposition to the war. After that, she'd been sent to deal with the twelve families instead.

She exhaled, her breath too shallow to be considered a sigh.

"Don't you have any hints to offer? Weaknesses King Farsas might have, for example?" Niké asked coolly as he rolled a hard candy across the map.

"Uh, carrots?" replied Shizuku.

"Tell me how that information's going to help us."

"It won't. Sorry."

It was true that Lars hated carrots so much that they made the color drain from his face, but Shizuku couldn't imagine how that knowledge would prove useful on the battlefield. Shizuku picked up the hard candy that Niké had rolled toward her and rested her chin on her hand.

"I mean, who am I to know what his weaknesses are?" said Shizuku. "All I know is that he's a horrible guy... Oh, and that Leuticia has him under her thumb."

"The princess?" replied Niké. "So he's weak when it comes to his younger sister?"

"She's important to him. It's almost like he can't go against her."

Just as they were having this exchange, a question came to Shizuku's mind.

If Ortea had had Lars as her older brother, how would she have turned out?

Would she have grown up without a care in the world? Lars would have never tricked his sister into committing evil deeds, tormented by jealousy.

“Hmm... Maybe things wouldn’t have worked out. It depends on whether they’d get along or not.”

“Don’t let your imagination go to such scary places. You’re making me want to quit being a royal court mage and go off and become a hermit instead.”

“I didn’t even say anything. And besides, you need to submit your resignation a month in advance.”

“You’re both here?” Faneet asked, making the pair jump to their feet. “We’ve found the person we’ve been looking for.”

Shizuku had requested this search some time ago, and she grinned.

“Th—that’s great. Just in time!”

“There’s an issue, though. You’ll have to come, too.”

“An issue? What is it?”

Faneet beckoned her over. Shizuku was puzzled, but she followed his instruction nonetheless.

Working under Ortea’s command, Shizuku had negotiated with two of the marquises before the three-family meeting. Initially, she secured the cooperation of the Marquis of Ladmai—who had a newly born grandchild—by promising priority access to the language education materials she was currently developing at the castle. Despite being criticized as “naive” and “stubborn” by those around her, Shizuku knew how to adapt her approach depending on who she was dealing with. She told the Marquis of Kiaph, a moderate, about the possibilities in Ortea’s future. With the timid Marquis of Ladmai, she mixed threats with the benefits she enticed him with.

Next, Shizuku needed to negotiate with a whole host of people in preparation for the Twelve Family Council. The person they’d been looking for was expected to play a significant role in those negotiations.

Shizuku cocked her head as she walked down the corridor with Faneet by her side.

“What’s wrong? Are they refusing to cooperate?”

“No. I’m sure they will. It’s just, the princess...”

“What about the princess?”

Shizuku had a bad feeling about what Faneet was going to say next. When Shizuku reached the princess’s chamber, she realized she could hear smashing sounds. This came as no real shock, but she still pressed her temples apprehensively.

“Oh... It’s happened, huh...?”

Shizuku felt the urge to hold her head in her hands in despair, but she couldn’t bring herself to turn a blind eye to what was happening. So she followed Faneet into the room.

Ortea’s chamber was always a mess, but on this occasion, it was an atrocious sight. The room’s owner was pacing around in fury, whacking pots and other ornaments onto the floor. The princess was barefoot, this being her own room; however, she must have cut her feet on some of the broken pieces, because traces of blood were smeared across the floor.

The injured princess, however, didn’t seem bothered by these wounds. Instead, she continued to take her emotion out on the objects around her.

“Why now, after all this time? Did you really think you could beg for my forgiveness and ask me to help your people?!”

“It’s not what you think, Your Highness. I just wanted to apologize for—”

“It’s too late!”

Entering the room, Shizuku looked at Tigor, who was prostrating in front of the princess, then at Ortea, who was in the middle of her fit of rage. Shizuku had anticipated that this would happen, but still hoped it wouldn’t. These two thoughts swirled in her mind.

Shizuku had asked Faneet to find Tigor because she believed his testimony had the potential to improve Ortea’s reputation and damage the king’s. Tigor felt guilty about what he’d done to Ortea in the past, whereas Beelhurze had jailed him, muzzled him, and caused turmoil in his domain.

If Tigor told the marquises the truth, that would be more effective than anything Ortea could say. At this moment in time, Shizuku felt like Ortea needed individuals like the Marquis of Kiaph and Tigor on her side—people who'd spent years cultivating strong reputations in society.

Ortea's angry yells echoed around the room.

"You just want to get everything off your chest to make yourself feel better! What will that achieve?! What's done is done!"

"You're not wrong about that. I committed a crime, whether I atone for it or not. I've been tormented by it for a long time. I want to make peace with that, so..."

Shizuku hadn't necessarily expected Tigor to confess his past wrongdoings. Upon finding out the truth, Ortea would realize Beelhurse had been working against her for a long time. Perhaps that knowledge would help her reach a conclusive decision.

At the same time, though, Shizuku wished the princess never had to find out the truth. The revelation could have crushed and broken Ortea's already warped psyche to its very core.

Still, the decision of whether to admit the truth was Tigor's to make. Only he could choose whether to confess his past sins, or to simply tell the princess about the king's recent misdeeds.

On their way to Ortea's room, Faneet had told Shizuku that it was Tigor, as she'd suspected, who'd arranged for the king to be assassinated. After a fierce argument with Beelhurse, Tigor had realized that if he left things to Beelhurse, the castle would become corrupt from the inside.

After Tigor had escaped from prison with the help of an underling, Beelhurse had relentlessly pursued the lord. If he attempted to return to Rosta or contact any of the other marquises, the king would have been able to find out where he was. Backed into a corner, Tigor had hired an assassin to put an end to the king's tyranny and salvage some freedom of his own.

Once the king was dead, he could return to Rosta and beg Farsas to surrender. Alternatively, he could once again ask Ortea for mercy. Praying that

the attempt would be successful, Tigor had been hiding in the storeroom of a small tavern in the city, desperately thinking of ways to solve his predicament, when the people Faneet had hired finally found him.

“I—!”

Ortea picked up a glass candlestick. Grasping it in her hand, she glared at Tigor—but then she finally noticed Faneet and Shizuku’s presence.

She addressed the girl who was frowning at her.

“Shizuku.”

“Yes?”

“Did you know about this?”

Shizuku couldn’t answer out loud, so instead, she used her eyes alone to communicate her answer.

For a moment, Ortea was astonished.

Cracks appeared in her amber eyes, making them look like shattered crystal balls.

As if someone had just told her that everything was meaningless, her gaze fell to the floor.

She tossed away the candlestick that she’d been clutching tightly, then retreated into her bedchamber at the back of the room, refusing to say a word.

With its owner gone, the room was left with a feeling of something closer to remorse than confusion. The bitter aftertaste left behind wasn’t directed at anyone in particular, yet it felt even more oppressive than the room’s atmosphere. It gradually settled on the floor covered in pieces of broken ornaments.

Shizuku shook her head, shaking off that oppressive feeling. She walked over to Tigor, who was still sitting on the floor, and crouched down beside him. The man looked a lot more haggard than when she’d last seen him, and he widened his eyes when he noticed her.

“You’re...”

“Sorry about last time. My name’s Shizuku. Thank you so much for coming here. I know this room’s a mess, but just be patient for a while. She’ll calm down soon.”

“But—”

“It’ll be fine. Just wait there.”

Shizuku asked Faneet to get the room tidied and have the princess’s wounds healed. Then, after locating a few objects, she knocked on the princess’s bedroom door. In a quiet voice, she called out to her master.

“Princess.”

There was no response. Undeterred, Shizuku knocked again.

“Princess, I’m coming in,” she said, her words more a warning than a question.

The door wasn’t locked. Shizuku stepped inside to find Ortea lying face-down on her bed. She was so still that it almost looked like she was dead, but she probably just didn’t want to move. Shizuku knelt by her master’s feet, examining the wounds there. Fortunately, none of the cuts looked to be very deep. Shizuku began to remove the small fragments that had sunk into her skin with a needle. Ideally, she would have preferred to use tweezers, but as crammed full of bizarre objects as Ortea’s room was, Shizuku hadn’t been able to find anything similar.

As Shizuku was wiping away the blood and removing the fragments, she heard a muffled voice coming from the bed.

“That hurts.”

“I’m not surprised. There’s quite a lot of blood,” said Shizuku.

“Why don’t you use magic?”

“I don’t have magic powers. A mage has been summoned for you.”

“I don’t want one.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?” Shizuku asked as she continued her work. Once she’d finally pulled out all the fragments and wiped away the blood with a

damp cloth, she wrapped strips of cloth tightly around Ortea's small feet.

Ortea didn't react. It almost seemed like she was asleep, but Shizuku knew she wasn't. Shizuku stayed by her side, not saying a word, and eventually the princess let out a small murmur.

"This...isn't going to work, is it?"

"What do you mean by that?" Shizuku asked.

"We can't change the past. I can't bring myself to forgive my brother or Tigor. Which means...people must feel the same way about me."

Regardless of what she'd done wrong and why, that was in the past now; she couldn't change it, no matter how hard she tried.

The damage was done, and the hatred still lingered.

In the same way that Ortea loathed the two men who'd betrayed her in her youth, there were probably a lot of people out there who'd continue to detest Ortea. They'd hold onto that hate for as long as they remembered the wounds she'd inflicted on them.

There was no way to undo that chain of negativity. The stronger the hatred inside of her, the more sensitive she'd be to the hatred directed at her.

"How could someone like me ever become queen?"

Ortea's honest statement—or you might even call it a complaint—made Shizuku frown.

Ortea was still young. The pressure must have been driving her crazy. If they traded spots and Shizuku was saddled with the same burden, she'd feel just as distressed, even if she was reaping what she'd sown.

Clutching her knees, Shizuku shut her eyes. What had people said to comfort her when *she'd* been at her breaking point? A few memories came to mind. Without saying a word, Shizuku thanked her lucky stars for the irreplaceable friends, family, and other people in her life who'd been there for her.

It was thanks to their help that Shizuku could be here now.

"Princess," she said.

"What?"

What could Shizuku do?

Not all events that formed a chain reaction were negative. Shizuku knew that, but there was still something she wanted to ask out loud.

Even in this a faraway world, she was still allowed to voice her thoughts. She was incredibly grateful for that.

"Princess, please stay strong. Accept that the hatred you feel is natural. In the same way that you resent them, you have to take responsibility for what you've done. There's no getting around that."

Shizuku let out a deep breath, then looked at Ortea.

"But, Princess, what is it that you want from Lord Tigor right now?"

If the only way Ortea could fight her hatred was by getting revenge, she'd never be able to fulfill her role as queen. If she became blinded by hatred and haunted by the fear of retaliation, she'd end up self-destructing at some point during her solitary reign.

If that was the inevitable end to this, then fleeing was the better option by far. She could get revenge on her brother and Tigor, then run away from the country that had hurt her. Shizuku couldn't deny that was one way to wrap things up.

But...she knew that Ortea had other options available to her.

If the princess simply detested her country, then why had she been serving it all this time? Had she simply been reluctant to abandon her royal duties?

Shizuku doubted that Ortea wanted Tigor to die.

So there must have been something else she was hoping for.

Shizuku didn't say any more than that. She waited silently for her master to respond.

If time allowed it, she was willing to wait there forever.

The atmosphere in the room was no longer stagnant. In fact, there was even a breeze passing through.

Just as Shizuku was starting to feel that the stillness would last an eternity, Ortea slowly got up. She glanced at her feet, wrapped in white cloth.

“...It hurts.”

“I’m sure it does.”

“I can’t walk like this. Call Tigor here.”

“Okay.”

Shizuku went back to the other room, then brought a shamefaced Tigor before the princess.

Ortea looked down at the man who knelt before her, hanging his head.

“Tigor.”

“Your Highness. I am prepared to accept any punishment you see fit...”

“Are you really?” the princess asked.

Ortea’s mood had become subdued, as though the fury she’d displayed only moments earlier had all been a dream. She fixed her emotionless, amber eyes on the man who’d once betrayed her.

His thin shoulders shaking, Tigor answered the princess’s question.

“Most certainly. But...the people of Rosta have nothing to do with this. I don’t mind what happens to me, but please have mercy on them...”

“Fine. In that case, I want you to work for me.”

It was a blunt decision.

Ortea spoke quietly, yet her words were powerful enough to send shivers down anyone’s spine.

Tigor lifted his head, looking as though he’d been struck by lightning. Shizuku, standing nearby, was equally astonished.

She couldn’t say whether it was a person’s upbringing that made them a royal or if it was something they were born with.

Yet being a monarch and adopting the mindset it demanded was something you chose to do.

Despite never having wished for it, Ortea was adopting that mindset for herself.

The words “stay strong” were so cruelly simple, but Ortea would personify the spirit of that message for as long as she lived.

Tigor lowered his gaze. In an instant, the regret that was deeply etched inside him dissolved into his eyes and vanished.

He looked up and straightened his spine. Despite the years, his eyes still had a powerful light behind them.

His unwavering gaze was fixed squarely on Ortea.

“Your Highness... No, Your Majesty. My life may be of no consequence, but I pledge it and my everlasting loyalty to you.”

Shizuku couldn’t find a trace of doubt on his face as he uttered those words—only the firm resolve of an esteemed lord.

Ortea nodded haughtily.

In that moment, complex emotions and sentiments condensed together.

Shizuku was witnessing a turning point that made her keenly aware of the passage of time. It forced people to keep moving, whether they liked it or not, and it was sweeping her along, too, no matter how she tried to fight it.

She just hoped that the conclusion they were reaching would bring even a little bit of peace of mind to somebody.

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The room was spacious and full of expensive furnishings. The atmosphere in the air, however, was bleak. A man was seated in a large chair at the back, his body half-buried in it. His eyes were teeming with a murky anger, but aside from that, his expression was lifeless. A curse-like grumble spilled from his lips.

“Ortea...you’ve really done it now...”

Beelhurse had heard about Jired’s suicide; now he was unsure whether the man had truly betrayed him or not. Either way, Beelhurse had lost one of his closest aides, and Ortea had put her plan to dethrone him in motion. If he did nothing, sooner or later, he was bound to be ousted from the throne, leaving

him to live out the rest of his life in eternal humiliation.

Beelhurse clenched his trembling fingers into a fist.

“I won’t let you get away with this, Ortea...”

How could he keep his sister in check and return to power? His mind had never been particularly sharp, but he began formulating a strategy nonetheless.

In only six days, the Twelve Family Council would meet to discuss whether Beelhurse was fit to sit on the throne. He was determined to bring Ortea down by any means necessary. He started to sputter dark insults about her, but nobody was around to listen.

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According to Beelhurse, only a fool would believe Tigor to be competent—but as far as Shizuku could tell, he actually *was*. After pledging his allegiance to Ortea, Tigor immediately grasped the situation she was in and began to negotiate with the family heads he was acquainted with.

The difference between Tigor’s and Ortea’s reputations inside Kisk was like night and day. There were plenty of people who frowned when the possibility of Ortea becoming queen was suggested to them, but the fact that Tigor was supporting her made them reevaluate her capabilities.

Public opinion naturally shifted in Ortea’s favor when people also heard that the king had imprisoned Tigor. So far, two of the patriarchs who Tigor had negotiated with had declared their support for the princess.

“Since things are heading in the right direction, how about you apologize to that massive sadist?”

“What does that mean, ‘massive sadist’?”

“It’s what we call people who share the same inclinations as Marquis de Sade, a renowned writer from my world. It’s just my way of referring to the pervy king of Farsas.”

Shizuku articulated her merciless slander of the king with a straight face, earning her a dubious sidelong look from Ortea. The princess rearranged the papers in front of her, acting as if she hadn’t heard a thing.

“How many times do I have to tell you this? This castle isn’t running as well as it should. If we were to surrender, it would tarnish our reputation as a Great Nation. That would upset both our citizens and our nobles. In fact, our generals and soldiers *want* to fight on the battlefield.”

“But once they die, that’s that. If there’s any way to avoid that situation, you need to look for it.”

“Who are *you* to give me advice...?”

Ortea looked at Shizuku like she was stupid, but Shizuku parried her condescension with a blank expression. If she let such trivial comments anger her, they’d never get anywhere. If no one else was going to offer their opinion, then Shizuku had to, even if it meant disregarding her own shortcomings.

“Your approach will work fine if you win, but if you lose, the damage will be even greater.”

“We’re not prepared to give up that easily, are we? I’ve never claimed that we’re going to crush them, but if we can inflict enough damage to convince Farsas that continuing the fight would be detrimental, then it’ll be easier to negotiate further down the line. As things stand, giving up the entirety of Rosta—not just the fortress—wouldn’t be enough for them.”

“...Oh.”

Maybe Ortea wanted to avoid settling things on the battlefield, too.

Still, her options were limited. She had enemies both inside and outside her country’s borders, and she lacked a solid foundation for herself. Her position was a precarious one.

As she flipped through her papers, the princess calmly expanded on her point.

“Also, I won’t be able to take the throne unless I venture to the battlefield myself. If people think I’m just pulling the strings from deep inside my castle, I won’t stand a chance.”

“You’re planning on going to the battlefield?!”

“Of course. I’ll let General Dalai command the troops, but I’m still going to join him.”

The moment she heard this, phrases like “watch out” and “don’t do it” popped into Shizuku’s head—but in the end, she didn’t voice any of them. Ortea had to repay her debts, even if she could only do it gradually. There wasn’t much Shizuku could do to change that.

“But...do you have time? It isn’t long until the heads of the twelve families meet.”

The council was due to assemble in just five days. Teleportation magic made it much quicker for armies to advance within their own borders, but they still didn’t have much leeway. Would Ortea be able to achieve the military success she was hoping for and *still* get back in time for the council meeting? Shizuku couldn’t hide her apprehension.

Ortea abruptly glanced out of the window.

“I’ll make sure I can get back. But if I don’t make it in time...”

There was a faraway look in her eyes. Was she thinking about the past or the future? Envisioning a grisly death, or a life filled with pain?

Whatever Ortea was imagining, it had nothing to do with Shizuku and was something deeply personal that she couldn’t share.

In the depths of their minds, everyone carried a unique idea of how things would end. They did it their whole lives.

Ortea shifted her gaze back toward Shizuku.

There was a firm determination in her beautiful amber eyes, and they captivated Shizuku with their brilliance.

“If I don’t make it in time, you will act as my substitute. Get that throne for me.”

Shizuku’s master’s order was a straightforward one. Stunned, Shizuku stood frozen to the spot.

Faneet would most likely accompany the princess, while Niké would keep a low profile.

Shizuku would be the only person left in the castle who could serve as a negotiator. Plus, she’d make a more appropriate standin than Tigor. If Shizuku

couldn't overcome the drawbacks of being a young woman and win people's support, there was no way they'd accept Ortea as queen anyway.

A tingling sensation coursed through Shizuku's body—but she found it comforting.

Since when had Ortea placed so much trust in her?

The first time they'd met, they hadn't been on the same page about anything.

But as they continued to butt heads, they'd learned what frustrated and annoyed each other.

And now, here they were. Somewhere along the line, the princess had won Shizuku's heart. She genuinely wanted to support her.

Shizuku bowed deeply to her master, a woman no older than she was.

"I'll make sure to live up to your expectations, Princess."

Shizuku wasn't going to let this break her. She was going to withstand the pressure. By clashing with one another and compensating for each other's shortcomings, the pair had evolved as people.

One day, they would each create a place where they truly belonged, entirely on their own.

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Within the castle, most people viewed Shizuku as an unknown, enigmatic person.

She was the woman who'd earned Ortea's confidence. Initially, she'd come along with a solution to the widespread epidemic, leading people to assume she was a foreign academic—but as time went on, she'd begun to seem more like the princess's aide. She was more forthcoming with her criticism than Ortea's other advisors, and she was also tasked with negotiating in her place. As such, she was chiefly regarded as Ortea's close spokesperson.

Despite being the same age and gender as her master, Shizuku's personality differed greatly from Ortea's. She wasn't as intimidating and astute as the princess, and she lacked her knowledge, but Shizuku had the ability to sit down, converse with people, and eventually win their trust. Her features alone made it

obvious that she was a young girl, but once someone actually spoke to her face to face, they'd discover that she was surprisingly brave. Yet it was her tendency to respond to honesty with an equal amount of her own that made people feel most at ease. Shizuku balanced out Ortea's infamously fiery disposition.

Having received directions from her master and advice from Tigor, she'd been steadily negotiating with the heads of the twelve families.

"Oh, you look much younger than I expected. Are you really nineteen?" asked the Marquis of Sage immediately after meeting Shizuku in person.

"I get that all the time," she said to the man.

People often pointed out how young she looked. Perhaps that was why most of the negotiations began with her either being treated like a child or looked down upon.

On the other hand, people's reactions to her appearance helped her guess what attitude to adopt with them. She prudently altered her approach depending on whom she was talking to, responding with sincerity to those who took her seriously despite her appearance, and using intimidation and bargaining with those who underestimated her.

According to Ortea and Tigor, the Marquis of Sage was a rather crafty individual. Tigor had offered to negotiate with him instead, but the marquis had requested to meet with Shizuku. That alone gave Shizuku a glimpse of his personality. Shizuku spread the papers she'd been carrying in front of him, then picked up the notes she'd made in Japanese.

"I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today, Your Grace," she said.

"The pleasure's mine. I'm sorry for making you come all the way to my residence."

The marquis was a gentlemanly man in his mid-forties whose perpetual smile suggested a lack of vulnerability rather than warmth.

Shizuku kept smiling, not letting her nervousness show, before broaching the matter at hand.

"I'm sure you already know why I'm visiting you... I've come to ask you to support Ortea in the meeting in four days' time. As the incident with Lord Tigor suggests, the current king is trying to ostracize and expel Princess Ortea. However, it is clear that the sovereign lacks the ability to run this country. For the past few years, Princess Ortea has been the one governing its affairs."

"It does seem that way," responded the marquis. "That said, I do wonder whether that's a good enough reason to revive an ancient council and replace the king. A monarch doesn't necessarily have to be competent. I admit this isn't the best way of putting it, but hasn't the current sovereign been *using* Princess Ortea to run the country? Few kings in our continent's long history have actually been wise. All a king needs is the ability to utilize his staff effectively, or at least that's what I believe."

Having said his piece, the marquis directed his probing gaze toward Shizuku and smiled at her. Shizuku forced herself to return the expression. This marquis had decided to challenge her from the very start.

"You make a valid point," she said. "However, does King Beelhurse *really* possess that fundamental ability to utilize people effectively? As we saw in the recent Farsasian invasion, he repeatedly rejected Princess Ortea's advice to deploy his troops. It doesn't matter how competent his subjects are—a king needs to be able to mobilize them effectively and make the final decisions himself. King Beelhurse may well be a good king when peace is guaranteed, but at the moment..."

"Farsas is here. I understand."

The man nodded theatrically, looking as if he'd known what Shizuku was going to say all along. He wasn't hoping to glean anything from Shizuku's rhetoric, but had been assessing how the princess's confidante would respond to him.

"What exactly would change if Princess Ortea were to become queen?"

This question made Shizuku switch her focus elsewhere, and she began explaining the policies that would be implemented after Ortea's ascension to the throne.

