
Babel
The End of the Journey to Restore Language
Kuji Furumiya
Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa
IV
FINAL

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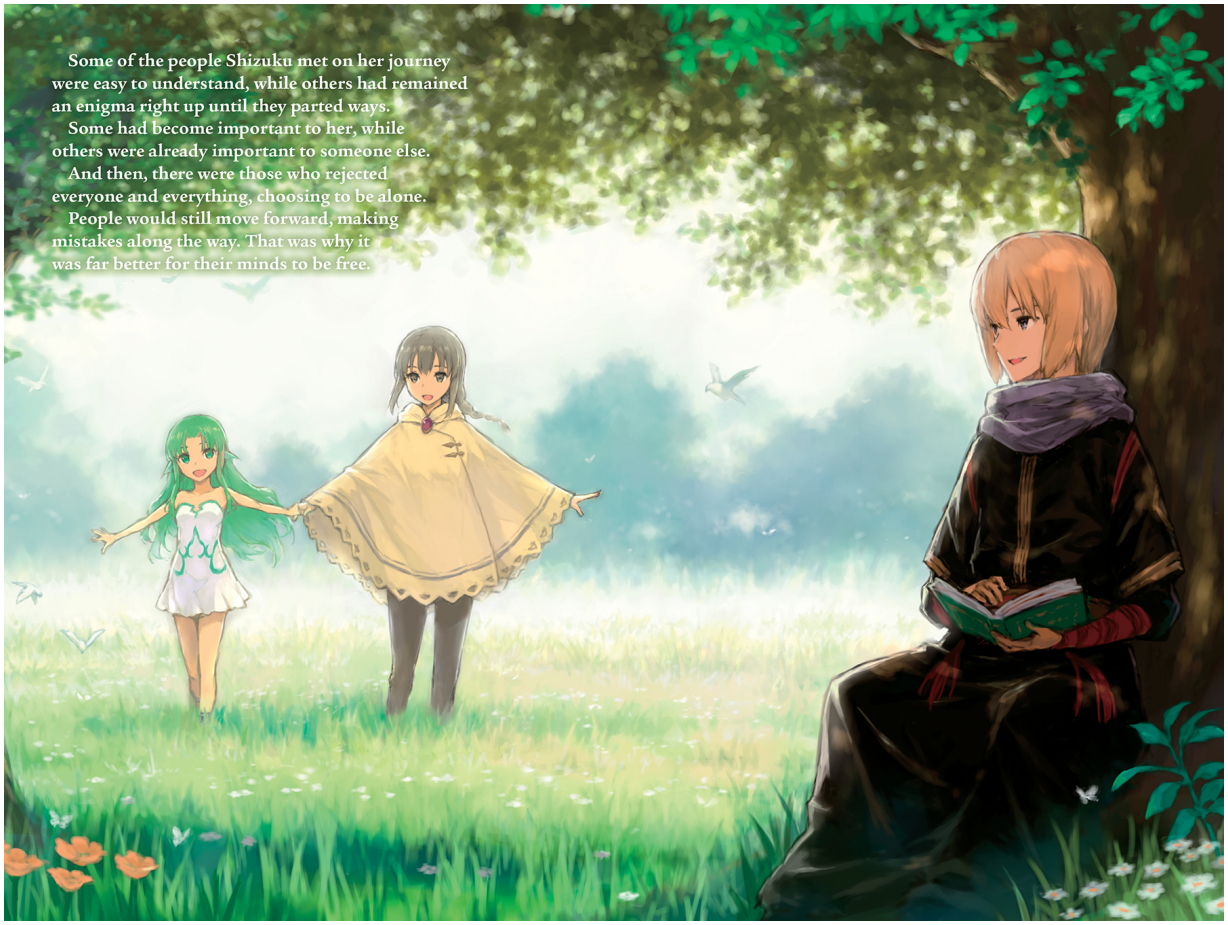
IV



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Some of the people Shizuku met on her journey were easy to understand, while others had remained an enigma right up until they parted ways.
Some had become important to her, while others were already important to someone else.
And then, there were those who rejected everyone and everything, choosing to be alone.
People would still move forward, making mistakes along the way. That was why it was far better for their minds to be free.


Elzard
A high-ranking demon who assists Aviella.
Aviella
A maleficent sorceress who uses forbidden curses.
“I’m just going to teach them a lesson. They need to learn that this continent and its humans have fallen into an idle slumber in which they have forgotten the many cruelties of the past.”



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Illustration by
Haruyuki Morisawa

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Babel IV

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Babel

The End of the Journey to Restore Language

IV

Kuji Furumiya
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Main Characters

Shizuku Minase

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

Erik

A peculiar young mage who studies the magic script. Accompanies Shizuku on her journey.

Mea

A demon girl. After waiting centuries for a princess to return to her castle at the bottom of a lake, she is contracted to become Shizuku's assistant demon.

Tarkis

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

Kaito

A young mercenary and a talented dagger wielder. A twisted individual who enjoys killing people.

Lars

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

Leuticia

Lars's younger sister and an exceptional mage. Erik and Shizuku work for her during their stay in Farsas.

Aviella

An evil mage. Possesses a cursed artifact that reveals secret events from history.



The Lands of *Babel*

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



The Dark Age has long since passed.

The Age of Witches, confined to the realm of fairy tales.

Innumerable stories and events from history are

recorded, read, and passed down by word of mouth,

but eventually even they fade into obscurity.

Herein, we shall recount the tale of a witch

who endeavored to imprint herself in people's memories,

and a single human who cherished the freedom of language

and a single human who cherished the freedom of language.

1. The Holy Book



The king of the northern nation had a little toad.

A luminous golden color, it was immortal and knew the history of everything.

One day, the king asked the toad a question:

"How can I expand my country?"

The toad replied, "I am only familiar with the past. If that is enough for you, allow me to share my knowledge."

The toad sang. It spoke of the history of a lengthy war and revealed the fate of a royal whose identity had been hidden. It conveyed the anguish that the populace had endured and described the use of evil magic.

The king danced. He instigated a war, manipulated the royal family, exploited his citizens, and employed forbidden magic.

The country soon grew in size.

The king rejoiced, and the toad sang.

Its new song was about a new chapter in history. It told the story of the criminal king.

When the king heard the song, he swallowed the little toad whole.

Not long after, the king drowned suddenly in a lake.

※

“How is it?”

Erik had handed Shizuku a piece of paper with a lengthy English text written on it. Shizuku stared intently at the string of words. After reading it four times, she gripped the side of the paper, channeling her strength into her fingers. They were trembling more and more by the second.

“Y-you’ve gotten better than me?!”

Her dumbfounded cry echoed around the room, which wasn’t especially spacious. Erik, who’d translated the example sentences into English, asked another couple of questions.

“Is it all correct? Did I make any mistakes?”

“…It’s correct,” Shizuku responded, feeling utterly defeated.

It had been nearly a year since Shizuku had found herself mysteriously transported from Japan to another world.

She’d been looking for a way to get back but had yet to find any leads. And if that wasn’t bad enough, a strange sequence of events had led her to become embroiled in an international conflict. As a result, Shizuku had ended up spending nearly five months in the Great Nation of Kisk. She’d finally made it back to Farsas just a few days earlier.

That said, it didn’t seem like much had changed in the magic kingdom of Farsas, which was regarded as the most powerful nation on the continent. If she had to pinpoint something, there had been a change in the seasons. The sweltering heat had been replaced by a gentler kind of warmth.

Still, the lack of observable changes didn’t guarantee that things were still the same. More subtle changes may have taken place beneath the surface. The young man who’d been acting as Shizuku’s protector had somehow acquired English skills comparable to hers—for example.

“I feel a strange sense of defeat…,” Shizuku said.

“Why? I just did a little studying by myself.”

“‘A little’…?”

When it came to language skills, Erik was clearly a few steps ahead of Shizuku.

She was so deflated that she could barely stop herself from

collapsing onto the table.

"But like, all I taught you was the grammar. How did you get so good at reading and writing? Vocabulary aside, your comprehension and composition skills are almost on par with mine. And I studied English for over six years in my old world."

"Maybe you weren't studying the right way."

"Wow, you sure don't mince words!"

Shizuku had suspected the same, but she didn't want to hear it out loud. Before ending up in this other world, she'd spent eighteen years being a diligent student. While she tended to score well on tests at school, she'd never been confident in her English abilities. Listening and speaking had always been her major weaknesses. The specialized English resources she'd been introduced to at university brought home how complex English really was. She often found herself unable to grasp the meaning of sentences even though she knew all the words—but just as she'd been reminded how challenging learning a foreign language was, she'd been brought here and *this* had happened. She looked up at Erik, green with envy.

The man lifted the tip of his pen off the page. He still had his magical device attached to his ear—it was too much of a hassle to remove.

"Once you grasp the basic structure of sentences, it's just a matter of memorizing the exceptions to the rule. Of course, not knowing the vocabulary is an issue, but that can be solved as long as you have a dictionary."

"Easier said than done…," Shizuku replied.