"First, she will improve the roadways throughout Kisk. We'll gather opinions

from the regions and use them to build roads and refurbish existing ones. We plan to increase the number of transit rings fivefold within five years, facilitating the distribution of excess resources between territories.”

Shizuku pointed to the relevant sections in the documents she’d given him, explaining the policies one by one. Among the proposals that Shizuku described were tax reductions, comprehensive state-run childhood education, strengthened trade relations with the eastern country of Nadolas, as well as armament changes and trial-related legal reforms. She made sure to go into plenty of detail about all these issues.

Some of these policies hadn’t been implemented due to Beelhurse’s lack of approval, while others were issues that Ortea had cast aside because they were a hassle to address. Upon learning this, Shizuku was secretly relieved that the princess wasn’t overly diligent.

“Tax reductions are great, but will there be enough money to finance the other projects?”

“We’ll repurpose the extra money that’s been stashed away in the castle. Once the domestic distribution of goods starts running smoothly, we estimate that the tax reductions can be recouped within about three years,” Shizuku explained, maintaining her composure as she responded to the marquis’s intermittent questions.

Although the man was asking about the policies, he still looked unimpressed by them. Eventually, Shizuku decided to mention something that wasn’t laid out in the documents. She had the princess’s explicit permission to touch on it, but she was still slightly hesitant to do so.

“Furthermore, Princess Ortea has decided to delegate some areas that are under the direct control of the castle to a number of other territories. A forest within your own territory is one such area, Your Grace.”

The monarchy directly owned a range of assets, including treasure, mines, and land.

Most of these assets, however, were currently stored away, so Ortea had chosen to hand over this unused land to the marquis as a form of compensation instead of holding onto it in vain.

Marquises who prioritized their own interests usually responded well to this news. Moreover, suggesting that Ortea would ascend the throne without a husband elicited favorable reactions from those with eligible sons.

Shizuku herself was uncomfortable with the idea of using the queen as bait, which made her think of Tryphina, the country's first queen. Yet Ortea herself was unfazed. "I'm not promising that I'll actually marry anybody," she'd said. "We just need to make them believe they have a chance at marrying a queen."

And so it was probably wise for Shizuku to exploit Ortea's status as much as she could.

The Marquis of Sage was a single man. Shizuku tried to discern whether he was interested in becoming Ortea's husband from his facial expression, but his smile prevented her from grasping his real intentions.

After listening to her explanations, he looked at Shizuku with his head tilted to one side.

"Very informative. Thank you. Now excuse me for changing the topic, but I'd like you to tell me about yourself. You seem like a very ordinary person. Why, then, do you work for Princess Ortea?"

Shizuku was taken aback, her eyes widening in surprise.

Maybe this was a question that everyone in the castle wanted to ask but hadn't dared to. She quickly suppressed her alarm and offered him a wry smile.

She clasped her hands in her lap. At that point, she suddenly remembered that she'd never held Ortea's hand.

"It...might have just been fate. Meeting the princess, the fact that I ended up working for her—it's all largely a matter of chance, I think."

If one cog in the machine had been out of alignment, she and Ortea may never have crossed paths. It was all merely coincidental...but Shizuku was fine with that.

"Still, even if our meeting was only coincidental, I'm determined to support the princess. She can be quite stern, but she's proven herself to be very kind of late. I'm sure she'll be a wise queen."

The Marquis of Sage narrowed his eyes at Shizuku, who wore a faint smile. Crossing his legs, he asked her another question.

“So you serve her because you believe she’s worthy of your loyalty?”

“That’s right.”

“If so, would you be willing to give yourself up for the princess?”

The man’s sudden question had come completely out of left field, and it left Shizuku looking somewhat surprised. She replayed his words a few times in her head. When she looked over at him, she noticed him directing an arresting gaze her way, a false smile stretched across his lips.

Without hesitation, Shizuku nodded.

“I’d sacrifice whatever it took—whether that’s my life or my body.”

“Oh my.”

“All I can offer is myself, though. Nothing more. Regrettably, I can’t pledge that having me will earn you any special favors from Princess Ortea.”

Ortea had never asked Shizuku to use herself as a bargaining chip; in fact, she’d warned her to be careful. If Ortea found out that Shizuku had put herself up for sale, she’d probably be furious.

At the end of the day, though, Shizuku was the only one who’d have to make a sacrifice. To her, it was a small price to pay. The throne and the future of her master were at stake. Her own chastity meant very little in comparison to that.

Then she remembered the strange mark on her stomach.

Perhaps she should have mentioned it. The constant, faint stomachache she constantly suffered came to mind—but suddenly, the marquis burst out laughing. Shizuku looked bemused as he vigorously waved his right hand at her.

“Don’t worry, I was only joking. You’re cute, but I’m not into young girls. I just wanted to see how much loyalty the princess has earned from someone like you. I’m sorry.”

“...I apologize for my baby face,” replied Shizuku.

“That said, I like you.”

All traces of laughter vanished from the man's voice.

In his powerful gaze, Shizuku suddenly noticed a willingness to accept her. She found herself sitting up even straighter. The marquis, who naturally embodied the sophistication of the nobility, unlaced his fingers resting on top of his lap and nodded.

"I will gratefully consider Princess Ortea's request. You can expect a favorable outcome."

"Your Grace...thank you so much."

"And you should come and see me in five years' time—if the mood strikes you."

Was that a joke or not? Shizuku's dark eyes widened, turning as round as a cat's. Her expression made her look even younger, eliciting a shrug from the marquis.

"Actually, better make that seven years," he said with a chuckle.

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The view from the walkway was truly spectacular, and Shizuku couldn't help but gape in awe.

In the plaza inside Kisk Castle, thousands of soldiers were lined up in neat rows. The metal armor covering their vitals reflected the light, reminding Shizuku of the ocean's surface. It was like a scene out of a movie, but it was clear from the piercing tension in the air that it was real.

"This is amazing..." she muttered, her words tumbling down onto the walkway's railing.

Shortly thereafter, preparations for the transit ring appeared to be complete, and the soldiers slowly started to move. They advanced toward the large magic circle etched into the ground, maintaining their orderly rows. One by one, the soldiers vanished into it.

It was such a surreal and wondrous sight. But then again, such things were probably ordinary in this world.

Ortea would be departing in just two hours. Shizuku stood up from where she

was leaning on the railing and walked away, hoping to say goodbye to her master.

Three days had passed since the news of Weisuz Fortress's fall had reached the castle.

As planned, Ortea had ordered for fifty thousand troops to be teleported to the battlefield. They would end up on the bank opposite the Shisa River, north of the fortress.

The bridge over the river had been captured immediately after the fortress fell, under Ortea's orders. Even for Farsas, it was impossible to determine the coordinates for large-scale teleportation in other countries, so there was no chance of the Farsasian army occupying the fortress teleporting over the river. In the meantime, Kisk's army had prepared for combat on the opposite bank. They were going to teleport back to the southwest of the fortress before launching an offensive against the Farsasian army.

According to reconnaissance, there were around twenty to thirty thousand Farsasian troops stationed at Weisuz Fortress.

Still, it was harder to attack a fortress than to defend it. Plus, there was a chance that Farsas was using teleportation magic to bring in reinforcements. Kisk couldn't afford to be too optimistic.

"I'm here, Your Highness," Shizuku announced upon entering the room.

The armored woman turned around to look at her.

Ortea's hair, which she normally wore down, was tied into a ponytail. Her white metal armor covered her front, shoulders, elbows, and the area from her knees to her toes. Somehow, it made her look even more lovely than usual.

She was wearing gauntlets over her hands, which trembled like two small animals. The clothes she was wearing underneath must have been enchanted, because Shizuku could see intricate patterns covering them.

Her slender frame suggested that she had hardly any muscle. Full armor probably would have been too heavy for her to move in.

Faneet waited in the room, also clad in partial armor, but in his case, it was

probably to help him move around more easily. He was going to stick by the princess's side, even on the battlefield.

Ortea wasn't going to be on the front line, nor would she be directly commanding the troops, but that didn't mean assassination attempts were out of the question. She'd have to stay vigilant.

Yet despite the gravity of the situation, Ortea simply shrugged her narrow shoulders slightly.

"It's so heavy, Shizuku."

"It definitely looks that way. Want to trade places?"

"No."

Shizuku had actually volunteered to serve as a decoy on one occasion, but Ortea had promptly dismissed the idea.

"Everyone would laugh at me if I did something like that," Shizuku's master had told her. "It's not like I have to go to the front line anyway."

So Shizuku had reluctantly backed down.

Instead, Faneet was accompanying Ortea as her bodyguard. Shizuku shot him a worried glance, and he replied with a nod, his face as expressionless as ever.

"It'll be fine. I'll keep the princess safe, even if it costs me my life."

"What are you talking about? If we get into any situation where your life's at stake, then we're already done for," the princess joked, strapping her sword for self-defense to her waist.

No matter what the princess said, Shizuku was certain that Faneet would defend her, even in the most unexpected of circumstances. Shizuku smiled and nodded.

A moment later, Tigor showed up and began to give Ortea his final update.

"You need seven votes to ascend the throne, Your Highness. So far, we've succeeded in getting four of the men to pledge their support. In addition to those, there are three more who seem likely to come around. We will continue the negotiations over the coming three days."

"Very good. I'm counting on you," replied Ortea.

Considering the short time frame and the princess's disadvantageous starting point, things were actually going quite smoothly.

However, some, including the Marquis of Tylga, were still vehemently opposed to Ortea's coronation, while others remained loyal to Beelhurse. The situation was incredibly precarious.

After listening to everything he had to say, Ortea spoke to Tigor.

"While I'm away from the castle, I'm leaving the rest to you."

"As you wish."

"You'd better not do anything stupid, either, Shizuku," she continued.

"That was a sudden change of tone. I'll be on my best behavior," said Shizuku, puffing out her cheeks.

The princess giggled. Then her amber eyes abruptly took on a solemn gleam.

"If anything happens to me, I want you to negotiate with the boy's father to decide what to do with him."

"Huh? Uh, of course," Shizuku replied reflexively, but it was an ominous topic to bring up.

Besides, was it really safe to assume that Lars was Vied's father? Shizuku looked puzzled, prompting Ortea to expand further.

"Niké knows who the father is. He was the one who brought Seilené here."

This revelation came as no surprise to Shizuku. Niké must have approached Seilené to gather information about the king of Rozsark. She'd seen him extend the same invitation to Lyshien before her very eyes, so it wasn't hard to work out.

That said, Shizuku still couldn't understand why Seilené, who'd been a member of Rozsark's royal court, had given birth to a direct descendant of Farsas's royal lineage.

Shizuku couldn't hold Ortea up any longer, though; she was about to go into battle, and there was a lot that needed to be done. She could ask more

questions once the princess returned. Satisfied with that thought, Shizuku bowed.

“I understand. I’ll see you when you get back.”

Shizuku had a hard time concealing her apprehension completely, and Ortea gave her a mischievous smile.

“Don’t worry. I won’t push myself too hard. Oh yeah... Do you like the king of Farsas?”

“Not in the slightest.”

“In that case, I’ll bring you his head as a souvenir. Look forward to it.”

“His head is the last thing I’d want. Just make sure you don’t lose your own.”

Ortea raised her eyebrows slightly but decided not to reprimand her subordinate for her ill-mannered statement. With Faneet by her side, she confidently raised her head and left the room.

In just three days’ time, everything would be decided.

That knowledge excited Shizuku in a way she couldn’t explain. One year earlier, she never would have predicted how things would turn out. She couldn’t help but smile wryly when she thought about the situation she’d found herself in.

If someone were to tell her that she could go back to her old world...she’d ask to stay for another three days, at the very least. As she watched her master walk away, she prayed she’d get to stay a little longer.

It might have been Shizuku’s imagination, but once Ortea, Faneet, and the soldiers departed, the castle suddenly felt incredibly empty. She flicked through her papers as she made her way through the deserted corridors.

Immediately after seeing Ortea off, Tigor had gone to visit another member of the Twelve Family Council. Beelhurse knew that Ortea had taken the lord under her wing, but he didn’t make any moves against him, likely because the news of Beelhurse imprisoning Tigor was already widespread. The king being the king, he had apparently been in contact with the marquises, but Shizuku hadn’t received any precise information about his movements.

After scrawling a checkmark on one of the handwritten documents, Shizuku started reading the next page. There, she found notes about royal assets inside Kisk's borders—knowledge that Ortea had shared with her. While this information was highly confidential, Shizuku had translated it into Japanese so if, by some chance, her notes ended up in someone else's hands, they'd be unable to decipher them.

As Shizuku read through the remaining assets she hadn't brought up in any of her negotiations, one of them suddenly caught her attention.

"Huh? I didn't know something like that existed. I'd love to see it."

According to the records, it had remained entirely untouched since it came into the royal family's possession. Feeling that this was a waste, Shizuku casually marked it with a star.

She'd arranged to meet with another one of the twelve marquises that evening. Some of the council members were already in the castle, while others remained in their own territories that were impossible to visit without the use of teleportation magic.

Shizuku reached into her pocket to check the time, but before she could take out her watch, she bumped into somebody who'd come darting around the corner.

"Oops, sorry!"

Shizuku instinctively apologized as she tried to regain her balance—but the person, who was dressed like a magistrate, ran away without saying a word. Shizuku took out her magical watch again.

"Hmm. I guess I have time for another cup of tea," she said to herself. "... Ouch."

Had she been hit in a weird place when they'd collided? Shizuku twisted her side, which was stinging in pain, and started walking toward the break room. By the time she'd finished looking through all her papers, she was right in front of the door.

At that very moment, Willett appeared from the other end of the hallway. When she spotted Shizuku, she stopped in her tracks, and Shizuku offered her a

wave.

“Hey, Willett. Do you want some tea?”

“...Shizuku.”

“What?”

For some reason, the girl was becoming paler by the second. Just as Shizuku was about to ask what was wrong, Willett pointed a trembling finger at her. Shizuku cocked her head, then glanced down at her own body.

Her side was covered in bright red blood.

“Waaaaahhhh?!” Shizuku cried out. Even she thought she sounded like an idiot.

Until that point, she hadn’t noticed any pain at all.

She hastily shoved her bloody clothes aside to try to locate the wound, and sure enough, she found a gash in her blood-drenched side. It looked like a bladed weapon had been plunged directly into her skin. The sight of the injury made Shizuku dizzy, and she felt as though she was about to pass out.

Having heard the scream, Yura rushed out of the break room and grabbed Shizuku by the arm.

“Shizuku?! What happened to you?!”

“I-it looks like...I was stabbed.”

Shizuku couldn’t feel any pain, but her mind was beginning to become hazy. Her eyelids were getting heavy, threatening to drag her into a peaceful sleep, and she resisted the urge.

“If Niké is around, call him for me...,” she said, then immediately lost consciousness.

“Are you stupid?”

That was the first thing Shizuku heard after she cracked her eyes open.

She blinked, then looked up at Niké sitting by her bedside. The sight of her colleague’s face, which looked genuinely annoyed, was a comforting one. Shizuku ran her fingers through her sweaty bangs, then pushed herself up on

the couch where she'd been lying.

Yura and Willett were also standing in the small break room, looking at Shizuku with concern. She was relieved that nobody else had needed to find out about the mark on her body.

"Didn't I tell you you'd be numb to pain? If you'd fainted with nobody else around, you'd be dead by now."

"I-I'm sorry. I was pretty out of it."

Shizuku looked underneath her new clothes. The blood had been wiped away, and everything looked normal. Niké had presumably been the one to heal her, and he asked her a question, his voice cold:

"So? Who did this to you?"

"...I didn't see their face."

"You really are stupid, huh."

Come to think of it, the person she'd bumped into on the corner had appeared abnormally intent on hiding their face. Even so, they must not be a professional assassin, otherwise Shizuku would have been dead there and then.

There were plenty of reasons for her to be targeted. Shizuku was a close aide to Ortea. Considering the situation at hand, walking around without any guards was rather careless.

Niké sighed and rose to his feet.

"I'll get in touch with the princess," he said.

"Wait, hang on a minute. You need to keep this a secret."

"Don't be dumb! She'd be furious with me!"

"Please! We can both get scolded together when the time comes. The princess is going through a tough time herself... Just tell her to watch out for assassins."

"You're the one who needs to be more careful! You're lucky I was in the castle at all!"

Having been thoroughly reprimanded, Shizuku shrank back a little. Niké was

completely right. She'd neglected to consider that she was one of the people at the center of this commotion; it'd be humiliating to die at this stage of the process. Shizuku bowed her head again.

"I'm sorry. I was careless. I'll be more cautious from now on."

"...If anything like this happens again, I won't give you any more medicine. You'll have to find a man yourself."

"Argh. I'll bear that in mind."

Still looking angry, he took something out of his pocket and threw it toward her. When Shizuku caught it, she realized that it was a small ring, and she gazed at it with wonder. It had a transparent crystal embedded in the center.

"What's this? It's so pretty."

"It's a protective magic implement. It won't defend you from particularly powerful attacks, but it's enough to offset ones like this."

"Oh. Erik gave me something like this before."

"He did, did he?"

"What?!"

Shizuku had only been telling the truth, but for some reason, Niké had decided to pull her hard by the ear. It hadn't hurt, but it still felt weird. She clasped her hands over her ears.

Shizuku didn't have a good understanding of magic implements, but they probably weren't all the same. This one could be totally different. Regretting her sweeping assumption, she corrected herself.

"No, it wasn't the same. It wasn't made with a crystal."

"...Crystals are frequently used in the manufacturing of magic implements. There's a direct correlation between their quality and the tool's efficacy. However, due to the explosive increase in magic implement production, there's been an issue with overconsumption, meaning there aren't that many pure, unprocessed crystals available."

"Ooh. You really know your stuff, huh?"

“What do you think we mages are?”

“The intellectual class of society?”

“Not necessarily. There are plenty of different types of mages.”

Niké checked that Shizuku had the ring on, then stood up.

“I’m leaving the castle now. Make sure to keep your wits about you.”

“Everyone’s got a lot on their plate. I know. Thanks.”

Niké looked like he had something he wanted to say, but he left the break room without another word. Shizuku reflected again on how careless she’d been. Tigor never did anything without one of his underlings by his side. He was probably worried about what Beelhurse might do. It made sense that someone like Shizuku, who was always by herself, would be targeted.

She bowed her head at the two court ladies who were looking worriedly at her.

“I’m sorry. You saved me back there. Thank you.”

“Shizuku! You gave me such a shock!”

“Aha-ha. I’m not surprised.”

Willett rushed toward her, and Shizuku managed a smile as she embraced her. It must have been like a scene from a horror movie, seeing a blood-covered person walking down the corridor. If Shizuku had been in her shoes, she probably would have screamed even louder.

Shizuku looked up and glanced at Yura over the younger girl’s shoulder. She was smiling silently.

Yura was smiling but not with her eyes. In fact, they seemed to be fixed on something.

The stern aura she was emanating made Shizuku tense up. The color started to drain from her face, as if the blood loss was only just getting to her.

Still smiling, Yura began to speak.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Shizuku.”

“Th-thank you...”

“By the way, you’ll have to excuse me, but I did catch a glimpse of your body while I was changing your clothes.”

“.....Okay.”

“What’s that mark? And what’s that ‘medicine’ Niké mentioned?”

“G-good question...”

Yura was probably the *last* person Shizuku wanted to see that mark.

After being squeezed to a pulp by Willett, Shizuku managed to slip away by insisting it was a secret she couldn’t share, but the whole ordeal had sapped about five negotiations’ worth of energy out of her.

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The man was painting haphazardly on the white stone wall of Weisuz Fortress’s office when he was interrupted by his subordinate. A pot full of blue paint in hand, Lars listened to the report.

“So Kisk finally made a move,” he remarked. “About time.”

“It appears that right now, in the castle, the king and his sister are fighting over the throne. It’s the princess who’s mobilized the troops.”

“A fight between siblings? They’re lacking in resolve.”

The mage who’d brought Lars the report wondered what kind of “resolve” siblings were supposed to have—but considering the kind of sister Lars had, perhaps something like that *was* necessary.

Lars set his pot of paint down on the desk.

“So is Ortea coming to the battlefield?”

“Yes. Reconnaissance confirms she’s with the main force of the army, at the rear.”

“Good. Let’s capture her and teach her a lesson. We’ll beat that twisted nature out of her.”

The king’s hypocritical disparagement brought about an awkward silence. The mage who’d arrived with the report pulled himself together and continued

doing his job.

“There’s one more report you need to hear,” he said.

“What is it?”

The king began listening to the news with a frown, but it had nothing to do with the army from Kisk they were about to fight.

There was another, unrelated problem that was being investigated.

“We need to hurry up a bit,” muttered Lars irritably, having heard the entirety of the mage’s report. “This is going to be a breach of contract.”

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There was no breeze on the grassy plains. Ortea, mounted on her horse, looked up at the overcast, early afternoon sky.

The clouds were thick, but it didn’t look like a downpour was imminent. Her armor was already heavy and cumbersome enough, so it’d be annoying if it did rain.

Ortea found herself distracted by the sight of tens of thousands of soldiers marching. It was a sight she’d never witnessed before.

“We’re almost at Weisuz Fortress, Princess,” Faneet whispered, riding alongside her.

“Right.”

Kisk’s army had teleported from the other side of the river and was approaching Weisuz Fortress, marching along a straight line connecting the fortress and the town of Caribala.

Farsas’s army, having captured the fortress, were reported to have a force of just over twenty thousand men, but with the use of teleportation, that number could swell.

Their plan was to strike at Farsas with their fifty thousand troops before things got to that stage.

This was easier said than done, though. With the fortress occupied by their enemy, the battle wouldn’t go that smoothly.

"It seems that when Farsas captured the fortress, they lured our troops outside and used that confusion to infiltrate, disguising themselves as messengers," Ortea said.

"Yes," replied Faneet. "There are reports that even our magical barrier spell was overwritten. That's terrifying if it's true."

"It suggests that relying too much on magic could be dangerous. We won't beat Farsas using magic alone."

Ortea's voice resonated serenely across their dark surroundings.

Unusually, it didn't sound like she was simply being self-effacing; she seemed to be genuinely praising the enemy nation.

Faneet was momentarily taken aback by her words, but he soon carried on guiding his horse as if nothing had happened.

Before long, the Kisk army came into the view of Weisuz Fortress. The troops hadn't encountered any of the obstacles they'd been worried about, and they positioned themselves slightly behind where the protective barrier had once stood.

Their goal was to recapture the fortress and drive Farsas out of the country. General Dalai, who had total command over Kisk's army, explained his strategy. When Ortea heard that his plan was to "take the fortress by storm," she smiled confidently.

"I understand. I can't hold a candle to you, here on the battlefield. I'm counting on you."

It was motivating to hear this encouragement from the beautiful young princess. Dalai and the other officers eagerly set their magical barriers, and they began to approach the fortress. As they got closer, they noticed people on top of its high walls, keeping watch. Some of them must have been mages. They hurled a few spells in Kisk's direction to keep their enemy in check, but their effects dissipated upon hitting the barriers. Unless the spells were particularly powerful, attacks launched by individual mages got weaker the farther they traveled.

Kisk's army partially surrounded Weisuz Fortress, positioning themselves to

the southeast and stretching west.

“Good. Halt! Prepare the siege fire!” Dalai ordered, as planned.

In response to his command, the mages deployed behind the soldiers began their incantations. Groups of three started conjuring massive fireballs to support the siege, creating a dozen of them in the air.

Ortea, stationed at the rear of the army, couldn’t help but express her admiration at the spectacle.

“That’s incredible...”

In all honesty, the princess didn’t want Weisuz Fortress to get destroyed—it was Kisk’s property, after all—but this was no time to express such sentiments.

General Dalai fixed his fierce gaze on the massive fortress, then ordered the attack.

“Fire!”

The fireballs flew through the air, reaching the walls and gate of the fortress.

A few seconds later, they exploded with a deafening boom, and black smoke billowed into the air. The gate crumbled, creating a small opening.

“Prepare the second volley!”

The mages started to create another round of fireballs to attack with, but before they could launch them, several beams of light shot out from the direction of the fortress. The first person to notice shouted a warning.

“This is bad! Brace yourselves!”

But the warning came too late.

The beams of light pierced several of the half-prepared fireballs, and the magic caused them to explode right in the midst of the Kisk army. Mages’ bodies were flung into the air, and nearby horses neighed. Amidst the sudden chaos, Dalai raised his voice.

“Don’t falter! Fire!”

One of the fireballs reached the lookout tower, where a sniper must have been lurking, and a resounding vibration echoed through the sky as the top of

the tower crumbled to pieces. The other balls of fire hit the gate again, widening the hole that had already been created.

The expansive grassland had suddenly become filled with activity, as mages not only launched fireballs but tended to the wounded, shot snipers, and kept their wards in place.

Thus, with the exchange of long-range spells, began the Second Battle of Weisuz.

Occasionally, small stone fragments from the blasts would strike her in the face.

Ortea lifted her arm to shield herself from the slight pain they caused. She looked toward the fortress far in the distance, behind the vast army of people and horses.

“It’s quiet...”

“Huh?” said a young guard, unable to contain an inane exclamation of confusion. He met Ortea’s gaze and, flustered, yelled out, “I’m so sorry!” but Ortea gently waved her hand to show that she was unfazed.

“Don’t get me wrong. I can see that Farsas is fighting back, but it’s only magic, right?”

“They have fewer troops. They must be planning to stay inside the castle.”

“Do you think so? I thought that fool would call for reinforcements, rather than draw things out.”

Ortea knew Lars far better than General Dalai did. She’d come to blows with the king on multiple occasions when handling governmental affairs.

Lars gave the impression of a wise ruler, faultlessly running his country’s affairs with an open-minded, far-sighted, and generous approach. However, beneath this facade lay the contradictory side to his temperament, marked by impulsiveness, coldness, childish fussiness, and his rough-and-ready nature.

Niké tended to omit parts of his reconnaissance reports, but when Ortea was bored enough to make him share the whole thing, he’d often include useless stories about Lars.

Ortea had met him in person. They tended to encounter one another at events in Gandona, the country that both Farsas and Kisk shared a border with. Still, he often had a crowd of princesses from other countries around him, and Ortea, who found talking to people a nuisance, had a habit of escaping as soon as she got the opportunity, leaving them with very little opportunity to converse. Regardless, the fact that Shizuku, of all people, hated him told her everything she needed to know.

“I hope these negotiations will go in our favor,” she muttered.

It would probably be hard to coax Farsas into surrendering, but if Kisk could inflict a certain amount of damage on them, Lars might agree to negotiate. If they could engage in a fair discussion without Lars becoming too big-headed, then Ortea could take care of the rest.

The princess looked out at the gate, which was gradually being destroyed. Once it came down, Dalai was supposed to send his troops inside; however, for the time being, the constant barrage of magic coming from the fortress was keeping Kisk at bay.

How long will it take for the situation to be resolved? Ortea wondered.

But just as she was turning that thought over in her mind, a sudden commotion broke the stalemate.

“Reinforcements from Farsas!”

A succession of astonished cries prompted Ortea to turn around.

She stared at the wide highway that stretched out before her. An army from Farsas stood on the road running adjacent to the forest. The troops seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and they started getting themselves into position, as if they were trying to block Kisk’s path of retreat.

Realizing that one of the possibilities she’d speculated about had become a reality, Ortea frowned.

“Were they waiting for us to attack...? That man’s so annoying.”

With a new army positioned at their rear, Kisk’s troops were worried about being attacked from both sides. Dalai wasn’t sure whether to attack the

enemies behind them or those ahead.

He wanted to take control of the fortress, where the king of Farsas was likely located, but that would be time-consuming. If Farsas's army attacked them from behind while they executed this plan, they'd suffer significant losses.

After making a swift decision, Dalai instructed his troops to move clockwise around the fortress and hurriedly advance to the northwest. Instead of fighting both of the armies that had surrounded them, he wanted his troops to occupy a different part of the battlefield—a strategy that would allow them to attack each enemy in turn.

Farsas's troops, however, didn't just sit around and watch it happen. The cavalry that had appeared behind Kisk sped up and began attacking the enemy, who'd begun to move. In the blink of an eye, sparks flew on the grassy field as Kisk's soldiers fought back.

“This way, Your Highness!”

Ortea and the cavalrymen protecting her weaved through the throng of soldiers, attempting to flee in the opposite direction from Farsas's onslaught. However, since Ortea's group was at the rear end of Kisk's army, they inadvertently ended up closer to Farsas's forces.

The young soldier had called out to the princess in an effort to take the lead, but unfortunately, it backfired. When they heard the words “Your Highness,” several soldiers from Farsas drove their horses in Ortea's direction, swords in hand. Catching sight of them, Faneet swiftly reached out and smacked the rear of Ortea's horse, sending it galloping. Soldiers rushed to clear a path for Ortea's escape.

Riding right beside her, Faneet whispered to his master.

“We'll be able to make it out, Princess.”

“...Okay.”

As she raced forward, pressed on by the surrounding troops, Ortea looked back at the enemy soldiers. They weren't far behind.

It wasn't long before Kisk's soldiers intervened, though. They cut into the

Farsasian cavalry, hot on her heels. The sounds of swords clashing and men falling off their horses melded together.

Yet Ortea and her group didn't slow their horses.

It wasn't long before the battleground faded into the distance. The next time Ortea looked over her shoulder, she was greeted by a sight that made her amber eyes widen in shock.

For a moment, her gaze met that of a man cutting down a Kisk soldier with a longsword.

He was wearing plain armor and riding an unremarkable horse—yet his eyes were familiar.

It only took a few seconds for Ortea to recognize him. As soon as she did, she yanked as hard as she could on her horse's reins and came to a halt.

Before her flustered guards had the chance to turn back, the princess began to yell.

"Don't be fooled! There are no reinforcements!"

She pointed a narrow finger at the Farsasian soldier.

"That man is the king of Farsas! Capture him!"

Everyone from Kisk was momentarily stunned. During the ensuing silence, the man flashed a relaxed smile. He cast aside the sword he'd been carrying and drew another weapon hanging from a sheath on his saddle. The double-bladed sword gleamed brightly.

"I'm surprised you noticed, Ortea."

Akashia—the marker of Farsas's king.

Holding his *true* sword of choice, Lars took hold of the reins and jutted his chin in Ortea's direction.

"Anyone who captures that woman will be handsomely rewarded."

Seemingly unaware that he himself was also a target, the young king made his way forward.

Ortea's proclamation had impelled Kisk's soldiers to rush toward him to try

and capture the rival monarch. The conflict rapidly escalated to a free-for-all as soldiers jostled and collided with one another.

Lars and his Akashia silently cut down the soldiers who had rushed toward him, but when he noticed that Kisk's main army—which had begun to retreat to the northwest—was turning back, he scowled.

"Damn. Word spreads too quickly. That woman's such a nuisance."

"That's why I told you to stay back, Your Majesty..."

When Lars had heard that Kisk's army was approaching, he'd had most of the soldiers in the fortress teleport to the forest to the southwest to lie low. Only a few mages had remained in the fort, responding to attacks in a way that gave the impression it was still fully manned. Lars had planned to make his army look like reinforcements who'd teleported from their homeland, hoping to throw Kisk's comparatively large army into disarray.

His plan had all but succeeded before Ortea recognized him, rendering his efforts futile.

Harve gave the king a disdainful look. Lars surveyed the battleground, trying to spot Ortea.

Without any tricks on their side, Farsas's army was simply outnumbered.

Lars had been flexible in his command of his front line as he held off the enemy offensive, but he suddenly looked up at the overcast sky.

"I think it's about time, Harve."

"Understood."

Having received this royal order, Harve used magic to communicate with those still inside the stronghold.

In a room deep inside the fortress, a man nodded in response to the message. He wasn't one of the mages who'd been on top of the walls, fighting back with magic; his role was of a different nature.

Touching the blue gem in his right ear, he issued instructions to the ten mages gathered there.

“Direction is northwest to south. No change to strength and range from the authorizer.”

The mages started their respective incantations, setting into motion the preprepared spell. Their commander took charge of the core section, from where the magic would shoot out.

He squinted as if he could see the sprawling battlefield through the walls of the enclosed room. Then he began pouring a huge amount of magical power into the core.

“Now, then... Let’s begin.”

Like a vast blanket being laid down, they unleashed the colossal spell outside the fortress.

As it spread out in a beautiful fan, it instantaneously nullified the magic of any Kisk soldier within its reach.

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When Shizuku told Tigor that she’d been attacked, he went pale, concerned about her health.

There was no doubt that the Twelve Family Council, which was just around the corner, must have motivated someone to take direct action.

They both had the same idea about who’d ordered her to be killed, but not knowing who could be listening or where an eavesdropper might be hiding, neither of them dared utter the person’s name.

Tigor exhaled, wiping the strained expression from his face and giving Shizuku a forced smile.

“Anyway, keep your wits about you. You don’t know when or how someone’s going to strike.”

“I will.”

“At this rate, half the council seems to be on our side. But even so...”

Tigor hesitated. Shizuku was puzzled, but she didn’t pressure him for an explanation. She’d already worked it out herself.

Ortea’s victory was becoming increasingly more certain. But would Beelhurse

really go down without a fight?

With the same doubts going through their minds, the pair went back to their respective tasks.

It turned out their concerns weren't unfounded. On the day before the Twelve Family Council was scheduled to assemble, the Marquis of Ladmai, one of the main patriarchs, was murdered.

"What? Really?"

Shizuku had been enjoying a late breakfast after finishing her morning work when she'd been informed of the marquis's death. It had happened just as she was spreading honey on a piece of nicely toasted bread, and her spoon fell into the honey jar. The magistrate who'd brought the report gave her a nod.

"One of his assistants found him dead in his bed. It appears that the liquor he drank as a nightcap was poisoned. Investigations are still ongoing, however..."

"Oh...I see. Thank you for letting me know."

Shizuku was understandably taken aback by the sudden news, and while she was sorry to hear about the passing of an acquaintance, she couldn't shake the feeling that they were in trouble. The Marquis of Ladmai had promised to support Ortea in exchange for educating his grandchild. He was one of the main three patriarchs, so there would be significant consequences from his disturbing death.

Shizuku left her meal to get in touch with Tigor. He'd gotten wind of the incident already, so the pair soon gathered in the meeting room.

"Honestly, this is an incredibly dire situation."

Tigor let out a deep sigh. Shizuku likely wasn't imagining the deep furrows she noticed in his brow.

"I don't know who poisoned the Marquis of Ladmai's drink, but there's talk going around that it was done under Ortea's orders."

"Huh?! But the marquis..."

"I know. He was on our side. However, he was demanding a trade, and rumor has it that the deal fell through. Of course, there are those who assume the

perpetrator was someone who dislikes Ortea, but others are suspicious of Her Highness herself. Someone must have manipulated public opinion to suit their agenda. There's a risk that the Marquis of Rema and the Marquis of Riyas will withdraw their support."

"The princess is on the battlefield! How can they even think such a thing?!"

Ortea had headed to Weisuz Fortress with fifty thousand of her soldiers, and from what Shizuku had heard, they were facing an uphill battle. Farsas's army had attacked them from the rear while Kisk's forces were attacking the fortress, and in the midst of the ensuing chaos, a forbidden defensive barrier had been put in place.

The spell had initially been formulated by Kisk to seal Farsas's magical abilities, but the Magic Kingdom's army had retaliated by implementing the same magic across the region. As a result, Kisk had lost more than a third of their army, leading them to retreat from the fortress and move farther southwest.

Luckily, it sounded like Ortea was unharmed, but Farsas was pursuing her, intent on capturing the princess. Many, including Shizuku, wished she'd just teleport back to the castle, but the army needed her as moral support after the battering they'd suffered the day before. "I can't come back yet," she'd said in her most recent message the night before.

It was outrageous that suspicion had turned to Ortea, especially when she was so desperate to help. In all likelihood, Beelhurse was the one responsible for the poisoning. His brazenness had gone too far this time, and Shizuku wished she could yell at him.

"What will happen without the Lord of Ladmai there?"

"His son might have been able to fill his seat, but this incident was so sudden. I think his position in the council will be left empty."

That might mean Ortea won't get enough votes.

Shizuku went pale, but she refused to let herself feel disheartened. She gathered the papers spread out in front of her and held them to her chest.

"All the marquises are already in the castle, right? I'll go talk to them."

“You can’t do that.”

“Why not?! There’s still time!”

There was still half a day left. She could clarify the misunderstanding about Ortea and request their support again.

Shizuku couldn’t understand why Tigor would try to stop her. He shook his head weakly and looked at her, his eyes filled with bitterness.

“As a result of this incident, all meetings with the marquises are prohibited. The Lord of Kiaph was opposed to the idea, but since His Majesty and Lord Tylga both agreed, it was passed by the kingdom. Our movements are now restricted.”

“...You’re kidding.”

Shizuku felt like she could see the darkness closing in on her.

The gloominess of the world made her head hurt, and she pressed her temples. She heard Tigor sigh.

The Twelve Family Council was assembling the following day. Soon, the long-standing grudge that had been festering within the walls of Kisk Castle would reach its conclusion.

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With Farsas sealing their magic, Kisk initially lost many soldiers amidst the chaos. Eventually, however, under Dalai’s command, their army managed to escape from the barrier.

By the time they got away, their numbers had dwindled from fifty thousand to thirty thousand, with the enduring barrier also preventing them from launching another attack. If that wasn’t bad enough, Farsas was unyielding in its pursuit, leaving the Kisk troops unable to reposition and forcing them to keep retreating.

Now even farther southwest from the location they’d initially teleported to, Kisk dispatched messengers under the cover of night to get a handle on the state of its troops. Having been humiliated by Farsas’s strategies and magical technology, Kisk’s military officers were initially too vexed to speak.

Ortea looked around at the men who formed the core of the army and got the ball rolling.

"I'm sure you have regrets and can think of things you would have done differently, but I want to hear about our next steps. If any of you has a strategy for quickly bringing down the fortress, speak up. I don't care what your rank is."

It sounded almost like the princess was reprimanding them, and all the men gulped. Those who'd been on the brink of despair began to regain a bit of their former fire.

Still, the reality of the situation was harsh, and none of them said a word.

After a short while, a pained smile appeared on Ortea's face. Instead of reproaching the officers, she simply pointed to a spot on the map spread out between them.

"In that case, I'd like you to listen to my thoughts. While Farsas's invading army has set up base at Weisuz Fortress, they also have troops stationed elsewhere—in the town of Caribala, southwest of here."

All the officers knew that. At first, they'd assumed that capturing Caribala was Farsas's goal. Back then, they never could have imagined that Farsas would capture the fortress. The men grimaced as they recalled the situation they'd found themselves in.

Ortea ignored the heavy atmosphere and continued making her point.

"In an ideal world, we'd be able to take back the fort, but if we continue as we are, we could end up losing more than we gain. What if we captured the town of Caribala and used it as leverage instead? There's only a small number of troops there. We could either swap Caribala for the fortress or use it to draw Farsas's troops away from the fortress. Whichever option we go for, it would give us an alternative to continuously attacking the fortress."

The officers silently listened to the strategic assessment of the princess—a woman unfamiliar in the ways of military tactics—seemingly mulling it over. A few moments later, Dalai asked for permission to speak.

"There's a chance that the plan could go well; however, the town of Caribala is close to the border. Couldn't Farsas just call for reinforcements from their

homeland?"

"That would be a problem for us—but the same thing could happen at any time, anywhere. With teleportation in play, there's no end to the list of possibilities. We're better off setting our sights on a place where we're more likely to succeed. It'd only take a day and a half to march from here to Caribala, even at a normal pace."

A bewitching flower blooming in the depths of the castle.

That was how people thought of Ortea. Her hair was now covered in dust and had lost its luster, but the light in her amber eyes was just as bright as ever, filled with a strong determination.

The princess looked different from what the younger officers had imagined, but they found their eyes drawn to her nonetheless. She was far more beautiful than when she was languishing in the closed rooms of the castle, even if she was soiled with blood and sweat.

Dalai fixed his gaze on Ortea's face once again.

The Twelve Family Council was being held in just two days. Ortea wasn't supposed to be putting her life at risk at such a crucial point. She was showing how determined she was to become queen through her actions, but she'd already done more than enough. The wisest thing to do would be to return to the castle immediately.

Still...that was clearly not what the princess wanted to do.

Carrying the morale of her whole army on her shoulders, Ortea looked up from the map and glanced at each and every one of her officers.

"What do you think? I'm a total novice when it comes to war, so feel free to speak up if you have any thoughts."

As distinguished as her expression was, there was no trace of arrogance there. A few moments later, one of the officers hesitantly raised his voice.

"You make a good point, Your Highness... But can Weisuz Fortress, a strategic point within our borders, really be compared to Caribala, a town in Casola? It's a volatile place, whether there's an invasion happening or not. Wouldn't it be in

Kisk's best interests to hand it over to Farsas...?"

"Caribala is a town in Kisk," Ortea said emphatically.

Her statement was clear, but peculiarly, she said it in a neutral tone.

Faneet, standing behind her, held his breath. The incident from Ortea's past had been swept under the rug, meaning that he was the only person present who knew Ortea's history with Caribala.

She gazed at the city on the map with a sorrowful look in her eyes.

"There may be people from Casola living there, but it's also a town of Kisk. We can't just surrender it to Farsas without any resistance. Plus, it's right on the border; its location is probably more valuable to Kisk than a fortress deep inside Rosta. We have nothing to lose by gaining control of it."

Her last sentence sounded quite typical of Ortea, and the officer who'd spoken up let out a sigh of relief. When she noticed his reaction, the princess gave a faint smile.

Perhaps this *was* one way of getting revenge.

Caribala was the town she'd been sacrificed to protect. This time, she was going to sell it to Farsas. Having become a pawn in the negotiations between the two nations, it would be plundered, conquered, and handed over.

Shizuku felt no emotion toward the town, which had been tossed from one country to another in a conflict that nobody could be blamed for. She was indifferent. It was like dealing with a lifeless entity.

What would Shizuku think if she heard Ortea's plan?

The princess looked up at the starless night sky. Her officers began to express their agreement, one after another, but Ortea simply furrowed her brow and closed her eyes, not saying a word.

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Having retreated from the fortress, Kisk's army began their march to Caribala under the cover of night.

When Lars heard the news, a cynical look appeared in his eyes.

"Your Majesty, what should we do? Head them off before they get there and

fight them back?"

"No, there's no need for that," the king replied. "It's the fortress they want the most, so we should just let things play out."

"What should I say to Azulia?"

"Tell her to retreat if it looks like we're going to lose."

Once the mage messenger had left, Lars began to look over the damage from the previous day.

The Farsas invasion seemed poised for success. Kisk must have realized that they weren't going to win the war, and Lars had a hunch that they might broach the subject of negotiations soon—assuming the council meeting scheduled for the following day went smoothly.

Lars glanced at the papers he'd received from his homeland—a report from his sister about the unrest among the nobility within the country—and smiled.

"Now then, Ortea. Considering it doesn't really belong to either of us, what will you do with that city?" he asked himself. "...To tell you the truth, that place is too much for Farsas to handle. Our memories of the disgraced king are still too fresh."

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The streets were all ablaze.

There was nothing that could escape the fire's grasp—not buildings, not people, not even the sky itself. It was all burning.

A nauseating stench filled the air. The smell of burning blood and searing flesh.

The air reeked of death, as though everything had rotted away. Mercy was nowhere to be found here.

Screams echoed in the distance, accompanied by the pounding of hooves.

Ahh.

They had to flee, and quickly. Otherwise, that person was going to come back.

They were already on their way.



As he teleported from city to city, country to country, Niké began to see things more clearly.

In the past, all of those places were just toys for Ortea to play with. She would stir up small conflicts to avoid more catastrophic choices and add fuel to the fire just to quell her boredom.

When Niké told Shizuku about Ortea's tendencies, she'd said, "That sounds like something out of Arabian Nights," but Niké still didn't know what that meant.

"I really wish they'd hurry up and call the king back..."

Niké had just had another secret meeting with a lord from Farsas. It was just one of many. After it was over, Niké let out a sigh of exhaustion and made his way to the tavern of the small town. No one else was around to hear him, so he took a moment let out his grievances.

In the past, he'd gathered seeds of unrest for the princess's amusement, but now he'd altered his approach slightly, provoking conflicts within Farsas at his own discretion. He'd already wound up some discontented nobles in the castle and gotten them to cause problems, but it wasn't enough.

One could question why he was doing this, but his objective was simple: He wanted to get people to summon Lars back, dragging him away from Kisk in the process.

If Niké's coworker was to be believed, the incumbent king of Farsas—who was currently wreaking havoc within Kisk's borders—supposedly had two weaknesses: carrots and his younger sister.

That sounded totally stupid to Niké, but Leuticia *had* temporarily taken over the running of Farsas. If Niké gradually increased the number of problems she had to deal with and put more strain on her, the king's fondness for his sister might prompt him to rush back. Niké wasn't completely serious about this idea, but inciting an uprising within a country to get them to call back their troops was a commonly used tactic.

Niké had been working on these strategies whenever he wasn't busy

gathering intel, so he decided to enjoy a drink to distract himself from his mounting exhaustion.

"Next, I'll go and see what's happening in Caribala...and then I'll go back to the castle."

The Twelve Family Council was being held the following day. His master was sure to return to the castle for it.

Shizuku had been attacked only a few days earlier, but he sincerely hoped that nobody else would resort to such extreme measures. To Niké, both Ortea and Shizuku seemed like restricted, powerless people in danger—but that was just how mages tended to view ordinary folk. If they got injured, they had no way of healing themselves. It wasn't wise for him to stray too far from them.

Still, there was something else troubling him: Caribala, the town that had sparked this whole issue.

There was an unmistakably tense atmosphere between the residents of Caribala and the Farsasian troops who had occupied the town. Farsas had rescued them from the riots plaguing the town, so anyone would assume they'd be more welcoming, but the mood was still heavy. If the people of Caribala were that unhappy with their occupiers, perhaps Niké would be able to easily incite a rebellion. He'd be lying if he said the idea hadn't crossed his mind.

Why were the people of Caribala unwelcoming to Farsas?

Only the residents themselves knew the answer to that. It was the same answer to the question, "Why hadn't they returned to their old town after the war ended sixty years ago?"