She'd been studying her new world's writing system while she was in Kisk, but Shizuku was nowhere near being able to read and write fluently. When she had to create documents, she would make a list of words using bullet points, then give verbal instructions to a scribe so they could write things down. Only Ortea and Faneet knew that she struggled with reading and writing because she was from another world, so she had no choice but to try and hide this fact from everyone else as she studied to improve.

Her vocabulary had improved as a result of her efforts, but her writing skills hadn't progressed much.

Feeling as if she'd been left behind by Erik, Shizuku flung herself face down on the table.

"There's nothing left for me to teach you, is there?"

"Sure there is. To be honest, I'm still at a loss when it comes to Japanese. Apart from sentence structure, it's the Japanese writing system that really interests me. English was the easier language for me to tackle while you were away, so this is just as far I could get."

Erik, who specialized in the magic script, had displayed an interest in kanji for a while now. He had regularly practiced writing kanji, even before arriving in Farsas.

"For now, I want you to teach me some more characters. I'll correct your essays in exchange."

"Oh, that'd be great!"

Shizuku hurriedly took her notebook out of her bag.

In the language of Erik's world, almost all parts of speech—including adjectives, nouns, and verbs—had set patterns of inflectional changes.

When Shizuku had first learned this, she'd exclaimed, "This is way too much to memorize!" By now, though, she was totally used to it. Fortunately, there were no irregular changes in inflection. Each noun was assigned one of four declensions, and other parts of speech changed to match the noun they were connected to.

As a result, the words of a sentence fit together with puzzle-like regularity—and as long as you knew the words, you could easily discern the connections between subjects and verbs, and adjectives and nouns. The language had an extremely orderly structure, which impressed Shizuku.

The most convenient characteristic of this system was how easy it was to grasp what a pronoun referred to. In addition to the inflectional changes, the language also had a feature called "pronoun suffixes."

When a pronoun was referring to a single word in the sentence, it was given a number-based suffix to help you identify which word it pointed to. If a pronoun referred to multiple words, a plural suffix was added, and small triangular annotation marks were placed before and after the group of words that the pronoun was referring

to. These triangles were also used to indicate relative clauses. Whenever Shizuku got the chance to take a look at the magic books Erik read, they appeared on every page.

If the person—or people—a pronoun was referring to was not mentioned in the same sentence but had been declared earlier, a suffix indicating how many sentences prior it had been mentioned was used. If the antecedent hadn't been mentioned, or when a pronoun referred to an ambiguous subject, a suffix was used to signal as much.

Since the spoken language was automatically translated for Shizuku, it had been hard to tell at first, but the written language was *very* orderly. As far as Shizuku knew, understanding what pronouns were referring to had a major impact on how people interpreted a piece of writing back in her old world. This world's grammar was very rational in comparison, which made writing more complicated but reading much easier.

Still, Erik insisted that such meticulously grammatical writing was only used in texts handled by a certain educated class—and reading materials and literary works for common people didn't abide by the rules as strictly.

"These pronoun suffixes were originally made to be used in spell books. Misinterpreting a spell can lead to shocking mishaps, so that's probably why they had to be so thorough about it. There were even more annotation marks in the writing system of Tuldarr… That was the ancient magic empire."

"That's crazy. In my world, we *analyze* annotated editions of books."

"What? Like introductory books?"

"Well, we have introductory books as well, but the annotated editions are actually research books."

Shizuku poured some freshly brewed tea into two cups, then opened a jar filled with sweets.

"It started in ancient times. First, people would painstakingly dissect a text and write books where they expanded on their own theories. Eventually, those books themselves became philosophical texts. Then some new researchers would come along, read the

original text and the interpretive editions, and write *new* annotated editions saying, 'This person interpreted it like that, but I think this.' And that cycle continued, with people trying to seek the truth for over a thousand years…"

"Incredible. And that's still done today?"

"Yep. My professors do it, too."

As Shizuku smiled faintly, inhaling the steam from her tea, Erik let out a sigh of admiration. His deep-blue eyes slowly passed over her face.

"I thought your world only valued old things because they were *old*."

"That's not true. Well, a small fraction of people might think that way."

Analyzing other people's analyses was only a small part of the field of so-called speculative research. However, the pursuit had stood the test of time and was still carried out in the present day. Maybe people were still enthusiastic about researching ancient texts because the themes they tackled were closely linked to human nature itself. Shizuku had been confronted with similar dilemmas, even in her new world. Her conversations with people such as Erik and King Lars of Farsas had given her a sense of just how omnipresent some of these themes were.

"Are you going to carry out that kind of research when you go back?"