There were memories that would stay with people for as long as they lived. Their tales of despair were passed down from generation to generation.

The fear they felt when they saw the disgraced king laughing at the razed remains of their homes left behind deep scars, even after all that time.

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The town of Caribala had no walls surrounding it—just a highway that ran adjacent to it.

Having once quietly facilitated trade between Kisk and Farsas due to its

proximity to the border, the conflict had transformed the town into a key location in the struggle between the two countries.

However, this “key location” proved too much for both countries to deal with.

Kisk had given the settlement to Casola’s refugees after Farsas’s invasion drove them out of their homeland sixty years ago, but memories of their now-defunct nation remained everywhere around the town.

The Kisk army halted its advance toward the town of Caribala roughly three hours after the break of day, as the morning was coming to an end. Ortea, situated at the core of the army, squinted as she gazed into the distance at the town.

This was her first time seeing Caribala with her own eyes. Until very recently, the streets must have been teeming with thousands of people living peaceful lives. This thought gave her mixed emotions that she wasn’t able to process. If it weren’t for that one incident, she might never have seen the town in such circumstances. Nor would she have fought with her brother for the throne.

There were about two hours left until the Twelve Family Council began. Tigor and Shizuku were still at the castle, and if Ortea hurried, she could still make it back. Having marched through the night, the princess rubbed her heavy eyelids and looked up.

They had decided not to teleport the army to Caribala—not just because the mages were so exhausted, but also because relying on magic could cause them to fall for Farsas’s ploy. With a pained expression, General Dalai fixed his eyes on the town where Farsas’s additional forces were presumably stationed.

“Have they set up any traps?” he asked.

“It’s hard to tell from here,” replied Ortea. “But ideally, we want to avoid fighting them inside the town.”

If they engaged in battles scattered throughout the town, Kisk wouldn’t be able to leverage their numerical advantage.

General Dalai wanted to retreat without engaging in battle with Farsas’s additional forces. He considered this as he ordered his troops to advance. As they drew closer to the town, its buildings gradually began to look bigger.

There was no sign of any soldiers emerging from the settlement. Had they already heard about Kisk's advance? He debated whether to send someone to scope out the situation, but then, just as they were about to continue their advance, he heard what sounded like a faint whistle.

Suddenly, an arrowhead appeared right before his eyes.

Dalai was startled, but he didn't hesitate. As the defensive barrier around him slowed the speed of the arrowhead, he swiftly dodged it by twisting his neck at just the right moment. The arrow grazed past his ear and pierced the belly of the soldier's horse behind him, causing the animal to release a high-pitched cry and thrash around. Unable to withstand it, the soldier was thrown from the back of his horse.

"Dammit! A sniper attack?!"

If it weren't for the barrier—or if he'd been slightly slower to react—the arrow would have pierced Dalai's forehead.

He looked around, trying to spot the culprit, but there were no nearby buildings a sniper could use to hide. If the shot had come from the lookout tower he could see in the distance, then even if they were being aided by a magical implement, they must be incredibly talented.

"Stay on guard. Attacks are incoming. Strengthen your wards," the general ordered.

The mages commenced their incantations as ordered. But just then, as if triggered by the chants, the Kisk soldiers found themselves besieged by a barrage of attacks, some originating from within the town itself.

Lars had entrusted Azulia, who had one thousand soldiers under her command, with the town of Caribala.

This didn't sound like enough to occupy the town, but there had only been a few dozen guards there in the first place, and the number of residents had drastically decreased due to the ongoing riots. As a result, Caribala had been relatively easy to occupy over the past few days. Despite the presence of Farsasian troops on patrol, the town had retained its typical serenity—at least, it had as long as you disregarded the citizens' looks of fear and scorn directed

toward the soldiers.

“Oh, you’re kidding! He dodged it! The arrow struck a horse!”

The woman, having fired her magical bow from the railing of the watchtower, became extremely frustrated when she saw that her arrow had missed.

The sorcerer standing behind her stifled a sigh. If she were annoyed that she’d failed to kill the enemy general, her reaction would be understandable. But that wasn’t what had upset her.

“A horse! A *horse!*” the commander shouted repeatedly, prompting the mage to confront her as calmly as he could.

“His Majesty has instructed us to retreat whenever we see fit.”

“A horse! How *dare* the old man do that?!”

“Are you listening, Azulia?”

“Yeah.”

Although she was the best archer in Farsas Castle and possessed considerable prowess when it came to fighting at close quarters, Azulia rarely accompanied troops onto the battlefield. It was clear that her excessive fondness for horses was the reason for that. If she was going to lose her mind every time a horse was killed, she’d be useless out there.

Azulia pulled herself together and gave the order to strike back. It was less a serious counterattack and more a tactic to pin down the enemy and buy Farsas enough time to withdraw.

Upon receiving this command, the mage shrugged his shoulders.

“Does that mean we can finally leave this town behind? ...To be honest, I’m getting fed up with the looks these old cronies keep giving me.”

“That’s unavoidable. The tale of how the disgraced king Dysral ravaged the town of Casola is too shameful to mention.”

“Our current king is so easygoing, though. That said, I’m sure it’d take a while to convince them of that.”

The people who had escaped Dysral’s clutches and fled to Kisk had had no

intention of returning to their homeland after the war, even after Farsas helped rebuild it and it had become part of the country's territory. The region just brought back too many painful memories.

"But from Kisk's perspective, the people of Casola are still foreigners," said Azulia. "They have nowhere else to go home to. It's about time they came to terms with that."

"There's a new generation, and many people have sought refuge elsewhere. It must be hard for the elderly to change their mindset."

Azulia nodded and readied her bow once again.

"I'm going to kill that old man, even if it's the only thing I do," said the commander, to which the mage let out an audible sigh.

Kisk's troops weren't concerned about the magic pelting down at them from the town.

Strengthening their barriers to fend off the attacks, the soldiers rushed into the city, searching for enemy mages. Casola's remaining residents were startled by this sudden turn of events, yet seemed unwilling to fight back. The troops scurried into the buildings and hesitantly looked around.

However, the mages and archers from Farsas had halted their attacks and disappeared as soon as the enemy army approached the town. The only person still targeting them was the powerful archer stationed in the watchtower. As arrows continued hurtling toward Dalai one after the other, an officer raised his voice.

"This person's pretty persistent! Hide behind this building, General Dalai!"

Once Dalai was out of sight, the archer simply started targeting other people, and before long, Farsas started taking on casualties. The perpetrator must have begun using arrows that could break through magical barriers.

Dalai gritted his teeth.

"Head to the tower! Kill that archer!" he commanded, but his orders weren't necessary. Dozens of troops were already on their way there.

Yet by the time they reached the watchtower, a powerful barrier had been

put in place preventing anyone from trespassing. Standing in front of the barrier, the soldiers looked up at the top of the tower.

At that moment, an arrow came flying down from almost directly above them and struck a soldier in the face. The man let out a croaking sound as he collapsed to the ground. The metal arrow had pierced his jaw and gone all the way out the back of his neck.

Provoked and threatened by this attack, the other soldiers seethed with anger.

“Someone fetch a mage! We’ll make them break that barrier!”

“Let me destroy it!”

Before they knew it, a mage had positioned himself in their midst. When one of the soldiers saw his face, he was shocked.

“You...work for the princess...”

“Wait a moment.”

The man—the most unusual mage in the entire castle—held his hand over the barrier and began to recite an incantation.

The others remained vigilant for any attacks from above as they watched him cast his spell. A few seconds later, they heard something break. With the barrier removed, the soldiers scrambled inside, but there didn’t seem to be anyone in there anymore. The archer must have slipped away, their previous attack being their last.

Suspecting that this was the case, Niké recited another incantation and teleported back to Ortea.

If Caribala were to be described in one word, it would be “desolate.”

Setting foot in the town for the first time, Ortea aimlessly scanned her faded surroundings. The town had once been abuzz with traders, but now, a lot of the houses had their windows firmly shut. Many residents seemed to have fled to the region of Farsas where Casola had once been situated.

While Farsas’s occupation had proved exceptionally straightforward, Niké assured Ortea that the people hadn’t been happy about it. Instead, they’d been

living their day-to-day lives in misery. Now that the town had been taken back by Kisk's army, the few remaining residents watched the soldiers pass by from inside their homes, looking both bewildered and apprehensive.

Ortea met the gaze of an old man who was watching the cavalry's procession through his grimy window. Her expression stiffened.

"Still, I imagine that staying in Rosta will be nothing but hard for them," Ortea remarked. "Farsas is where their ancestral home lay. Surely they'd find life easier there."

Faneet looked around the deserted town.

"Maybe they can't forget what happened sixty years ago. The older generation of today must have heard about it again and again from their parents."

"King Dysral, the disgraced king..."

He may have been the ruler of a foreign nation, but the disgraced king's reputation was so awful that even Ortea knew about him.

The deranged monarch had destroyed his own country, murdered his own people, and, in the end, even slain his own family. The king's strength and temperament had made him seem almost inhuman, and Ortea was struck by a sudden sense of irony.

In a way, he and I are one and the same.

She had incited wars and executed people, too—and now she was preparing to fight her own brother.

Where was *she* going to end up? As Ortea stood filled with self-mockery, a soldier came running over. He bowed apologetically.

"Princess Ortea, the town elder wishes to meet with you."

"The town elder? What's happened?"

"Well... He asked who was commanding the army, so I mentioned you and the general. He insisted that he wanted to meet you, Your Highness..."

"Fine."

The man probably just wanted to thank her for freeing his people from the occupation. She knew just how depressed she was feeling, but the princess refused to let it show. She followed the soldier, accompanied by Faneet and Niké, to the town's assembly hall.

Inside, Dalai, several officers, and seven people who looked like local men were waiting for her. They were positioned in a circle, suggesting that they'd been discussing something, but when they spotted Ortea, they all bowed in succession.

After Ortea had given them a silent nod, an old man appeared from behind the wall of people. His body was trembling, so a young boy was helping him stay upright. The old man fixed his sunken eyes on the princess.

"Oh... You must be..."

"Are you the town elder I was told about?"

"Yes... I have wanted to meet you for a very long time, Princess."

The man sounded overcome with emotion. It seemed like the princess wasn't the only one who found this remark strange; the town elder's inexplicable welcome brought a skeptical look to Ortea's face, but she quickly interpreted it as the sentimentality of an old man.

Ortea responded, refusing to show any emotion of her own.

"I'm sorry it took us so long to deal with this situation. I don't know how things are going to develop, but—"

"Your Highness, I am relieved to see you all grown up safe and sound... I hoped to meet you once before I died...Princess."

What in the world was this man talking about?

Confused, Ortea debated whether or not to ignore his comments. Had he already gone senile? She glanced at the boy who was holding him up, trying to work out whether he always acted this way, but when she did, Ortea got a surprise.

The boy stared at Ortea with an extremely earnest look in his eyes. His gaze was clear, brimming with respect and gratitude. It was a pure and loyal gaze,

one she had never encountered before, and the princess caught her breath.

When he noticed how overwhelmed she seemed, the boy looked awkward for a moment. But then his expression reverted, as if he'd made up his mind about something, and he began to speak. His clear voice reverberated around the room like a bell.

"I know what happened, Princess. I heard the story from my grandfather...and the lord. I know that our town was once saved because of you."

It was so dark.

She was scared.

She was locked away in a small room.

It was cold. She was worried. She wanted to escape.

She cried and cried. She lashed out, screaming at the top of her lungs.

Let me out.

Let me go.

Let me go home.

Please.

The wrinkled corners of the old man's eyes welled up with tears.

Ortea already knew what this display of emotion signified. Her small lips began to tremble.

"Princess... We came from somewhere else...but you refused to abandon us. You gave yourself up in our place... I can't begin to imagine how painful that would have been. You must have been so worried. As young as you were, you carried the weight of all our lives on your shoulders. The pain that must have caused you doesn't bear thinking about... While we are grateful, we're filled with remorse."

As soon as Ortea was rescued, she'd shut herself in her room inside the castle.

She made no attempt to see either of her parents. She had all their letters thrown away.

Inside that castle, she was a princess. Nobody thought about the person beneath the title.

Once she came to that realization, she stopped expecting anything from anybody. She started to look down on any kind of warmth.

"I always hoped I'd get the chance to meet you, Princess..." the elder continued. "I've wanted to express my gratitude to you for a long time. But most of all, I wanted to say sorry... You endured so much hardship for our sakes... All I can do is apologize."

The man extended his hand to the princess. His fingers looked as brittle as a withered branch, but the gesture overflowed with emotion. Hesitating, Ortea gently took hold of his hand. It felt like skin and bones.

At that time, this was all she'd wanted.

Words that showed that someone cared. The warmth of someone's touch.

All she had needed was a shred of that kindness, and she could have stayed the princess she'd been.

She would have been able to devote herself to her country without straying off course.

Ortea closed her eyes. Visions of what she'd lost and what she'd abandoned burst to life, then vanished behind her eyes.

A warm feeling started to rise in the back of her throat, but she repressed the urge to cry. Instead, she squeezed out a hoarse reply.

"I'm grateful for your words. But...I'm not the kind of person you should feel gratitude to. I never have been, and I never will be... In fact, I'm probably going to hand this town over to Farsas if I need to."

She resented Casola. She hated Rosta.

That said, she wasn't opposed to using them as pawns in her negotiations.

She had no other options. Kisk wasn't going to triumph against Farsas in battle. She already knew that.

But even so, Ortea's voice was full of anguish.

As the princess's eyes clouded over with regret, the old man looked up at her and smiled.

"If that is your decision, then certainly. I will convince the people still here that it is the right thing to do. You saved this town. If it can be of any use to you...then we shall support you."

Shizuku had told Ortea to look at her nation with her own eyes. To step outside, instead of cowering away in her birdcage.

Her words may have sounded naive and pushy, but as Ortea clutched the man's aged fingers, she realized that there was truth to what Shizuku had said.

"...I'm really sorry."

Ortea's quiet apology was met with a smile from the elderly man. He held the princess's hand between both of his own, which were creased deep with wrinkles.

The world of men was cruel and irrational. And the people were always foolish.

Yet she had probably been the most foolish of all, hating everything around her.

Some things you could never understand unless you saw them, and others you had to want to learn about to in order to know them.

The old man's weak grip instilled in her an endless warmth—proving that sometimes, people *could* display incredible kindness.

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She opened the lid of the glass bottle.

Shizuku took out a white pill and placed it in her mouth. The hard sphere slid down her throat. Already accustomed to this sensation, Shizuku switched her focus. She lifted her head and looked at herself in the mirror.

"All right. Am I ready?"

Shizuku was dressed in a white collared jacket and a long gray skirt. Her hair was tied up, and she had applied a light layer of makeup. Nothing was amiss. If anything, her youthful face might have put her at a disadvantage, but she

hoped people would turn a blind eye to that. There wasn't much she could do about it.

Shizuku slipped on a pair of white gloves and left the room. The soldiers who were acting as her guards were already waiting outside. When she came out, they led her to the council chamber. Regrettably, it didn't seem like Ortea was going to make it in time; about fifteen minutes earlier, Shizuku had received a message saying that the princess was "reclaiming Caribala." This was nothing she hadn't foreseen, though. She'd been left behind to fill in for Ortea, so she was in no position to complain.

Upon hearing of the Marquis of Ladmai's murder, Ortea had simply said, "I can't say that I'm surprised." Shizuku asked her master if she should take any extra precautions, but Ortea just told her to watch her own back. With only half a day left before the council and meetings prohibited, there really wasn't anything she could do. Unless she resorted to assassination herself.

"I'd never do that, though," Shizuku mumbled as she strode down the long hallway.

Thinking back, it had been the assassination attempt on the king that had revealed Beelhurse's true nature to her.

If she hadn't foiled it, her situation right now would be much easier. But although she felt that way, Shizuku still believed that using such methods was despicable.

Ortea was going to secure the throne *without* resorting to murder. She had to do things the proper way, for the sake of her future.

When Shizuku reached the hall, her guards opened the doors for her, and she thanked them and stepped inside.

She was led into the waiting room, which was being used as a small reception area. That said, it was only small by the castle's standards—you could easily fit Shizuku's bedroom into it four times over.

Shizuku was guided to a chair by the wall, where she sat down. Tigor was already seated beside her. When Shizuku greeted him, he flashed her a nervous smile.

“Where’s His Majesty...?”

“It doesn’t look like he’s here yet.”

The marquises had already begun their discussions in the next room. However, members of the royal family, including the king, were not allowed to attend this first part of the deliberations, when the patriarchs would discuss whether the king should abdicate. The royals could only be present during the final stage, when the marquises were ready to announce their verdict. Until then, Beelhurse, Shizuku, and others had to wait in the antechamber.

Shizuku maintained her silence for a while, but eventually, she exhaled and gave a strained smile.

“This is quite nerve-racking, isn’t it...”

“It really is.”

The situation reminded Shizuku of interviewing for colleges. She relaxed her tense shoulders.

At that moment, the doors opened, and Beelhurse entered the room accompanied by a magistrate.

“...”

He was the man whose throne they were vying for, but regardless of what Shizuku thought of him, Beelhurse was still the reigning king. Shizuku and Tigor quietly rose to their feet and bowed. The king responded with a faint smile.

They all took their seats. After an indeterminable period of silence, Beelhurse suddenly shifted his gaze toward Shizuku. A gentle smile—the one he had shown her so frequently in the past—appeared on his face.

“You must have run out of patience with Ortea by now, haven’t you, Shizuku?”

“No. That’s not the case at all.”

“But she’s a bad woman. Did you know that just yesterday, the Marquis of Ladmai died because of her?”

“That’s...!”

Shizuku almost leaped out of her chair, but Tigor stopped her. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw the man shaking his head. He was telling her not to cause a scene. Seeing that, she suddenly began to calm down.

How dare you cast suspicion on Ortea.

She wanted to say it to him so badly she could feel the words halfway out of her throat, but instead, Shizuku put it out of her mind and smiled.

“What are you talking about?” Shizuku asked the king. “The princess would never do such a thing. She wouldn’t gain anything from it, either.”

“How would you know? She’s employed that tactic plenty of times before. Has something changed?”

“It has,” she declared, so angry that her voice almost cracked. On the surface, though, Shizuku kept her smile plastered on her face as she glared at the king. “I would advise against making unfounded speculations, Your Majesty. Such behavior may well come back to haunt you.”

“No, it won’t. Everyone knows what Ortea’s like.”

Discomfort settled in her stomach, like a serpent sleeping inside her.

Without realizing it, Shizuku found herself pressing the mark on her abdomen. She scratched the site of the magic suppressing her speech through her clothes.

How evil could a person become?

What caused a person’s character to deteriorate and change?

Shizuku wasn’t interested in the process by which Beelhurse had transformed, nor did she wish to learn about it. She felt like simply acknowledging it would make *her* change, too.

She confronted the king, refusing to avert her gaze. She was here on behalf of her master, after all. She couldn’t afford to lower her eyes deferentially.

“Your Majesty. My master has nothing to hide. She’s not like you. She has a firm understanding of her own wrongdoings. She’ll make a far better monarch than you. That’s what I believe.”

“...You’re a fool, Shizuku. Don’t blame me if you come to regret this.”

"I don't plan to. And even if I do, my regrets wouldn't mean anything to you," she retorted haughtily, causing Beelhurse's expression to darken further.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but at that moment, another magistrate entered the room.

"The vote will begin shortly. Please enter the council chamber."

The message caused a shift in the atmosphere of the room and elicited a small sigh from Shizuku. She looked at the king out of the corner of her eye. He rose to his feet, a bitter expression on his face. Shizuku stood up as well, straightening her posture.

The vote would be decided by eleven people.

Shizuku wasn't entirely sure which way it would go.

She didn't want to lose. Especially not to this man.

Shizuku stood up tall and stepped into the council chamber.

Eleven pairs of eyes immediately focused on her. It made her feel like she was in a tribunal, where people judged others for their actions.

The marquises were seated in two rows of desks facing one another.

The debate had probably been a heated one. Most of the tea laid out in front of each person had been drunk. A court lady was serving them new drinks as the king, Shizuku, and Tigor stepped inside.

Beelhurse and Shizuku walked past the desks and headed toward the chairs positioned at the back of the room, where they sat down. It felt like they were about to make a presentation at a seminar, but the nervousness Shizuku was experiencing was on a different level altogether.

Beelhurse didn't even try to look at her. He just kept his gaze fixed on the doorway they'd come through.

Shizuku glanced at him discreetly, then cast her gaze down toward the floor.

I need to calm down.

She'd worked so hard to get to this point. She was sure she could get through it. Things would work out one way or another.

Shizuku had encountered countless obstacles since finding herself in this new world—yet she'd managed to overcome them all.

She had nothing to fear. She'd extract the outcome she was hoping for.

Shizuku slowly breathed in.

Then she looked up.

After a long blink, she gazed at the faces of each of the marquises.

Some men returned her gaze with a smile, while others conspicuously looked away.

But this no longer made her feel anxious. Instead, she confidently puffed out her chest.

“The voting will now commence.”

At the end of the road paved with twisted emotions, in the darkness marred by wounds, began the trial that would settle everything.

There were eleven patriarchs.

Shizuku had met six of them in person. If she were to include the deceased Marquis of Ladmai, that made it seven. The other four had only negotiated with Tigor.

However, there was one who'd adamantly refused to meet with her: the Marquis of Tylga, whose nephew had been executed by Ortea.

It appeared that the voting would start with the Marquis of Kiaph, seated opposite the Marquis of Tylga.

The voting would not be conducted anonymously, allowing the monarch to find out who had opposed them. Last time the council had voted to put a new monarch on the throne, the newly crowned ruler had immediately imprisoned those who had cast their ballots against them.

The Twelve Family Council hadn't convened since. Until now, there had been no incidents serious enough to warrant ousting the king. It was the first time that the royals and the marquises had been harmed personally.

The Marquis of Kiaph smiled at Shizuku.

"I vote for Ortea," he stated.

His voice echoed around the silent room, surprising everybody inside it. This was a different decision than when the three patriarchs had met previously. This time, they weren't deciding whether to treat Ortea as a criminal, but whether she should become queen, and as significant as the decision was, he'd decided to support the princess. This sentiment made Shizuku happy. She silently bowed to him.

The moment the first marquis, who was among the most important of the patriarchs, cast his vote for Ortea, the atmosphere in the room shifted significantly.

Eventually, the next marquis raised his hand and announced his support for Princess Ortea as well, although he did so hesitantly.

Ortea needed a total of six votes to secure the throne. A few of the marquises who had expressed their support for Ortea during the negotiations ended up voting for Beelhurse, but Shizuku maintained her poker face and calmly waited for the next vote to be cast.

The ninth vote—and the fifth for Ortea—came from the Marquis of Sage.

"I cast my vote for Lady Ortea," he said with a smile, winking at Shizuku. His inappropriately casual demeanor nearly made her burst out laughing.

With that, Ortea had five votes, and Beelhurse had four.

If one of the two remaining marquises pledged their support for Ortea, she would win.

The tenth person to cast his vote was the Marquis of Rema, a man close to the Marquis of Ladmai. After Shizuku's lengthy debate with him, he'd admitted that perhaps entrusting the job to Ortea wouldn't be that bad. His turn had come, prompting him to raise his hand.

The man looked at Shizuku, furrowing his brows slightly. She swallowed nervously.

"...I vote for His Majesty, King Beelhurse."

The moment he heard this, a pleased look crossed the current king's face.

It was five votes against five.

The only person who hadn't cast their vote was the Marquis of Tylga, who hated Ortea.

She wasn't going to get enough votes.

Shizuku went pale as she recalled the contingency plans for such a scenario.

First, she needed to make sure Ortea got away. Considering how things had turned out, it was lucky that the princess hadn't attended the council.

Shizuku glanced at Tigor. He responded with a nod.

They had to get Ortea out of the country immediately. Then they would approach Leuticia to negotiate. She would ask Farsas to help them oust the king in a non-legitimate manner, in exchange for Beelhurse's head and some of Kisk's territory and assets. There was a chance that Shizuku wouldn't be able to escape, but as long as she wasn't executed immediately, Niké would come to rescue her. Naturally, plans were already in place for Vied, Yura, and Willett's escape. They just needed to act swiftly.

Shizuku looked straight ahead, refusing to let her disappointment show. Instead, she put up a determined front, focused on her next move.

The princess—who'd once threatened to take Shizuku's life if she failed her mission—would be extremely angry if Shizuku were executed. Or at least, that's the impression Shizuku got.

As such, Shizuku needed to do everything in her power to resist. However, just as she resolved herself to do so, the Marquis of Tylga cast the final vote.

"I vote for Ortea to become queen."

Silence filled the room. Above all else, shock filled the room. Everyone's stunned gazes converged on the marquis, but he just looked at Shizuku, unwavering. His intense gaze prompted her to straighten her posture before the relief even hit her. Then she returned his gaze.

The silence seemed to test her with every passing second. In the end, it was the former king sitting beside her who shattered it.

"W-why?! You...!"

“There is no ‘why.’ I’ve cast my vote for Ortea. That’s all.”

“Don’t you hold a grudge against her?!” shouted the marquis’s previous master, rising from his seat.

The Marquis of Tylga gave him a stern look.

“You seem to be mistaken about something, Beelhurse. The goal of this council is to select a king. It’s not a place to settle personal grievances. I think that Ortea is better suited to the role than you. That’s all there is to it.”

“Are you saying I’m an inferior ruler?!”

“At the very least, she’s willing to put her life on the line for her country. Isn’t the fact that she’s not here all the proof we need of that?”

“That’s...”

Just as Beelhurse was trying to argue back, the door burst open.

When everybody saw who’d entered, they rose to their feet, shocked.

The woman they were all staring at stopped in her tracks and gently tilted her head to one side.

“Sorry I’m late. What was the vote?” There wasn’t a hint of pretense in her voice.

She must have come straight from the battleground. Dressed in dirty linen clothes with her dusty hair still tied up, she looked around at everyone.

The last person her gaze settled on was Shizuku. The princess’s aide bowed deeply.

“Just the way you’d expect. We have fulfilled your command.”

“Well done,” Ortea replied.

Ortea didn’t even bother looking at her brother, who trembled with humiliation. Now he was a mere symbol of a bygone era, so she ignored him and chose to address the eleven marquises.

“Firstly, I’m incredibly grateful to you all for giving me the opportunity to be queen. And yes, I’m talking to *all* of you. I don’t care who voted for me. I have no need to find out, either. I’m going to prove myself to each of you anyway.”

But before that, allow me to ask you one question.”

The woman, who'd taken the throne from her brother at the age of nineteen, looked at everyone with the kind of dignity one would expect from a queen. She showed no nerves or timidity, but simply gave the impression of a strong-willed monarch.

“Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that we'll be able to deliver a decisive blow to Farsas in this war, even if we do rely on our military strength. We've taken back the city of Caribala, but our enemy has captured the fortress. Therefore, I intend to change tack and pursue negotiations. Naturally I'll ensure that Kisk is disadvantaged as little as possible...but we're in a weak position. I can't guarantee that we'll come out of it unscathed.”

This decision wasn't entirely surprising. A serious atmosphere enveloped all the people listening.

“So let me say this. If any of you object to inviting Farsas to negotiate, speak now. If you think I'm not capable of ruling as your queen, tell me now. Don't hold back.”

Ortea had just won over the majority. Shizuku couldn't help but wonder why she was asking them to do something that could potentially undermine her own position, but she quickly quashed the thought and watched her in silence.



She didn't have to wait long for a conclusion.

The eleven men skirted the tables and gathered around her, kneeling one by one.

The last one to kneel before her was the Marquis of Kiaph, who lowered his head and spoke in a solemn tone of voice.

"We will obey you, Your Majesty."

It was unquestionably a vow of loyalty.

Hearing his words, Ortea gave them a satisfied smile, but there was a slightly bittersweet edge to her expression.

That was how history was made.

The tide had changed thanks to a younger, stronger force.

The ancient queen's blood, bound by lies, had created a new queen who suppressed her own twisted tendencies.

The page opened on a different era, and a new day dawned.

Amidst the sudden flurry of movement around her, Ortea beckoned to Shizuku, who approached her.

"What is it, Princess?"

"You didn't do anything stupid while I was away, did you?"

"I thought I was going to lose my mind with rage a couple of times, but I managed to restrain myself."

Her truthful response made Ortea laugh out loud. Shizuku stayed silent, maintaining a blank expression, so the queen stifled her laughter.

"When you get angry at me, the consequences linger. That's the bit that irritates me," Ortea said with a shrug.

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To everyone's surprise, Farsas swiftly accepted Ortea's offer to negotiate.

They also probably realized that armed conflict would only get them so far. No matter how crafty their strategies were, Farsas would inevitably succumb to

Kisk's attacks unless they summoned reinforcements, and if both nations continued to boost their military strength without finding a way out, the conflict would eventually impact the entire continent.

During the countries' initial discussions, it was decided that the ceasefire negotiations would be held at Weisuz Fortress. Farsas withdrew their troops, leaving just three thousand cavalry soldiers behind.

When Ortea turned up at the fortress, she only had a few guards escorting her. Many people had advised her to have an army as big as Farsas's with her, but Ortea dismissed this idea.

"These talks are being held in my own nation," she'd said. "If I'm accompanied by more soldiers than I really need, people will criticize me for being a coward. I'm right, aren't I, Shizuku?"

"I'm not sure. I doubt Lars will care how much or how little backup you have. In fact, you're best off staying away from him completely."

"...I wouldn't be able to negotiate, then."

Ortea had only just had her coronation, but getting ready for the negotiations was already her top priority. Of course, the castle's inhabitants were aware that there was a new monarch, even though Ortea hadn't had a showy ceremony to celebrate it. Beelhurse being placed under house arrest made that exceedingly clear.

People who'd been frightened by the new queen's reputation were surprised by Ortea's stern yet fair demeanor.

"People are saying you've softened, Princess," chuckled Shizuku.

"Someone forcibly cut away all my spiky edges," Ortea responded with a wry smile.

While the most essential administrative tasks related to the change in ruler were still ongoing, three days were spent preparing the documents required for the negotiations in a speedy yet systematic manner.

Five days after the Twelve Family Council, it was time.

A transit ring was used to teleport from Kisk Castle to the fortress.

The ring inside Weisuz Fortress had been sealed off following Farsas's occupation, but it was reactivated, and an advance party was teleported first into the fortress. Farsas had promised not to use the transit ring in the northern section of the vast fortress to transport troops into its center. The first troops made sure that Farsas hadn't gone back on their word, ensuring that their queen would be safe when she arrived.

Once they'd given her the all-clear, Ortea teleported to the fortress with her close aides and about thirty guards. She chose a small conference room to use as a waiting room, then carried out her final checks.

"We've agreed that each of us can be accompanied by three people during the talks... But I can't pick Niké or Shizuku. Stay hidden."

Neither Niké nor Shizuku had any objections, so they silently bowed. Niké had been carrying out secret maneuvers within Farsas, while Shizuku had been effectively kidnapped from Farsas Castle and brought to Kisk, meaning that neither of them could afford to show their faces in front of Farsasian officials. To make up for his absence, Niké gave his master a magic implement that could pick up sounds so he could rush to her aid if anything went wrong.

In the end, it was decided that, along with Faneet, a mage and a magistrate would accompany Ortea. The queen turned back to Niké and Shizuku.

"I'm heading off, then."

"Please be careful. The person you're dealing with doesn't understand common sense," warned Shizuku.

"...Is he really that bad?" the queen asked.

Shizuku didn't want to give an answer more precise than that, so she kept quiet. Ortea looked uncomfortable, but she collected herself and left the room.

"Where's Vied?" Shizuku asked Niké once the queen was gone.

"He's in another room. The court ladies are looking after him."

Shizuku wasn't sure whether the presence of the baby—a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal lineage—would be a blessing or a curse.

The two of them exchanged glances, then decided to have a cup of tea while

they waited.

Farsas had kept all its prior promises.

Ortea walked down the corridor devoid of soldiers and arrived at the office where they'd agreed to meet. Inside, she felt relieved. In the worst-case scenario, she could have been captured and killed on her way there. Needing to gain the enemy's trust, the queen had made a number of concessions, including reducing her number of guards. To a certain extent, it seemed to have paid off.

The moment she stepped foot in the office, however, that relief evaporated.

Ortea, the queen of Kisk, strode defiantly through the door—but when she saw the graffiti covering the entire wall, her jaw dropped, leaving her unable to close her mouth again.

She'd been warned that Lars had no understanding of common sense, but this was *horrendous*.

Ortea found herself transfixed by one of the pictures on the white wall. It looked like it was supposed to be a dog or a mouse, but it was impossible to tell. As she stood there, frozen to the spot, a slovenly man's voice called out to her.

"What's up, Ortea? Aren't you going to sit down?"

Two groups of three chairs were positioned opposite one another, with the king seated in the center, facing her. His legs were crossed, and an infuriatingly calm smile was spread across his face. He was definitely the same king of Farsas she'd encountered on the battlefield just a few days earlier.

Lars had chiseled features, but his handsome appearance couldn't keep his mean-spirited petulance concealed for long. The sight of his face made her feel like clicking her tongue with contempt as she sat herself down.

Once the woman, close to ten years his junior, had settled down in front of him, the king began to speak.

"Now, then. Let's skip the tedious introductions. I've been waiting long enough. So Ortea—what do you plan to offer Farsas?"

What he was suggesting wasn't wrong. Technically, Farsas had been the one to invade, but it was Kisk that had lured it into doing so. The nation had failed to

defeat Farsas, and its fortress had been captured. Kisk was in a weak position. Bribing Farsas to go home was its only hope.

Ortea knew all this, but as soon as she heard these words come out of the king's mouth, she felt an overwhelming urge to slap him across the face with a fan. Instead, though, she just gave the king a cold look and answered his question with a request of her own.

"Before we get to that, I want to know about that drawing over there."

"I did it."

"Why?"

"Because these walls are easy to draw on. It'll make a good memento, don't you think?"

Shizuku and Niké could hear this conversation. Ortea envisioned the expressions on their faces as they listened to it, which helped temper her anger.

Still, the calmer part of her was relieved to find out that Lars was planning to give the fortress back. Lars had called the drawings a memento, implying that they'd serve as a lasting trace of Farsas's capture of the fortress. Usually, this kind of graffiti would intimidate military officers, but pictures as terrible as Lars's were nothing but infuriating. Ortea moved fixing the wall to the top of her mental to-do list.

Since she didn't have a fan, she spread out her papers instead.

"Now, starting with the town of Caribala..."

"...This is even worse than I imagined."

"I know. I hope the princess doesn't snap."

Ortea's two aides listening to the audio from another room were drinking tea, but their faces spoke volumes. Shizuku sighed as she opened a jar full of candies.

"If only Princess Leuticia had been here instead," said Niké regretfully. "I don't think the king can wrap his head around sensible conversation."

"No, the princess is even scarier," responded Shizuku. "I, for one, would like

to avoid meeting her again.”

“But she’s so pretty. Don’t you think she’s a sight for sore eyes?”

“I’d rather stare at those drawings on the wall than face her wrath.”

Niké looked back at the papers. Audio from inside the office was streaming out of the crystal ball on the table.

The queen proceeded to list the terms she proposed for the ceasefire. These included the handover of Caribala upon approval from the residents, surrendering a mine in the west of Rosta under Kisk’s direct ownership, a stipulated reparation payment, and a non-aggression pact that would last for the next fifty years. Niké and Shizuku listened intently.

Once all of Ortea’s offerings had been laid out, a tense silence filled the room.

“Is that everything, Ortea?” the king asked with what sounded like a sneer.

His tone made Shizuku and Niké tense up. It sounded like he could detect everyone’s weaknesses and secrets. Multiple suspicions rose up inside them, bursting like bubbles.

“...Are you saying that’s not enough?” the queen asked.

“They’re perfectly acceptable terms for a ceasefire. But isn’t there something else you’re hiding? That baby you’re looking after... Whose exactly is he?”

Not a word had been said about Vied’s existence. The fact that the king of Farsas, who was possibly the baby’s father, had found out about him shocked Shizuku—so much so that she dropped the teacup she was holding.

Ortea didn’t go pale, but her beautiful face did tense up a little.

In contrast, Lars maintained his relaxed smile as he continued to stare at her.

“Your worthless attempts at killing time would be annoying, but I have no hard evidence. Depending on the terms, I might turn a blind eye to this. Still, who are the child’s parents? I want you to tell me.”

They were talking about the baby boy whom Seilené had given birth to. Ortea knew who the father was, of course; Shizuku was the only one of her aides who didn’t. With the cooperation of Farsas’s royal family, they could quickly

determine whether he descended from their royal lineage.

The baby was still unable to move around on his own, yet Ortea had brought him to the fortress with her. Depending on how the discussions went, there was a chance that his presence would prove essential. She'd never expected her opponent to be the one to bring him up, though. How had the information been leaked?

Conscious of the dryness in her throat, Ortea flashed the king a smile.

"Who knows? Perhaps he's mine."

"Oh? Now, that'd be a revelation. Does that mean you're planning on becoming one of my consorts?"

"Huh?"

If Ortea had been drinking tea, she would have spilled it just like Shizuku did in that moment. Fortunately, all the queen was holding was a thick bundle of documents. Lars watched in amusement as the pile of papers fell onto her lap.

"You were intending to raise that child in secret, precisely because he was a direct descendant of Farsas. In other words, he's my child. That doesn't really bother me. In fact, if you insist that you gave birth to him, I'll take you *and* the child back to Farsas with me. If you add that to your list of conditions, I'll forgive Kisk."

"W-wait. But Vied..."

"What's wrong? If you're not sure that I'm the father, I'll check for you. Bring him here, right now."

Normally, the existence of a child that a person didn't know they had would make them vulnerable. The fact that Lars could act so assertive after such a major shock didn't seem right.

Unsure of what to do, Ortea's face quickly paled. She felt as though she'd been struck by a powerful blow to her head. Her thoughts got jumbled, rendering her unable to respond.

Lars glanced at the astounded queen and gave her a smile that could only be described as malicious.

"I'm not averse to strong women like you, Ortea. Don't worry—I won't let you get bored. Once I train you, you won't even think about crossing any lines."

If the look in the man's blue eyes was anything to go by, he wasn't joking. In fact, it was clear that he was deliberately trying to provoke her. Ortea gritted her teeth, well aware of this.

In other words, Lars already knew everything. He knew about Vied and all the other schemes Ortea had used to target Farsas. And now he was requesting that Ortea—the very source of the turmoil—hand herself over to his country as part of the ceasefire agreement.

Shizuku was wiping away the tea that had spilled on her lap, and when she heard the voices coming from the crystal ball, she dropped her cloth in astonishment. But picking it up was the furthest thing from her mind right then. She exchanged looks with Niké, who was equally stunned.

"Calling this 'unexpected' would be an understatement," he said.

"Huh, how did this happen? How much do they know?"

"I think it's safe to assume they know everything. If they know about Seilené, the rest will soon become clear."

Something about Niké's statement confused Shizuku, but before she could put her finger on what it was, he expanded on his point.

"This is a disaster. If Farsas takes the queen away, the throne will be empty."

"Oh, that's true!"

At present, Ortea and Beelhurse were the only members of Kisk's royal family. Of course, they had some distant relatives around, but if Ortea was taken away by Farsas, Beelhurse would naturally return to the throne. It was impossible to know how the former king, a man consumed with anger, would retaliate if he regained his position.

Shizuku held her head in her hands, imagining the worst possible outcome.

Going by what they'd heard from the office, Lars and Ortea were taking a brief break from negotiating.

Essentially what it came down to was that Ortea was being given one last

chance. Shizuku stood up to go and meet her master, but Niké grabbed her shoulder from behind.

“Wait. You need to go and see Vied. As long as nobody proves that he’s a direct descendant of Farsas, we can still weasel our way out of this, should worse come to worst. I doubt Farsas knows that Vied’s in the fortress.”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right! We can use transit rings, can’t we?”

“Yeah. Take the kid back to the castle for now. We’ll ask the princess for her decision later on. Take some guards with you.”

“Got it.”

Shizuku wanted to ask who Vied’s father was, but there was no time to waste. Once the pair had left the room, Shizuku embarked on her own mission, accompanied by three of the guards who’d been waiting outside.

At that moment, however, the walls around her began to vibrate. Thinking she’d heard an explosion in the distance, Shizuku stopped where she was and turned back to Niké, who’d been heading in the opposite direction.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I dunno,” he replied.

What had happened? It sounded like it had come from the office.

Shizuku debated whether to go back and listen to the crystal ball—but just as she was about to change direction, she saw something behind her colleague that made her eyes widen in astonishment.

It was a bewildering, incomprehensible sight.

Frozen to the spot, Shizuku saw one of the guards behind Niké turn his sword on the mage he was supposed to protect.

“W-watch out!”

Shizuku tried to warn him, but she was too late.

By the time she’d shouted, it was all over.

Niké casually waved his right hand, still looking straight ahead. That motion alone caused the soldier who’d drawn his sword to collapse to the floor in

convulsions. Stepping on the fallen soldier's neck and right hand, the mage beckoned Shizuku over.

She started rushing over to him, but it wasn't long before she heard someone immediately behind her fall down with a groan.

"N-Niké!"

Once she was by his side, Shizuku finally took the opportunity to look over her shoulder and grasped the situation.

Two soldiers were convulsing on the floor, their swords half-drawn. Niké wasn't the only person who'd almost been killed in that moment—she had, too.

Belatedly realizing the danger she'd been in, Shizuku shuddered.

"What just happened...?"

"We'll find out soon enough, won't we?"

This question was directed at the soldier underneath Niké's feet. The merciless mage's words made the man's face tense up. Niké was only stepping lightly on the soldier's neck, but it was probably still hard for him to breathe. He seemed too weak to fight back and gasped desperately for air.

Niké sneered as he adjusted the pressure he was exerting with his feet.

"I don't plan to take up much of your time. If you won't speak, I'll wake the others and ask them instead. Tell me everything you know."

"Shut up! You're a lapdog to that throne-stealing tyrant!" the man replied.

"Oh. So you work for Beelhurse, do you?" said Shizuku.

Her comment made the color drain from the soldier's face. It took him a moment to realize how stupid his slip of the tongue had been, but as soon as he did, his eyes widened.

Niké looked down at him, a derisive look in his eyes.

"Seems like Beelhurse has some pretty dumb people working for him. So what's he planning?"

"I—I can't tell you that!"

“In that case, you’re gonna have to die.”

Niké began reciting his incantation, not bothering to ask any further questions. The soldier squirmed around, but his body was refusing to cooperate properly. He was probably still numb from earlier.

He glared at the coldly smirking Niké and anxious-looking Shizuku.

“You idiots! You’ll be executed soon enough anyway! That’s what you get for killing the king of Farsas!”

This last line bewildered both Shizuku and Niké, who exchanged looks.

“He’s saying the king of Farsas is dead. Should we be celebrating?” asked Shizuku.

“I’m not sure...” Niké replied.

While Lars’s death may have been momentarily beneficial, Niké felt it would only complicate matters further down the line. He pointed to the room they’d just come out of.

“Fetch the crystal ball. Let’s get in touch with Her Majesty.”

“O-okay.”

Shizuku hurried back to the office and grabbed the magic implement off the desk, but there was no sound coming from it, as if it wasn’t connected to Ortea anymore. Shizuku peered into the hallway, but nobody else had come back. Her face turned as white as a sheet.

“Wh-what are we supposed to do? What’s going on?!”

“In all likelihood...Beelhurse’s plan was to frame the princess for the king’s murder. If all went according to plan, he could exterminate two nuisances in one go—and even if things didn’t work out, Farsas would do away with the princess. Some of the guards must have been traitors. At this point, we should view both Farsas’s and Kisk’s soldiers as enemies.”

“Wolves in sheep’s clothing!”

“What? Is that some kind of spell?” asked Niké. “Anyway, we need to go and make sure Vied is safe.”

As the mage started reciting a teleportation spell, Shizuku hesitantly argued back.

“But what about the princess?! She’s the one who’s in the most danger!”

“She has Faneet, and the mage who went with her is Tigor’s skilled right-hand man. She’ll be fine for the time being. That baby, meanwhile, only has some court ladies and soldiers to look after him. Considering there are traitors in our midst, he’s the one who’s in the most danger.”

Shizuku’s expression turned glum when she thought about Yura and Willett. She wished she’d left them at the castle. Still, it was too late for regrets. They needed to be taken somewhere safe right away.

When Niké started chanting again, a reflective distortion appeared in the air in front of him. He began to turn toward Shizuku, but the very next moment, the color drained from his face. The transit gate disappeared without a sound.

“...Crap.”

“Huh? Did you make a mistake?”

“No. The teleportation seal has been switched on. This is probably Farsas’s doing.”

The seal was a kind of magic spell that had been part of the fortress’s original defenses. It was designed to stop people from using regular incantations or making teleportation gates to travel there, leaving transit rings as their only option. Farsas must have changed the permissions while occupying the fortress, effectively preventing any magic-based teleportation. Frustrated, Niké kicked the floor.

“Let’s run. Come with me.”

“Okay.”

There was no time to hesitate. They needed to get Vied out of there and save Ortea. That was all there was to it.

Shizuku started running, her gazed fixed ahead of her.

The desolate interior of the fortress seemed to be strangely connected to Kisk’s labyrinthian castle—the giant birdcage that had prevented Ortea, as well

as the country's first queen, from getting away.

But that birdcage was now broken. Ortea had become queen thanks to her own determination. In which case, there must have been a way out of this situation, too.

The room that Vied had been left in wasn't that far from the transit ring. Shizuku ran as fast as she could, effectively dragging Niké along by the hand, but as soon as they'd turned the second corner, an angry voice called out from behind. When they looked over their shoulders, they saw several Farsasian soldiers with their swords drawn. Before long, they were closing in on the pair at full speed.

"Wait! You two!"

This bloodcurdling yell naturally prompted Shizuku to speed up.

At that moment, however, the man who she was forcibly pulling along shook free from her grip.

"Niké! What're you doing?!"

"Leave me be, crazy stamina girl... I'll be fine. Go on ahead."

The man steadied his breathing and began to chant. Then he turned away from Shizuku and confronted the soldiers. After hesitating for a moment, Shizuku turned around and carried on running.

Niké was a terribly self-important man; he'd manage one way or another. *Shizuku* was the one who couldn't fight, so she needed to get away.

She accurately followed the route she had in her mind, and it wasn't long before Vied's room came into view. However, there was no trace of the guards who were supposed to be standing outside. Experiencing a sense of foreboding, Shizuku pushed open the door.

"Yura! Willett!"

The room was spacious yet drab. It was devoid of any kind of movement.

The bodies of the two guards lay at the far end of the room, still clutching their swords. They didn't seem to be breathing. Shizuku bit her lip and began to turn around.

“...ku...”

Just as she was about to start running, the tearful voice of a young girl brushed against her ears.

Shizuku turned around in a panic and ran back into the room.

“Willett?! Where are you?”

“...Shizu...ku...”

Shizuku spotted a closet in the corner of the room. A large box meant for storing spears had been placed right in front of it, making it look as though the closet hadn’t been used in a long time. Even so, Shizuku was certain that the girl’s voice was coming from behind its doors.

Shizuku arduously shoved the box filled with spears out of the way and opened the door. A young girl came tumbling out, holding a baby in her arms.

“Willett!” Shizuku exclaimed.

“Shizuku...I’m so glad you’re here...”

Willett looked like she’d been crying, and the young girl froze in horror when she spotted the corpses past Shizuku’s shoulder.

But there was no time to seize up with fear. Shizuku obstructed Willett’s view with her body and asked her a question.

“Where’s Yura?”

“Th-the soldiers suddenly demanded we give them the baby...and we ended up in a tussle with them... Yura told me to hide in the closet...”

“Okay.”

There was no sign of Yura’s body. That meant she’d either been taken away or escaped.

Clinging to the hope that she was still alive, Shizuku took the baby out of the girl’s arms.

“Some of the soldiers are traitors. We need to get back to the castle right now. Can you run?”

“N-no. My legs won’t move.”

Willett seemed like she was about to collapse at any moment. Shizuku looked at the shaking girl in front of her, torn between guilt and a sense of urgency. The truth was, she didn’t know where her enemies could be lurking—and considering the state she was in, taking Willett on the run with her wasn’t in the cards.

Having come to a bitter decision, Shizuku gave the girl a nod.

“Alright. In that case, Willett, hide here and don’t make a sound.”

Vied couldn’t be handed over to Farsas or Beelhurse. He was the only one in that crucial position, and in fact, without him around, Willett would probably be safe. After all, she was just a normal girl.

“I’ll be back before you know it,” said Shizuku.

She put Willett back into the closet, positioning the spear-filled box in front. Then she ran out into the empty corridor, skirting the blood on the floor.

The baby in her arms was fast asleep. Shizuku couldn’t help but smile as she gazed upon his innocent sleeping face, unperturbed by the chaos playing out around him.

But the next moment, her expression was tense again as she began dashing down the deserted corridor once again.

Given that the assassination attempt on the king of Farsas had been falsely blamed on Ortea, killing any more of his soldiers than was truly necessary would backfire.

As such, Niké was mainly casting spells that would simply knock his enemies unconscious, and he sent them all dropping to the floor as they approached him.

Shizuku was long gone. She seemed to possess far more base stamina than Niké, so she’d probably already made it to Vied’s room.

Once he’d knocked out all the soldiers, Niké started sprinting down the corridor again, hoping to get away before any new ones arrived.

Just then, however, his intuition prompted him to formulate a defensive spell.

He'd sensed a hint of magic in the air, and his hunch was soon proven right as, a moment later, a binding spell collided with his barrier.

Niké could sense a formidable amount of magical energy behind the attack. This brought back a long-forgotten memory, prompting him to look over his shoulder.

There stood a mage from Farsas, a large sapphire magic implement attached to his right ear. He was weaving a complex spell structure, not saying a word. Upon seeing him, Niké couldn't conceal his disgust.

"Look who it is."

This was no time for standing around, but this man couldn't be dismissed lightly, either. His magical energy and intricate spell configurations were easily recognizable. Niké began to construct a spell of his own.

If this is where the carpet gets pulled from under me, then that's what I deserve for manipulating others for all this time.

But if Niké were to meet his demise, Shizuku wouldn't be saved, either.

She'd done nothing wrong. She was just trying to correct a mistake. Shizuku was completely powerless, yet stubbornly good-natured. She deserved to be where good intentions were the norm, a place far kinder than Kisk.

Wearing a self-deprecating smile, Niké channeled his magical power into the spell he'd constructed. He knew he needed to escape before any more enemies arrived, but he couldn't bring himself to flee. Instead, he used his spell to block any incoming attacks.

"This is your fault, stupid girl."

People were capable of putting their lives on the line for things they weren't willing to give up.

After meeting Shizuku, Niké had finally learned this firsthand.

Shizuku tiptoed across the floor, trying to keep her arms from jostling as much as possible.

She had yet to encounter any suspicious soldiers from Kisk. It was probably lucky that Ortea hadn't brought that many with her after all.

Once she reached the final corner, Shizuku suddenly slowed her pace and peered around it. She spotted three soldiers from Kisk standing in front of the transit ring room, but Shizuku had no idea whether they were traitors or not.

Just as she was deliberating whether to reveal herself, a nearby door swung open and another soldier emerged. Shizuku hurriedly pulled her face away.

“Has the child been found?” somebody said in a whisper.

“Not yet. Apparently, a woman fled with him.”

“It’ll be a nuisance if word reaches the castle. Hurry.”

They were enemies.

Shizuku felt relieved she hadn’t chosen to show her face—but the next moment she noticed their footsteps getting closer and ducked. She needed to find a hiding place before they saw her. She immediately reached for a nearby door, but it was locked. Left with no other choice, she started running.

There was a chance her footsteps would alert them of her presence. And once the soldiers turned the corner, they’d spot her immediately.

Shizuku sped up, clutching tightly onto Vied. The corner she’d rushed around a short while earlier seemed incredibly far away, and before she could reach it, one of the doors beside her opened up, obstructing her path.

“This way, Shizuku,” someone called out in hushed tones.

There was no mistaking who it was.

Once Shizuku had rushed inside, the woman locked the door.

“Yura.”

“I’m glad you’re safe, Shizuku.”

Yura’s clothes were splattered with blood, and a sword lying on the floor seemed to imbue the hardships she’d endured.

Shizuku gulped, but Yura simply looked at her and Vied without a trace of criticism in her gaze. When she smiled, her expression was just as warm as ever.

“Anyway, Shizuku, I’d like you to tell me what’s happened.”

“R-right.”

The room had just two doors and no windows, and the pair sat down and began their quiet discussion. Although the information surrounding Vied was highly confidential, Shizuku decided it was time to be up-front about it. Yura had already been implicated as much as any other people concerned, and hearing her thoughts might lead Shizuku to come up with a solution. At the very least, it would be better than contemplating the matter alone.

Shizuku briefly explained that Vied was apparently Lars’s child, that Beelhurse had orchestrated Lars’s assassination to incriminate Ortea, and that due to this misunderstanding, Vied was being pursued not only by Farsas’s troops, but also by traitors from Kisk.

They were cornered on all sides; there was no other way to describe the situation, and Yura frowned.

“The castle is safe, but aren’t there guards in front of the transit ring?”

“It seems that way. Niké hasn’t shown up, and neither has the queen...”

Shizuku had no way of knowing what had happened to them. She frowned, thinking of the silent crystal ball in her pocket.

“But we still don’t know whether he’s *really* the child of the king of Farsas, do we?” Yura asked skeptically.

“Well, no. But if they confirm that he is, it’ll be terrible.”

“If they discover that he’s *not*, though, that could work in our favor. The king didn’t know about him, did he?”

“Probably not... Not at first, at least.”

Neither Ortea nor Niké had ever properly confirmed it, but they’d been operating under the assumption that Lars didn’t know about the child. This was why they’d been so shocked when Lars had seen through their secret.

In all likelihood, Lars had probably only found out that Ortea was looking after the baby after it was born. He couldn’t have known all along, otherwise he would have tried to get his child back sooner.

Shizuku cocked her head, struggling to decipher what Yura was trying to say.

They were the same age, and the court lady held her finger in front of Shizuku's face and stared at her.

"Listen, Shizuku. For royals, the concept of having a child they don't know about is practically impossible."

"R-really? That makes sense for women, but I assumed men could father children by accident..."

"It doesn't work like that. Royals tend to take contraceptive magic potions regularly. There's no way they would conceive a child unless they'd been intending to do so."

"Gah."

Shizuku knew that medicines in this world were magical in nature, but the existence of contraceptive potions had never occurred to her. She hurriedly discarded everything she thought she knew and collected her thoughts once again.

"Huh? So if the king didn't know about Vied...does that mean Vied's not his child?"

"I would think so. The king of Farsas hasn't had a woman by his side for the last couple of years."

If Vied wasn't Lars's child, then that changed everything.

If Niké were around, Shizuku would have throttled him, shouting, "What the heck is going on?!" Unfortunately, though, he hadn't made it back yet.

Shizuku vigorously shook her head, which was filled with questions.

"If Vied's not the king's child, then both the princess and king himself would have known... In which case, why bring him along? Why suggest that he's a direct descendant? Huh...?"

Shizuku was baffled, but Yura just placed her hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes.

"Listen, Shizuku. The king of Farsas probably isn't the child's father. As long as we can prove that, the child will be safe, and the princess won't need to be taken away."

Ortea had playfully suggested that Vied was her own child, which Lars had used as a pretext to suggest taking her to Farsas. The speculation that she was hiding a direct descendant of Farsas's royal bloodline stemmed directly from that joke.

If people found out that Vied had nothing to do with Lars, there would be no reason for him to take Ortea. Grasping this, Shizuku nodded emphatically.

"That means that Vied..."

"Yes. We should hand him over to Farsas and have *them* prove it."

"R-right..." Shizuku replied, nodding in agreement. But a trace of apprehension lingered in her voice.

Was giving Vied to Farsas to prove they weren't related *really* the right thing to do?

It was widely accepted that no royal offspring was ever conceived by accident, so both Ortea and Niké must have known this. Even so, they seemed convinced that Vied was a direct descendant of Farsas.

Seilené wasn't part of the Farsasian bloodline. It was Vied's father who was the key to this whole tangled mess. Ortea had said so herself.

"Could it be...that there's a direct descendant of the Farsasian bloodline that the public don't know about?"

If so, everything would make sense. The term 'direct descendant of Farsas' referred to those within five degrees of kinship of past kings. There had been conflicts among the royal family in the past, so it was possible that someone had secretly escaped the castle and was still alive. Perhaps Ortea and Lars knew about their existence.

Plus, if Seilené had been in Rozsark's royal court—

"Hey! Anyone in there?" a loutish, angry voice bellowed, and they heard a violent banging on the door.

Shizuku and Yura sprang to their feet. They held their breaths, listening intently.

They could hear people talking on the other side of the door.

“Is this really the right place?” one person asked.

“I thought I heard voices,” said another.

Shizuku tensed up. They were the same voices she’d heard in front of the transit ring room. She hoped the men would just give up and leave, but they didn’t seem to have any intention of abandoning the locked door. They yelled angrily as they began to throw their bodies against it, and the door made an unpleasant creak.

“Geez, can this get any worse?” Yura said exasperatedly, picking her sword up off the floor.

Shizuku stared at the sword-wielding court lady in astonishment.

“Escape through that door over there, Shizuku. I’ll buy you some time,” Yura said.

“B-but Yura, this is risky...”

From what she could hear, there must have been about four or five men outside. That sounded like too many for a single court lady to handle. But Yura just smiled, not a trace of fear in her eyes.

“I’ll be fine. Just go, Shizuku. Don’t you remember what I told you? I’ll beat them to a pulp.”

With every forceful shove, the door’s fittings bent further out of shape. It was only a matter of time before the men broke through.

Shizuku backed away, still holding Vied in her arms.

“Yura.”

“Trust me, Shizuku.”

Yura’s smile vanished. Her expression turned painfully calm and serious as she readied her weapon. She turned to face the door, which was on the verge of being destroyed.

Shizuku hesitated, unsure whether she should run or if that was even an option, but then somebody pulled on her hair from below and her eyes went wide.

She looked down at Vied in her arms. The boy must have woken up a little while ago, and he was gazing up at her with his blue eyes. He was clutching a clump of Shizuku's disheveled hair in his tiny hand with an innocent smile on his face, clearly oblivious to the situation playing out around them. To Vied, being loved was just a normal part of life. This naïveté made her heart hurt.

I can't let Beelhurse get hold of this child.

Beelhurse couldn't even love his own sister—someone he was related to by blood. Shizuku wouldn't let him have Vied under any circumstances. Having made up her mind, she raised her head.

"Yura...if you find yourself in danger, just surrender."

"I understand. Let's meet up again later."

The door's fittings made a screeching sound. Shizuku went through the other door and rushed into the next room. She ran through it, but just as she flew out into the corridor, she heard what sounded like a dull scream—though it was impossible tell whether it was a woman's or a man's.

Niké couldn't really tell how much time had gone by. On one hand, it seemed like it had been no time at all, yet on the other, it almost felt like half an hour.

Niké sighed as he formulated a new spell.

In terms of battle experience, Niké had an overwhelming advantage.

That said, his opponent had extraordinary magical powers on his side, and he could cast incredibly complex spells.

If he were up against any ordinary mage, Niké would have been able to determine the effect of the spell just by looking at it, allowing him to counter an attack before it even reached him. However, Niké's current opponent condensed multiple effects into a single spell—something that no regular mage could do. Due to the multi-layered structure of these spells, Niké was always one step behind.

He quickly put together a spell and released it into the air. It drew his opponent's spell toward it and neutralized its effects. Niké used the opportunity to direct a bolt of lightning toward his adversary, but the mage from Farsas

nullified his attack using the dagger in his hand.

The dagger seemed to be some kind of magic implement. It crackled as electricity coursed through it, then absorbed Niké's magical energy and began to glow.

"Shit!"

At this rate, the fight was never going to end. Niké was incredibly worried about how everyone else was doing.

Deciding to change tactics, he looked for an opportunity to get away. At that moment, however, someone surprised him by tapping him on the shoulder from behind.

"Found you."

The person's voice, tinged with laughter, resembled that of a mischievous child.

By the time Niké worked out whom it belonged to, an inescapable net-like spell had closed in on him.

Shizuku couldn't head straight to the transit ring room.

She didn't know how many traitors there were, but it was highly likely they'd be guarding it.

She couldn't bring herself to hand Vied over to Farsas. Even if Vied wasn't Lars's child, he could still be a direct descendant of Farsas, and if so, he could be taken away from her. Shizuku mapped out her current location in her head as she haphazardly turned corner after corner.

Everyone in the castle knew that the negotiations were taking place that day. If it became apparent that the queen wasn't coming back, they'd grow suspicious and check what was going on. All Shizuku could do was buy herself some time and avoid being captured.

She prayed that everyone she'd had to leave behind would stay safe. She turned right at her next corner, avoiding a voice coming from the distance.

A straight corridor stretched out ahead of her. At the end of it was a staircase leading downward. When Shizuku spotted a figure lingering in front of it, she

came to a sudden halt.

The man was carrying a long, unsheathed sword, and his expressionless face was devoid of any warmth.

It was a face Shizuku recognized—the face of man who'd served the princess for many years. Shizuku was relieved to see her ally.

“Faneet!”

“...Oh, it’s you.”

“What happened? Is the princess...”

But before she finished her sentence, Shizuku finally realized that Faneet was alone.

He was supposed to have been with the princess. Why wasn’t she here with him?

Faneet fixed his gloomy eyes on her.

“The king of Farsas took her away.”

“What...?”

The assassination must have proven unsuccessful after all. She looked up at her colleague, his body covered in wounds, and gulped.

“So does that mean...?”

“She won’t be disposed of immediately. We need to act while she’s still captive.”

“Okay. Let’s head back to the castle for now. We can ask Tigor and the marquises for their advice.”

The situation had become too complicated to solve easily anymore. They needed to leave the fortress and renegotiate. There were probably guards outside the transit ring room, but with Faneet by her side, Shizuku would probably be able to get in.

However, Faneet didn’t agree to her plan right away. Without saying a word, he looked down at his bloodstained sword.

“Okay. But there’s something you need to do first.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to hand over that child,” Faneet said, extending his bloodied left hand.

The sight of it made Shizuku frown. She grimaced as she readjusted Vied in her arms.

“If you’re going to take him, use both hands. It’s dangerous with one,” she told him.

“Who cares? Just hand him over.”

“I care! I’ll hold onto him, then.”

“Then I’ll kill you both.”

It sounded like a joke.

Faneet couldn’t be serious. It was totally out of context.

However, Shizuku’s instincts told her otherwise. She automatically jumped back, distancing herself from Faneet. She adopted a defensive stance, but the man just looked at her calmly, readjusting his raised sword.

“The princess is fond of you. If possible, I’d prefer just to kill the child.”

His words were emotionless and clinical. Shizuku could hardly believe they were coming out of his mouth. Horrified, she began to question him.

“What are you talking about...? Have you lost your mind? He’s a baby!”

“I’m perfectly sane. That child will threaten the princess’s position.”

Faneet started to walk toward her, as if to prove that he was telling the truth.

“Wait. You know this is Seilené’s child, right? You always cared for her.”

“She never held any personal value to me. I respected her because I thought the princess needed her. I was the one who killed Seilené.”

“...What?”

Even if you thought you knew how someone felt, you could still turn out to be completely wrong. You could try and read their expressions and their actions,

but that didn't give you the full picture.

Shizuku stared into the man's eyes in blank amazement, finding him impossible to understand.

The face of a man she thought she knew so well was terrifyingly blank and warped.

He'd been watching her from the start.

All that time, he'd only had eyes for her.

He'd put his heart and soul into protecting her. It was fair to say that all of him belonged to her.

And yet he hadn't been there when it mattered most. She'd changed.

She was no longer a blossom in bloom under the sun, but a bewitching flower whose fragrance wafted through the darkness.

The girl who apologized and awkwardly looked away after arguments disappeared as if she'd never existed at all. She began to callously hurt others to ease her own frustrations. Those who'd once praised her now lowered their voices to disparage her. Resentment filled the castle, and her bad reputation spread outside the country's borders.

Every time he saw how much she'd changed, he became overwhelmed with regret.

Why had he taken his eyes off her that day? Why hadn't he rescued her sooner? In the back of his mind, he was tormented by an ineffable guilt. It was for that very reason that he decided to continue serving her.

However, when he saw the gradual changes that a certain person was bringing about in her, he came to a sudden realization.

The truth was that he was profoundly attached to the dark, locked room they inhabited. He wanted to keep their gloomy world just the way it was—forever unchanged, and home to just the two of them.

"Why...did you kill Seilené?"

"When I tried to take the child off her, she began reviling the princess to my

face. There was no way I could forgive her.”

“What are you...?”

Shizuku started to argue, but the look in Faneet’s eyes made her bite her tongue.

It was the look of someone who’d passed the point of no return—someone who’d already decided which path they were going to go down.

There was no reasoning with him. Shizuku backed away, clutching Vied in her arms. She kept an eye on his sword, aware that he could swing it at any moment.

“Everything I do is to protect the princess. Killing a woman or a child is a small price to pay.”

“That’s not true,” said Shizuku. “I’m sure the princess would be angry.”

“The way she is now, yes. You changed her.”

Shizuku could hear the bitterness in his voice. He began drawing closer, his eyes fixed not on the child, but on Shizuku. He was glaring at her, his previously impenetrable gaze emitting a palpable frustration that Shizuku had never seen before.

“You changed her. You accomplished what I wanted to do. I was too useless to protect her, and that was my sin to bear. After that, I was prepared to do whatever I could to help her, but in the end, *you* were the one who put everything in motion. When I think of that...honestly, it fills me with envy.”

All along, Ortea had been the only person who was truly special to him.

He didn’t want her to turn to cruelty. That was precisely why he’d protected Shizuku, guarded Seilené, and taken care of the child.

But before he knew it, Ortea had started to change.

She’d left her small, dingy room and become everyone’s queen.

“I served her for years, and yet I turned out to be useless. I’m still the same pathetic clown who failed her that fateful day.”

“...That’s not true. The princess depends on you.”

The only reason she acted so selfishly was because she depended on Faneet. She was spoiled, demanding, and rude. That behavior was a clear sign of the childlike affection Ortea held for him.

When Faneet heard Shizuku say that, he smiled sadly.

He seemed to be grieving the past while also grappling with the sad realization that he and Shizuku would never understand how each other felt.

A flower that bloomed under the moon, and a flower that bloomed under the sun.

If he were to be asked which one he loved, his answer would have been “both.”

However, only the flower that bloomed at night could be his and his alone.

“You’ll never understand.”

That was Faneet’s final declaration. He raised his sword, but Shizuku still refused to let go of Vied. In fact, she held onto the child even tighter.

“Stop this, Faneet.”

“I’ll tell the princess that one of Beelhurse’s underlings killed you.”

The woman from another world had changed Ortea—not with any knowledge or power, but simply with her feelings.

Such a feat would have been impossible for Faneet. Deep down, he secretly wished to keep Ortea confined to her isolated room. He never could have brought himself to tell her she could flee the castle, no matter how much she hated being a royal.

Once she left for the wider world, he felt she’d never even spare him a second glance.

Shizuku wasn’t sure if she wanted to cry or rage.

She gripped tightly onto Vied, making sure he wouldn’t fall. She couldn’t bring herself to turn her back to Faneet. It felt like if she looked away, she would be struck down at any moment. Shizuku continued to retreat one step at a time, unable to check over her shoulder. If she kept going backward, she was bound

to reach a dead end. Wouldn't somebody come and find her before then?

Shizuku couldn't help but wish for a miracle, but there was nobody around to have her back. Realizing such hopes were futile, she hurriedly discarded them.

I need to handle this by myself.

Everybody had their own struggles; you couldn't burden others with yours. Having made her decision, Shizuku channeled her strength into her legs. A moment later, without any warning, she began running toward Faneet.

The man was understandably surprised. His eyes widened slightly, then he swung his sword down toward Shizuku's head.

But Shizuku had anticipated this. She leaped diagonally, dodging his blade. Attacks she couldn't evade were deflected by her protective ring.

She couldn't stand still. She couldn't stop her feet from moving.

She slipped past Faneet and began racing toward the end of the corridor.

She paid no heed to what was behind her. Her mind was blank.

Shizuku didn't hesitate when the descending staircase came into view. Instead, she kept her gaze fixed straight ahead. Maintaining her running speed, she held her breath...and jumped down onto the landing several steps below her.

Her field of vision opened up.

An uncomfortable floating feeling surrounded her whole body.

She clutched onto the baby as she fell through the air. Then she bent her knees to prepare for the impact.

Her landing was hurried, but it was more than satisfactory.

"...Urgh!"

The tingling sensation in her legs caused her to lose balance, but she hurried down the remaining stairs even so.

However, when she was just two steps from the bottom, she felt the atmosphere shift behind her. She tumbled to the right in an effort to dodge the person's attack.

A sword blade came down right beside her, slicing through her long skirt.

I won't be able to dodge the next attack.

Her body tensed up with fear. The next moment, however, she lost her footing and slipped down to the bottom of the stairs.

"Agh...!"

She landed on her buttocks, and a sharp pain shot through her ankle. She must have sprained it—but right now, staying down wasn't an option.

Suppressing the pain, Shizuku rose to her feet. However, at that moment, a sword appeared right next to her face.

"Is there anything you left undone?" Faneet asked. "I'll finish it on your behalf, if I can."

Shizuku was staring death right in the face.

She could see the reflection of her own mouth in the blade, her small lips tightly pursed.

"I'm not done with *anything* yet. I still have everything left to do," Shizuku replied.

There were probably a lot of people who died feeling that way.

And now Shizuku was going to join their ranks. The faces of those she missed didn't surface to mind, nor did her countless regrets. She would die without the reality of the situation sinking in.

Her words made Faneet go silent for a brief moment. He seemed almost hesitant, and Shizuku could hear him let out a sigh.

"I see. I'm sorry."

The emotion behind his parting words was impossible to discern.

He raised his sword. Shizuku didn't have a chance to escape.

She splayed forward, holding Vied close. She hoped her body would serve as a shield, even if her own head was severed. That way, she could keep the little boy safe for just a moment longer.

However, Faneet's sword never reached Shizuku's neck.

"...Hngh."

Shizuku heard a man groan.

"Huh?"

Whose voice was that? Shizuku slowly turned around.

"Faneet?"

The man—who'd been trying to kill her just a moment earlier—was sitting on the stairs staring at her. It didn't make sense. The hand he'd been holding his sword with dropped limply.

A calm stillness settled over everything.

Emotions that had been piling up for years dissipated and cleared away.

Although they would never see eye to eye, in those last few seconds, the two of them showed enough consideration for one another to make up for it.

Faneet's lips began to move.

"...Please, protect the princess."

With that, his head dropped, and the arrow sticking out of his back shook.

The arrowhead protruded from his chest.

Red liquid traced its way to the tip and dripped onto the white staircase. Eventually, it gathered into a pool and slowly cooled.

Faneet's sudden death didn't make Shizuku feel relieved or sad. As she was backing away, she looked up the stairs.

There stood a man holding a shortbow. His features were handsome, and although Shizuku had never met him before, he also reminded her of someone she knew. He began descending the staircase with his hand extended toward her.

"I'll take that child," the man said.

"...Are you from Farsas?" Shizuku asked.

"No. I'm...the child's father."

“What?”

Dumbfounded, Shizuku watched as he cast his bow aside and reached out with his hands empty. As he gazed at the infant, Shizuku noticed that the man had the same blue eyes as Vied.

There was no aggression or hostility in his gaze. In fact, all Shizuku could discern was obstinate determination.

“D-do you have any proof...?”

“This child is the son of Seilené Eato Sofona, right? Seilené was my wife.”

Shizuku hadn’t known Seilené’s full name, but upon hearing it, she found herself thinking, *Oh, of course*. In this world, only people of status had last names. Seilené was one such person, and that knowledge helped Shizuku discern who the man was.

“Are you the king of Rozsark?” she asked softly.

Seilené was an ally who had come from Rozsark Castle. Niké had once said, “If they know about Seilené, the rest will soon become clear.” He hadn’t meant that Lars—the man Shizuku had assumed to be the baby’s father—would immediately understand the situation if he found out about her, but that Seilené’s presence would lead him to find out about her husband.

The man in question had invited the noblewoman into his royal court and made her his wife—concealing the fact that he was a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal line.

Lyshien had once claimed to know the king of Rozsark’s secret. That was why Shizuku suspected this man was that very king.

As a matter of fact, he did bear a slight resemblance to Lars.

The man blinked in response to Shizuku’s question, his expression slightly troubled.

“Did Seilené say something to you about me?”

“No...”

Seilené had taken a lot of her secrets to the grave. Despite working so closely

with her, Shizuku had nothing to share about the woman. However, Seilené had admitted that she'd weighed Rozsark against Kisk and chosen the country that offered her the most. The fact that she'd been so reluctant to give up her child when the moment came suggested that there was some truth to that claim.

All Shizuku could give the man was the child that Seilené had tried so hard to protect.

Without saying a word, the man took the child from Shizuku's arms. He lifted Vied up with his big, clumsy hands, carrying the little child as if he was the most precious thing in the world.

Their faces reflected in each other's sky-blue eyes—the baby looking up in wonder, and the man looking down lovingly, silently acknowledging each other. It was a strangely touching sight, and Shizuku bit her lip.

However, that moment couldn't last. The place they were in was as dangerous as a battlefield. At the very least, she needed to confirm whether the man was on Farsas's side or not. If she was going to hand Vied over, she wanted to ask for Ortea in exchange.

Having made up her mind, Shizuku opened her mouth to speak.

“Umm...”

That very next moment, however, Shizuku screamed and collapsed to the ground.

The pain was so intense that it instantaneously shattered her thoughts and willpower. The magic lurking inside her body was responsible for this unbearable agony. Clutching her abdomen, she let out a sorrowful cry.

“Aah... Aaaaah!”

The medicine had worn off. She would normally never miss a dose, but time had gotten away from her. Shizuku's shaking hand fumbled inside her pocket, but there was nothing in there. She must have dropped her pills somewhere.

Shizuku opened her tearful eyes. The man peered down at her, looking surprised.

Faneet had died.

What had become of the princess and Niké? Were Yura and Willett safe?

Shizuku didn't have the answers to those questions. There was a chance that she was about to die, too.

Shizuku began to block out her unsettling thoughts, consumed by her excruciating pain. As her senses began to break down, she cut herself off from them.

However, just as her consciousness was being scattered through the abyss of darkness, she felt as though someone was lifting her up in their arms.

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Someone was gently touching her body with their fingertips.

It was an incredibly warm, kind feeling.

As the fingers slid over her skin, she drew a shallow breath.

She felt no worry. No anxiety or pain.

Nothing but tender comfort coursed through her body.

The fingers slowly moved inside her body, and Shizuku gave herself over to them, completely at ease.

As those gentle fingers tickled her skin, Shizuku exhaled a breath softer than a sigh and fell from that shallow dream into a deep sleep.

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She felt as though she'd had some kind of confusing dream.

That was the first thing Shizuku thought after regaining consciousness. Unable to see anything but the ceiling above her, she placed a hand on her forehead.

“Huh...?”

“Shizuku! You’re awake!”

“...Yura.”

Without waiting a moment, the face of a familiar court lady appeared in her line of sight. Shizuku reached out and touched her cheek.

“Are you alright, Yura?”

“Of course! I’d never let a situation like *that* knock me down.”

The clothes Yura had changed into were completely different from the ones she usually wore. Her new crimson outfit looked familiar somehow. As she sat up, Shizuku tried to recall where she’d seen it before, and the blanket draped over her slipped to the floor.

“Huh? Naked again?”

Shizuku and Yura were the only people in the small room, so Shizuku absent-mindedly pulled the blanket back toward her. At that moment, though, she suddenly noticed something and stared down at her body in shock.

“...You’re kidding me.”

Maybe Shizuku was still dreaming.

She stared at her pale abdomen. She knew it so well, yet something was different. The magical pattern—which had definitely been there that morning—had unexpectedly vanished without a trace.

“Whaaaaat?! Mmph!”

Shizuku let out a scream, and Yura clapped a hand over her mouth, forcing her to hold her breath. Yura shook her head vigorously.

“Don’t make so much noise. Someone might come in. You need to put on some clothes first.”

Shizuku, stark naked, nodded emphatically. After moving her hand away, Yura pointed at a nearby stand.

“There’s an outfit for you over there. Do you want me to help you get dressed?”

“No, I’ll be fine. Thank you.”

Shizuku hopped out of bed and took some clothes out of a basket, picking items similar to what she usually wore.

As she quickly dressed herself, Shizuku posed a question to Yura.

“Sorry, where are we?”

“The fortress. We just borrowed an empty room.”

“...What happened after I blacked out?”

“Farsas took control of the fortress. The princess, Willett, and everybody else are safe, but they’ve been detained by Farsas.”

“Oh... I’m sorry, Yura.”

Considering she was just a court lady, Yura probably wouldn’t be executed, but she still wouldn’t have ended up in this mess if Shizuku hadn’t brought her to the fortress. Feeling guilty, Shizuku bowed her head.

However, Yura simply responded with a mischievous smile.

“Oh, don’t worry—they’d never detain me. Doesn’t my outfit say it all?”

“Hmm, it does look familiar. I just can’t remember where I recognize it from.”

“It’s the uniform worn by Farsas’s military officers.”

“Ohh, of course it is. You don’t see many female officers, so that didn’t even occur to me— Wait, *what*!?”

Shizuku screamed again, but since she was already dressed, Yura didn’t stop her. Instead, she laughed over the top of Shizuku’s shriek.

“I was a spy from Farsas all along, Shizuku.”

“...I had no idea.”

Yura gave Shizuku a playful wink, and Shizuku felt all the energy leave her body.

Now that Shizuku knew Yura worked for Farsas, it made sense that Lars knew about Vied. She must have been passing on all the information she had. Realizing the person she’d trusted and picked out to help her was actually on the enemy’s side, Shizuku wished she could shrink away and disappear.

Even so, she took the opportunity to ask the question she least wanted to hear the answer to.

“Umm...”

“What is it?”

“The mark on my body is gone, isn’t it?”

"It has. It's vanished without a trace. You have lovely skin."

"I don't care what my skin's like," said Shizuku. "...I just want to know who removed it."

Even after Jired's death, the mark hadn't gone away, so the fact that it had disappeared implied she'd lost her virginity.

She'd been in intense pain and the situation *was* an emergency, but Shizuku still wished they'd woken her up to ask her for her opinion. Shizuku grumbled vindictively under her breath as she waited for a definitive answer.

The name that Yura responded with, however, was the last one that Shizuku was expecting to hear.

As soon as Shizuku heard it, her jaw dropped—and five minutes later, she rushed out of the room in a frenzy.

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She never thought she'd see him again.

She had been the one to leave him. There was no way they'd meet here.

She'd been ungrateful. Coldhearted.

Yet he'd never forsaken her. Instead, he'd reached out to help in her time of need.

The hallway was long.

He stood in the spacious hall at the end of the corridor, holding a drink and documents in his hands while issuing instructions to those around him.

Beside him stood another man, most likely his friend. Harve, who was the first to spot Shizuku, let out an exclamation of surprise.

"Ah!"

This prompted the other man to turn around.

Shizuku hadn't seen his face in so long. His hair was shorter now, so he must have cut it. He had a large sapphire accessory attached to his right ear.

"Erik!"

Shizuku called out his name. As pretty as his features were, his face was

expressionless. He raised an eyebrow and scowled at her.

In truth, she'd been wanting to see him for a long time.

She'd longed to speak to him.

She'd wanted him to come and save her, but...

"I'm so sorry!"

The woman ran up to them and flung herself to the floor, fully prostrate. Erik and Harve gazed down at her small head, looking speechless. Everyone else in the room found themselves staring, too.

It was inevitable that she'd draw attention to herself. Shizuku had burst in while everyone was busy fixing the fortress's magical devices so Kisk could use them again, and her forehead had thudded against the floor with such force that it had actually made a sound.

Worried when Shizuku didn't lift her head, Harve called out her name.

"Sh-Shizuku."

"I'm so sorry!"

"Just look up for now..."

"But I'm too ashamed to look you in the face!"

"You really never change, do you?"

His voice was cold—or perhaps simply lacking in emotion.

The familiar sound of his voice rang in her ears, and for a moment, Shizuku was entranced. Before she knew it, her eyes had started to grow hot. How badly had she longed to hear that voice while they were apart? She'd been trying so hard not to acknowledge her true vulnerability, but there was no changing the way she felt. She held back a sob.

The man tapped her lightly on the head.

"For now, just stand up. You have your own position to uphold. The queen's right-hand woman shouldn't be abasing herself like this."

"Aaaaaah! You're so right!"

Shizuku didn't know if she *was* the queen's right-hand woman, but she was still one of Ortea's closest aides.

She hurried to her feet and stared intently at Erik once more. The man standing before her looked a little tougher than how she remembered him, but maybe that was just her imagination.

It was about time he took a break from this work anyway, so Erik and Shizuku decided to go elsewhere to talk. She'd said she wanted to apologize to Harve as well, but the other man fled before Erik had the chance to drag him along, saying, "I'll pass, thanks."

The two of them stood in the gallery overlooking the plaza. Down below, mages were scurrying around, dealing with the aftermath of the conflict.

Erik offered Shizuku a cup of tea. She gratefully accepted and started to drink it.

"Yura mentioned that you're working for Farsas's government," Shizuku began.

"Yeah. I'm under contract, to be precise. I'm working directly under the princess for a set period of time. I only played a part in this war because the princess loaned me out to the king."

"She loaned you out...? I'm sorry."

After Shizuku had vanished from Farsas, leaving behind nothing but a scribbled note, Erik had asked Leuticia to employ him.

There were no witnesses, but the fact that Shizuku had disappeared from within the castle barrier suggested that she'd gotten herself dragged into something.

When it came to searching for a missing person, looking around blindly wasn't the wisest option; it was quicker to rely on a country for help. So for that reason, Erik had accepted a formal employment offer from Farsas—something he'd been refusing for a long time. He'd had permission to frequent the castle when he was in Katiliana's good books, but it wasn't until now that he'd become a royal court mage.

“Is that thing attached to your ear a magic implement?”

“Yeah. I can’t go into battle without it. It lets me harness the princess’s magic powers. It’s heavy, but it’ll take a certain procedure to remove.”

Despite his reluctance to get involved with the castle or the nobility, Erik had been driven to partake in an actual war. Shizuku bowed her head even deeper. She looked like she was about to sink into the ground in despair.

Erik glanced at her, taken aback. “Why are you reacting like that?” he asked.

“I’m so sorry. I’ve caused so many problems for you...”

“That doesn’t really matter. I acted of my own accord. Still, you need to stop being so reckless. At this rate, you could die at any moment. Don’t you care about your own life and returning to your family?”

“...I do.”

Erik’s voice had suddenly turned stern. Was he scolding her?

In all the time they’d known each other, he hadn’t admonished her even once. Shizuku turned pale and hung her head.

“You seem to get so caught up in what’s in front of you that you lose sight of everything else,” he continued. “Didn’t I warn you that Kisk was dangerous?”

“Yeah, I remember that...”

“Then why come here alone? And I bet you had plenty of opportunities to flee if you’d wanted to.”

“I guess so. But running away felt like admitting defeat...”

“That stupidity could have gotten you killed. *I’d* be ashamed to show my face in front of your parents, after all the trouble you’ve caused.”

“I’m sorry...”

For some time, Shizuku had uttered nothing but words of apology. Everything Erik had said to her was justified.

There must have been other ways in which she could have handled things. At the time, Shizuku felt like she had no other choice, but she could have still asked for someone’s help and chosen a safer path. Wanting to get back down

on her knees and beg for forgiveness, she let out a big sigh, but at that moment, Erik's fingers reached out and lifted her bangs, which had fallen forward.

He peered down at her with his deep blue eyes.

"That said...I'm just sharing my opinion. I rate your thought process relatively highly."

"Huh?"



What did he mean by that?

Shizuku was confused, but Erik just gave her a bittersweet smile.

"You put your all into your thoughts. You're stubborn, but I think that's one of your good qualities. Next time, just remember to consult with me. Also...you worked really hard."

He patted her on the head with his big hand.

His fingers were gentle, and his words were plain and unaffected.

While Shizuku kept running on and on, he'd always been there to watch over her and lend a helping hand.

Erik had given her the words she hadn't even realized she needed.

How many times had Erik's warmth been her salvation? In this world where nothing was ever certain, he'd always been there to help her.

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you..."

"Forget that. You've apologized more than enough times in the past fifteen minutes."

Erik shrugged his shoulders and sipped his lukewarm tea. He looked down, watching the work that was being carried out in the plaza.

Still, Shizuku didn't feel that she'd apologized enough. She lowered her head once again.

"A-also, thank you for dispelling that magic."

Shizuku heard a choking sound, as though Erik had something stuck in his throat. She looked up in surprise. Erik had choked on his tea—quite badly, it seemed. He coughed violently, apparently struggling to breathe.

"Are you okay...?" Shizuku asked.

"How...did you know...about that...? I forbade people...from mentioning it..."

"Huh? Yura was quite happy to tell me. You broke the spell."

Shizuku had been told that Leuticia was probably the only person who could break the spell, yet Erik had removed all traces of it from inside her body while

she was asleep. It wasn't that she'd lost her chastity and the pattern had become invisible—the spell itself had been completely removed, causing the pattern to disappear.

"I would expect nothing less from a mage who Leuticia invited to work for her," Yura had remarked admiringly after explaining what happened.

After a coughing spell helped him clear the tea from his windpipe, Erik awkwardly waved his hand in front of his face.

"Well, don't worry about it. I didn't really do anything."

"What do you mean? You broke the spell."

"Yes, but that was it."

"Got it. Thank you very much."

Yura had watched the spell being undone, so Shizuku never had any reason to suspect anything untoward had happened. Given the extent of the pattern, it was probably unavoidable that she'd been undressed. She'd already decided not to worry about what had happened, thinking of it like a surgical procedure. If she thought too hard about it, she would have ended up running around the fortress making strange noises, so it was better to push it to the back of her mind.

Shizuku expressed her gratitude with a serious look on her face, which seemed to exhaust Erik even more.

He stared at the small amount of tea left in his cup.

"From now on, all expressions of gratitude are banned," he stated, before heaving a huge sigh.

When Shizuku asked to see Ortea, she was readily granted permission to do so.

"I'll ask His Majesty. He'll probably let you see her," Erik had said as he escorted Shizuku to another room inside the fortress.

She only had to wait in front of the door for about thirty seconds. Once Erik beckoned her over, Shizuku stepped inside.

Ortea seemed to have been engaged in a tense conversation with Lars, and she rose to her feet as soon she saw Shizuku. Her face lit up with joy as she spread her arms out wide.

“Shizuku! You really *are* okay!”

“Princess.”

“I kept telling you she was fine. Weren’t you listening?” snapped Lars.

“Come over here. Did anyone hurt you?”

“Don’t ignore me, Ortea. I’ll make you pay compensation.”

“You really never change, Your Majesty...”

It had been a while since Shizuku had seen him, but Lars seemed just as conceited as ever.

“I’d never dream of it,” he asserted.

He and Erik left the room, presumably to give the princess and Shizuku some privacy.

Ortea and Shizuku sat down next to one another and talked through the chaos that had ensued after the negotiations.

As it turned out, the assassination attempt had indeed been carried out by a follower of Beelhurse who’d snuck into the fortress.

On her way back from the office, Ortea had heard a thunderous roar and gone to check what was going on—only to find herself surrounded by Beelhurse’s assassins. She tried to fight back, but just as she was beginning to get overwhelmed, Farsas turned up. Lars had dragged her away like a kitten, shoved her into a room, and locked her away. In the meantime, Farsas took back the fortress.

While some suspected that Ortea was behind the assassination, Yura’s testimony apparently dispelled these doubts. Shizuku told the princess that Yura had been a spy from Farsas and apologized profusely. Ortea admonished her, whacking her on the head with a sheaf of rolled-up papers.

“You trust people too easily,” she said, before adding bitterly, “Still, Farsas

and Kisk were both spying on each other. I did expect there to be a spy or two in our midst."

She also mentioned the man who'd been spying on Kisk's behalf.

"He caught Niké, apparently. I asked him not to kill him, though."

"Huh? Was everyone going to be killed?!"

"No, just him. He got up to a lot of trouble, after all. That said, he was acting under my orders. I'm the one who should shoulder the blame."

"...Princess."

Ortea *had* changed, just as Shizuku had suspected. She never would have said anything like that in the past.

While she hadn't quite perfected the skill, she was trying to look out for people. When Shizuku looked at her, she felt a dull ache in her chest. She'd been reminded of the man who'd spent so long protecting her, and his final moments came flooding back.

"I heard Faneet died," Ortea said quietly. It seemed as though Shizuku's silence had said it all.

Her voice sounded raspy and feeble, likely because no one else was in the room. Shizuku looked into Ortea's opaque amber eyes and gave her a silent nod.

"I hear that he fought back until the very end, but was eventually killed by a Farsasian soldier," Ortea said. "...What an inflexible, foolish man."

That was probably the version of the story that Lars had shared with her, and Shizuku silently thanked him for being considerate enough to conceal the truth.

Ortea bit her crimson lip.

"You were with him, weren't you? Did he say anything to you?"

Shizuku could hear the last vestiges of Ortea's childish ways in her shaky voice. She had been raised under the man's protection and behaved like a spoiled child in his presence, and that immature part of herself had remained constant, even when the rest of her had changed. His death, however, had left

her by herself. Perhaps that childish behavior would now vanish into the innermost recesses of her heart, along with his memory.

“Faneet...was worried about you. Right up until the very end.”

That much was true.

She’d always been precious to him—so precious, in fact, that he had always been prepared to sacrifice everything else for her sake.

Shizuku kept staring at her lap, refusing to look up.

Ortea wouldn’t have wanted Shizuku to see her cry. So she just waited.

Although everything Faneet had done had been for Ortea, there was no denying that his thoughtfulness had helped Shizuku, too.

He’d helped her for the sake of the princess.

He’d tried to kill her for the sake of the princess.

That was his truth, but Shizuku was never going to tell anyone. She’d take that secret to the grave.

The pair spent some time quietly mourning Faneet’s death, not saying a word.

It was Ortea who broke the silence, trying to sound strong. The woman who’d chosen to become queen started mapping out the future in a clear, yet not particularly loud voice.

“Despite all the extra interruptions, we still need to do something about these negotiations. We’ve also incurred a debt to Farsas.”

“Oh, about Vied. His dad showed up...”

“I heard about that. I never expected him to make an appearance.”

Unusually, there was a hint of defeat in Ortea’s tone. Shizuku’s eyes widened.

“Is he really the king of Rozsark, Princess?” she asked.

“Keep your lips sealed, Carrot Girl. He seems to want nothing to do with Farsas.”

It was Lars, having returned with Erik, who’d spoken. His simple response made Shizuku frown.

“Then Seilené is...”

“One of his consorts, yes. An ambitious woman, she disappeared from the castle because she was unhappy with how she was treated,” Lars explained.

“Oh...”

Shizuku glanced at Ortea, who had a pained expression. Shizuku had plenty of thoughts to share, but since the king of Rozsark had insisted that he wanted no involvement with Farsas, voicing them felt impolite.

Shizuku glanced at Lars, confused.

“But if you knew that he wasn’t your child, what was all that ranting and raving about...?”

“I wouldn’t have minded claiming him as my own. I did tell his father that I’d have the boy if he didn’t want him, but he ended up flying off the handle and making a lunge at me.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s not like giving someone a kitten,” said Shizuku.

“It’s not my fault. Ortea’s the one to blame.”

He might have had a point, but Lars had definitely added fuel to the fire. Shizuku and Erik gave the king angry looks. Ortea was trembling, unable to argue, but at least she had a handle on her temper. Shizuku rubbed her master on the back.

Lars sat down on the seat opposite the queen and gave her a malicious grin.

“So, Ortea, have you come to a decision? Come to Farsas—you’ll get to experience my teasing all the time!”

“That’s not going to happen. Without me, the castle will fall into chaos.”

“Would you prefer I just annexed Kisk?”

“Y-you’re the worst...”

In reality, that would be no different from a full-on conquest. But if things continued this way, the negotiations could collapse, potentially leading to all-out war.

Shizuku laid out some papers she’d taken out partway through the discussion

and showed Lars a line she'd put an asterisk by.

"We'll give you this if you back down," she offered.

"What is it?" Lars asked.

"A crystal cave owned by the Kisk royal family. It's in Rosta."

"Shizuku, that's—"

Shizuku knew what Ortea wanted to say.

It was a territory under direct royal ownership and had been given to Shizuku to negotiate with, so handing it over to Farsas wouldn't be an issue. However, some said the cave had already been mostly depleted of crystals when it was gifted to the royal family.

With Ortea about to point out that handing it over to Farsas would be of no value, Shizuku clarified her suggestion, speaking to both Ortea and the man they were negotiating with.

"The claim that there are no crystals left is a lie intended to stop overmining. The previous king ordered that fabrication to be written down. In reality, the cave is largely untouched, offering plenty of high-quality materials for making magic implements."

At one point, there had been a boom in demand for crystals, leading to overconsumption, but there were still more than enough natural resources in this crystal cave. The asset had simply been hidden away in case it was needed in the future. It was a shame to hand it over to another country, but if they didn't make use of it, the country could crumble.

Nobody in the present royal family knew the truth, and there couldn't have been any records of it, yet before she knew it, Shizuku had obtained that knowledge. She stared at the two royals.

Lars rested his cheek on his hand and gazed at the map. Then he nodded thoughtfully.

"Crystals, huh...? Maybe that'll cheer Lettie up a little."

"Then please don't take the princess away."

“All right. You can come instead.”

“Huh?”

Why was it so hard to predict what he would say? The color drained from Ortea’s face as Shizuku’s eyes widened in astonishment.

“That would never happen! Don’t be absurd!” said Ortea.

“Which one of us is being absurd? I’m making a major concession by leaving the queen-at-large in exchange for some crystals and this troublesome girl.”

“Stay away from her! Why couldn’t you just demand more compensation?”

Shizuku held her head in her hands as the arguing resumed, while Erik, waiting behind Lars, was perfectly composed. It was impossible to tell whether he was even listening. Leuticia might have put a stop to the king’s stupidity, but it was absurd to expect Erik to do the same.

Ortea stood up to shield Shizuku, her face bright red.

“You’re planning on killing Shizuku once you’ve taken her away, aren’t you?! I heard about your schemes!”

“I heard you tried to kill her, too.”

“That doesn’t matter!”

“Yes, it does...”

Shizuku wished somebody would help her—she didn’t care who. Why did peace negotiations between monarchs have to devolve into childish squabbles?

From Shizuku’s perspective, Lars’s demand wasn’t unreasonable. If going to Farsas was all it took, perhaps it was best to just go along with it.

Shizuku was about to persuade her enraged master to give in when a cool voice interrupted the quarrel.

“Your Majesty the Queen. Do you know where Shizuku originally comes from?” Erik asked Ortea in a calm, comforting voice. He’d been quiet up until now, and Ortea looked up.

She glanced at the mage she’d never met before, then turned to Shizuku. Shizuku responded to her master’s questioning gaze with a nod. Having

received her permission, the princess spoke.

“...I heard that she was from another world.”

“That’s right,” said Erik. “She’s not someone who should be dragged into disputes between nations or put in harm’s way. She had a peaceful life. She was supposed to stay with her family and complete her studies.”

Erik’s words made Shizuku reflect on what felt like a very distant past. She was hit by a pang of nostalgia, feeling slightly homesick.

“I understand that you care deeply for her. However, she won’t be here forever. She’s been searching for a way back to her old world, enduring countless hardships in the process. If you ask her to stay by your side forever, she might comply. That’s just the kind of person she is. However, that will mean she has to give up on returning to her world and seeing her family again. Are you really okay with that?” Erik asked dispassionately.

Ortea fell silent.

With the princess standing in front of her, Shizuku couldn’t see Ortea’s face from where she was. Just her trembling pale fingers.

In all honesty, Shizuku had considered the idea of living out the rest of her life here.

She did want to go home and see her family, but on the other hand, she also had a strong desire to support the queen.

It didn’t stem from hypocrisy or pity, or because she hated losing. She was simply happy that Ortea was gradually opening up to her. It made her want to stay by her side, trying her best and dedicating her time to fulfilling Ortea’s needs. Shizuku wouldn’t have minded pursuing that kind of a life.

Still...was it really enough for her?

Could she really abandon the idea of finding a way to return home?

Shizuku closed her eyes. In the darkness, she tried to figure out what she really wanted.

As Shizuku was sitting there with nothing else to do, she heard her master let out a quiet sigh. Then Ortea asked Lars something.

“You won’t kill her, will you?”

“Not for the time being, at least. I won’t hurt her, either. It’d go against the contract.”

“...Fine. You can have her.”

The princess’s despondent tone made Shizuku’s head jolt upward. She met Ortea’s amber gaze.

How many times had they looked into one another’s eyes? In most of those scenarios, they’d been fighting to get their conflicting points across.

Now things were different. Although their eyes were different colors, they reflected the same emotions.

“Princess.”

“I’ve had enough. You complain too much. You never shut up, and I can hardly get a word in. Ever since I became queen, more and more people have started nagging me about things. If I don’t cut that number down, it’ll become oppressive.”

With that, Ortea turned her face away and left the room. Shizuku could see the guards who’d been in the hallway hurry after her.

Having been left behind, Shizuku looked around like a lost child, then met Erik’s gaze.

She hesitated, thinking she should say something, but a moment later, Lars stepped over the table and hoisted her up. The brazen king laughed as he held her in his arms like a child.

“All right. You’re mine now.”

“This sucks...” Shizuku complained.

“So now I’ll give her to you.”

With those words, he tossed Shizuku into the air. She was too startled to react, but Erik managed to catch her. He lowered her to the floor with a pained expression on his face and scolded the king, who seemed to be on a deadline.

“Please don’t treat her like an object.”

"I kept my word. I promised to give her to you in one piece, and that's what I've done."

"Huh?"

Shizuku, who'd been tossed around from place to place, had no idea what was going on. As she held onto her head and hair—both equally disheveled and chaotic—Lars turned to her.

"Erik agreed to go to the battleground on the condition that he would get you back. You're our spoils of war," he declared unapologetically.

※

Nobody contacted him to say his plan had failed.

However, the lack of any communication meant that it probably had.

Beelhurse bit his nails inside the dark, closed room.

"Ortea... That damn girl..."

If things had gone well, it would have been a miraculous comeback, but since his scheme had failed, he'd have to come up with another plan. He genuinely believed that if he didn't act quickly, Ortea would bring the country to ruin.

The former king stood up and paced around the room.

"What should I do...? What should I—"

"I don't think you have to do anything."

The light-hearted response sounded like it came from a young boy.

There wasn't supposed to be anyone else in the room. Beelhurse looked around in a panic.

"Who's there?! Where are you?!"

"I'm here. This castle's a real maze, huh?"

The boy emerged from the darkness, the weapon in his hand emitting a dull light. Knowing what it meant, Beelhurse started to tremble.

"W-wait!"

"Even I feel restless when a job doesn't go according to plan," the boy

continued. “Things need to be done properly.”

He didn’t listen to what anyone had to say. Even if he did, he wouldn’t understand them. He simply thrived on killing people with a beautiful smile on his face.

Beelhurse looked into the boy’s eyes—deadly weapons in themselves—and screamed. He clung to the iron bars of the window, trying to escape the blade.

“Please! Is anybody out there?!”

“There’s nobody around,” replied the boy. “No one’s going to find you here.”

“Let me out! I’m begging you! Let me out of this place!”

Beelhurse’s cries echoed around the dark room, cut off from the rest of the world.

His pleas for help turned to screams—but eventually, even those ceased. After that, all that could be heard in the darkness was someone clicking their tongue in disgust.

※

With people preoccupied with the post-armistice process, Beelhurse’s suspicious death was treated as a trivial matter within Kisk Castle. While some suspected that Ortea had killed him out of revenge, the fact that Beelhurse had sent assassins into the fortress and caused chaos made everyone lose any sympathy for him.

The terms of the armistice were almost the same as those Ortea had originally proposed.

The few changes that *were* made included Shizuku being handed over to Farsas, the addition of the crystal cave, and the removal of any further reparations.

When Leuticia surveyed the crystal cave in person, she decided that it was “more than enough to offset the damages incurred” and chose not to demand any monetary compensation from Kisk. The king’s sister arranged for the extraction of the available resources, then returned to her own country. For the next three years, the crystal cave would be frequented by people from Farsas.

※

Shizuku didn't have much luggage. She adjusted her grip on the one bag containing all her belongings, then walked down the corridor. As she was strolling along, she remembered the first time she'd arrived in Kisk.

Back then, she'd been with Faneet and Niké. A short time later, she'd met Ortea. It all felt like a distant memory.

Those few months were filled with hectic memories. She'd been constantly on the move, with almost no downtime in between. She'd been so absorbed in whatever she was dealing with at the time that she'd barely even noticed how exhausted she was.

Shizuku left the building she'd been staying in and headed to the place where they'd arranged to meet.

The person she was meeting was already waiting in the drafty atrium, which was located in the center of the castle grounds.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's fine. We still have time."

Erik smiled awkwardly and looked at her bag.

"Want me to carry that for you?" he asked.

"Thank you, but I'll be okay," she replied; there was nothing particularly heavy in it. She looked over his shoulder. "Why is the king here...?"

"No idea," Erik replied. "He said he wanted to see what Kisk Castle was like on the inside."

The King of Farsas was right at the back of the hall, staring intently at a mural. He was the last person Shizuku wanted to join them. She hoped he wouldn't cause any trouble. She saw him call over a nearby magistrate, seemingly issuing some orders.

"Sh-should we go before he causes a scene?" asked Shizuku.

"Good idea."

Erik nodded and began to recite an incantation, but then a woman's voice echoed from above the atrium, interrupting him.

“Shizuku!”

She looked up to find Ortea running down the stairs, dressed in her royal attire. Shizuku left her bag where she was standing and ran to the bottom of the staircase.

The queen had only Niké accompanying her as she stood in front of Shizuku, out of breath. Her amber eyes glared at the woman who was leaving.

“Shizuku, you were mine,” she stated.

“I was.”

“So if you can’t find your way back home, you can return to me whenever you like. I’ll make sure you have plenty to do.”

Ortea extended her graceful arms toward Shizuku, who gently wrapped her arms around the queen’s warm body. She bit her lip, reluctant to say good-bye.

Shizuku was glad she’d come to Kisk. She was glad that she’d met Ortea.

The harder she thought about it, the more she wanted to cry.

Shizuku’s own palms were too small to carry much in—but there was still a lot her hands could accomplish.

Shizuku slowly let go of Ortea. She took hold of her hand and squeezed it gently, as though she were carefully wrapping up a broken object.

“For as long as I’m in this world, I’ll come running at your call. Remember that, Princess.”

“...Don’t be in too much of a rush. You’ll trip and fall.”

“No need to worry—I’m pretty tough.”

Ortea frowned. Then a smile spread across her face.

She glanced over Shizuku’s shoulder at the atrium behind her—and her expression suddenly changed.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing?! Stop that!”

The queen broke into a run. The man in front of her was about to turn toward the wall, having just received a pot of paint from a bewildered magistrate.

It didn't take long for the two royals to start going at each other's throats. Shizuku looked back at them, covering her face with her hands, and let out a deep sigh.

"Why are they like that...?"

"All royals have messed-up personalities to some extent," Niké replied.

Niké appeared unfazed, apparently accustomed to their quarreling. His nonchalant expression made Shizuku shake her head.

She looked up at the man who'd been her colleague for the past few months.

"I'm glad they didn't kill you," she said.



“Don’t remind me. The things I’ve seen make the Sea of Negativity look like a playground.”

Shizuku hadn’t asked what exactly Niké had been through after Lars captured him for being “a bad guy who causes nothing but mischief.” She didn’t want to—and it didn’t seem like he wanted to open up about his experiences, either.

She gazed sympathetically at his face, which looked a little haggard.

“Why don’t you take a break once things settle down?” she suggested.

“I’m planning to. I’ll take some time off to visit my mentor.”

“I didn’t know you had a mentor!”

“Well, we haven’t seen each other for years,” he admitted. His voice sounded lighter than before, but Shizuku might have been imagining it.

He gazed at her with a cynical look in his eyes.

“I was hoping to quit if Faneet was still around...but whatever. I’ll take it easy and start things over again.”

“...Yeah.”

Some people were changing, while others were leaving.

The memories people carried with them in their minds were the only constants.

Shizuku knew and understood that. Everybody does; that’s why time is so precious to people.

Niké looked over the short woman’s head, glancing at the man who was waiting for her in the center of the hall. Erik’s blue ear adornment caught his attention.

“Isn’t it cheating, having that thing?”

“What do you mean? The way he’s borrowing Leuticia’s magical powers?”

Apparently, Erik had had an altercation with Niké inside the fortress, but there’d been no real winner. Niké appeared to have reservations about the magical energy Erik was able to harness from elsewhere.

Erik had developed exceptional spell configuration skills to compensate for his innate lack of magical power. If he were more powerful, he'd be far better than most mages. When Shizuku heard that Erik was the one who'd overwritten the barrier of the fortress, she felt sorry for everyone involved.

Niké's reply, however, was unexpected.

"Magic that lets you harness other people's powers is powerful, but hardly anyone uses it. Do you know why that is?"

"Huh? Is it because they have no one to borrow from?"

"You're so dumb."

"Hey, don't be so mean! How would I know that? I'm not a mage!"

It didn't matter whether something was common sense in the field of magic; as an outsider, Shizuku wouldn't know about it.

Shizuku's shouting brought a mystified look to Erik's face. Niké slowly reached out and tugged hard on her ear.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed.

"If you want to be equipped with those kinds of magic implements, you have to endure an operation so agonizing that it'd make grown adults run out screaming. That's why nobody actually uses them."

"...Huh?"

"You're an idiot, though, so I doubt you'd know that unless someone spelled it out for you."

What Niké was saying didn't ring any bells. Shizuku had just heard that the procedure was a hassle.

She gazed at Erik in astonishment, struggling to process her feelings.

When Erik noticed her looking at him, he turned toward Shizuku and Niké. When Niké met Erik's gaze, he narrowed his eyes.

"Niké?" said Shizuku.

"Well, I'd better get going. I have work to do."

“Oh, take care of yourself. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

“Don’t come back again, you stupid woman.”

Just as Shizuku was about to complain about this substandard farewell, Niké abruptly grabbed her by the chin. The man’s face drew closer.

She didn’t close her eyes.

After all, she hadn’t known what was going to happen.

“See ya.”

With a casual wave of the hand, Niké turned on his heel and started climbing the staircase.

Once the man had vanished onto the upper floor, Erik called out to Shizuku. She wasn’t moving a muscle.

“We should get going. You sure you haven’t forgotten anything?”

“Ah...”

“Ah?”

“Aaaaah, I want the ground to swallow me up!” Shizuku yelled, holding her red face in her hands.

The king was holding his paint pot above his head, looking down at Ortea as she tried to jump for it. Having heard Shizuku’s scream from the corner of the room, he cocked his head in an exaggerated manner.

“Hey, did you hear that? Shizuku’s asking to be buried in the ground!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

On one side stood the king, cursed with a personality that was never going to change. On the other side stood Shizuku, agonized by her own embarrassment.

Erik, standing right in the middle of the pair, silently picked up Shizuku’s bag and began opening up a transit gate.

That chapter in their story ended just as chaotically as it had begun.

Still, it had been peaceful in its own way, which was kind of okay.

Afterword



Kuji Furumiya here. Thank you for your continued support.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *Babel*, Volume 3!

This third installment marks a total change from the previous one, where we started to unravel the truth behind how language works in other worlds. In this volume, we see Shizuku struggling by herself in a whole new land. It's also the volume where Ortea, the heroine of this installment, finally makes her first appearance.

I hope you'll enjoy the story of these two contrasting characters.

This New Literary edition of *Babel* has roughly doubled in length in comparison to the old one, which was released by Dengeki Bunko in 2016. (Each paperback still covers the same section of the story—it's just that there's twice as much happening in the new versions.) Putting all the added content aside, this third volume is still the sequel to Dengeki Bunko's Volume 2. As such, moving on to this volume after reading the original two shouldn't pose much of an issue. The only real difference is that Shizuku had a mysterious book from right at the start in the Bunko edition, whereas in the New Literary edition, she only obtains it midway through the volume. This is the same as in the original web version, so keep that in mind before you start reading.

Shizuku has grown much stronger after traveling to all these different places, but her story is finally coming to a close in the next volume.

This story revolves around the issues of language in parallel worlds and a realistic, powerless protagonist. Every time she moves on to a new place, she's challenged by different ways of thinking, causing her to butt heads with all kinds of different individuals—and the final volume will be no exception. In the next

installment, Shizuku will come head-to-head with somebody who's capable of changing history. I hope you'll stick with her until the end.

Unnamed Memory, which is being published concurrently, will also reach its conclusion in its final volume, Volume 6. It takes place three hundred years before the events of *Babel*, so it doesn't matter which one you start with. It's fine just to read one of the two series, too! I'm going to keep putting my all into my work!

Lastly, let me express my gratitude to a few people.

I wasn't expecting this volume to be so long, but I ended up submitting a thick manuscript nonetheless. I'd like to apologize to my editors for that—and also express my sincere gratitude! It's because of you two that I've been able to publish the continuation of the story I began under the Dengeki Bunko imprint. I'll work hard so we can keep powering through!

Also, thank you very much to Haruyuki Morisawa for creating such beautiful illustrations once again! I can't thank you enough for the stunning drawings of Ortea—which just scream “Bewitching Princess”—as well as the iron chains on the front cover, which really embody what this volume is about. I really appreciate it!

I'd like to thank all the readers who've stuck with me, too. I feel so lucky that you've decided to follow Shizuku's journey. I know it's a little different, but I really hope that you enjoy the story.

See you again—in another period in time, perhaps! Thank you so much!

Kuji Furumiya

Extra Story: Nuisance



“I’m bored,” muttered Ortea, sprawled across her chaise longue.

Shizuku’s eyebrows shot up.

Shizuku’s master, who’d shut herself away in her private chamber, was often plagued by boredom.

In reality, she should have been busy. She was assigned plenty of tasks related to the running of Kisk, but after swiftly finishing them, she didn’t hesitate to complain about how bored she was.

Whenever this happened, she’d get other people to rush about, scrambling to entertain her—but on this particular day, Shizuku silently waited to see what would happen next, eager not to make any extra work for herself.

Resting her cheek in her hand, Ortea watched Shizuku organizing her shelves.

“Can’t you tell me something interesting about your country?” she asked.

“That’s a pretty open-ended question... Could you be a little more specific with your request?”

“I don’t care. Just think of something.”

“Huh...?”

Shizuku thought to herself for a minute, then decided to talk about her own country’s history.

“I only learned this stuff when I was studying for my college entrance exams, so my knowledge is pretty sketchy. I apologize if there are any mistakes.” Then she gave a rough overview of everything from ancient to modern history.

It wasn't a short story by any means. Shizuku expected the princess to stop her before too long, but surprisingly, Ortea listened until the very end. She cut in with a few questions—some of which Shizuku could answer immediately, while others left her stumped. Being a ruler herself, Ortea seemed to show a passing interest in the history and politics of Shizuku's world.

After listening to everything Shizuku had to say, Ortea expressed an offhand opinion.

"Pretty interesting stuff, in places. I had no idea what island countries were like."

"There aren't any on this continent, are there?"

During her travels, Shizuku had gotten the impression that the continent was much larger than Japan, but still significantly smaller than her world as a whole. Still, since she sometimes used teleportation to move around, she found it hard to fully grasp the scale.

Shizuku wondered about the continent's history. What was it like for an entire, vast world to be connected by land?

Ortea, meanwhile, sounded disinterested.

"There are other continents besides this one," she said. "We trade with the continent to the east, and there are records of castaways arriving from other continents, too."

"Oh yeah, I remember now—you have five continents in total. There's that legend about the continent splitting up."

"It's not a legend. It's just a stupid story," Ortea replied. "...Anyway, it's good that we don't have a lot to do with the other continents aside from the one in the east. It's less of a nuisance."

"Less of a nuisance? In my country, we rely heavily on imports."

"That's the same for Kisk. But think about the past. Knowledge from overseas must have forced your country to change the way it did things, right?"

"Yeah..."

"When countries are connected by land, it becomes much less likely for

drastic cultural disconnects to occur. Even if there are stark differences, you get more opportunities to hear about different cultures. Making contact with other cultures doesn't shock us too deeply; it's like having water splashed in your face while you're asleep."

"I guess you *do* have teleportation magic here. You won't get cultural gaps caused by distance."

You needed to know the coordinates of any place you wanted to teleport to, but after a place had been visited once, it became remarkably easy to come and go to. That kind of magic was what set this world apart from Shizuku's the most.

Ortea continued, although she didn't sound especially amused.

"Some people might welcome stuff from the outside world, while others might not be so keen. If no foreign lands had ever interacted with your country, it'd probably be totally different today, right? I bet the people who were in charge back then had a tough time."

Erik had made a similar point in the past. A rapid influx of foreign influences could be a beacon of hope for those who dealt with them—but they could also be a hassle. Ortea was definitely the type who'd see such things as a nuisance. She was a capable stateswoman, but she wasn't the hardworking sort. She managed to do just enough to avoid any problems.

"You don't ask me many questions about my world's technology. Is this why?"

"No. I just think it sounds shady."

"Well, that was surprisingly honest..."

"First of all, I'm not very fond of trading with the continent to the east," said Ortea. "They're behaving themselves for the time being, but they *have* tried to invade our continent in the past. It's greedy, considering how far away we are."

"That's the first I've heard about an invasion. What happened?"

"Farsas drove them away. They only attacked the smallest country in the far east, but at that time, a princess from that country was married to the king of Farsas. Farsas went to help and managed to successfully fight them off. If only both sides had been destroyed by that conflict."

“Wouldn’t that be a nuisance in itself?”

Shizuku knew that Ortea didn’t like Farsas, but if the continent’s leading nation had fallen in an invasion, the situation in the continent would have looked totally different.

The princess lay on her stomach on her chaise longue. She reached out and picked a piece of red fruit from the bowl on the table.

“I’m busy enough with everything I have to deal with already. I don’t need people charging in from somewhere else, acting as if they own the place, and causing me even more trouble. If they do come, they’d better keep quiet.”

“Is that a roundabout way of criticizing me?”

“No.”

Ortea finished eating her fruit, then yawned a little.

“Anyway, that was rather interesting. I’ll ask you for the rest of the story another time.”

“I told you everything up until the present day, so there is no ‘rest of the story,’ but I’ll think of something else instead.”

It seemed like Shizuku would have to entertain her master with various topics for a long time to come.

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