Erik's calm, pleasant voice reached Shizuku's ears. On this occasion, however, his words didn't sink in and evaporate but landed lightly atop her mind and stayed there.

Shizuku gave him a vague smile.

"Hmm… I'm not sure. I haven't even submitted my summer break report."

"You've probably been expelled by now. That's a shame."

"Come on, do you really have to be so blunt?!" Shizuku retorted.

Hopefully, they'd just considered it a leave of absence.

Shizuku, still just nineteen years old, pondered this as she gulped down the rest of her tea.

After returning to Farsas, Shizuku had taken on a job creating language learning materials for children. This was similar to what she'd been doing in Kisk. Apparently, Lars and Queen Ortea of Kisk had decided on this role for her when they'd set the terms for her handover.

The king of Farsas had given her a murderous glare when Shizuku told him that innate language skills didn't exist in her world; however, when he learned that the materials she'd created were consistently effective, he'd decided to let her continue her work.

"If I kill you, I'll have *three* people laying into me," he'd told her, before assigning Shizuku a laboratory and a team of underlings.

"These are adorable. The children will love them."

In her office, Leuticia had picked up Shizuku's sample cards and was leafing through them one by one, looking impressed. Their somewhat gaudy, primary-colored borders—red for animals, blue for food—were designed to sort the vocabulary into categories.

After explaining how to use the cards, Shizuku ended by explaining her methodology.

"I've used primary colors because they're easier for infants to see—but as the children grow older, I plan to use softer colors and more realistic images."

"I see. I'll leave those sorts of decisions to you," Leuticia replied.

For the time being, Shizuku reported directly to Leuticia, just as Erik did. After reviewing and signing the approval documents for the learning materials, Leuticia handed them back to Shizuku, her beautiful and serene face breaking into a smile.

"Erik's contract ends in two months. If your materials are finished by then, you're free to do as you wish after that. You should talk to him about it."

"I will. Thank you so much."

"I'm sure he'll insist on leaving Farsas, though… Oh yes, about that red book. We still haven't tracked it down. I'm sorry about that."

The red book, thought to be one of the interlopers' magical artifacts, contained secret historical knowledge and forbidden spells.

Shizuku had even had Faneet try to look for it, but he'd failed as well. Its whereabouts were still unknown. It was rumored to be in

the possession of a suspicious woman who traveled around between countries, never stopping.

"There have been several sightings, the most recent of which was in Medial, the Great Nation in the north—but no one knows where she went after that."

"That's okay," Shizuku responded with a faint smile. "I'm sure we'll find it eventually. Thank you."

"If I hear anything else, I'll let you know—even if you've left the castle by then."

"Okay."

It had been around eleven and a half months since Shizuku came to this world. By the time Erik's contract ended, it would have been more than a year. Shizuku almost fell into a daze, surprised at how much time had passed—before reaching the bittersweet conclusion that expelling her from college *would* be an understandable decision.

Still, being expelled wouldn't be that big a deal. If she wanted to pursue her studies further, she could get a part-time job, save up some cash, and take the entrance exam again. Compared to the journey she'd been on so far, that sounded like child's play.

For some bizarre reason, though, the scenario she was envisioning seemed unrealistic in a way. In fact, it felt like a fantasy. She cocked her head to one side, overcome by a vast sense of confusion.

While Shizuku was on a break from work, she went back to her room, where a young demon girl was waiting.

"Welcome back, Master!"

"Hey, Mea!"

When Shizuku had arrived back in Farsas, Mea—who didn't tend to outwardly express her emotions—embraced Shizuku with a slightly tearful-looking smile. It made Shizuku feel like she'd been transported back in time, and she could vividly remember how full her heart had felt. Shizuku had apologized repeatedly to her, and that evening, she'd told Mea about every single thing that had

happened over in Kisk. Mea clung to her every word with a look of earnest concentration that made Shizuku decide to never leave her side again.

The demon girl, who seemed to have been doing some cleaning, showed Shizuku a paper package.

"This was at the bottom of your bag, Master. Is it okay if I open it?"

"Oh, I forgot about that!"

The paper package was a light brown color. Naturally, Shizuku knew what was inside.

She took the paper package out of Mea's hand and pulled out a bundle of papers.

"Damn… I meant to get someone to read this for me."

The thick stack of papers was a thesis about the children's epidemic that a theologist from Kisk had submitted to Ortea.

The theologist's claim that "innate language did not used to be fixed" had stimulated Shizuku's interest back in Kisk, so Niké had given it to her. Shizuku had been so busy she'd forgotten about it, however, and she figured that Niké, who'd promised to explain the theory to her, probably had as well. Shizuku crossed her arms as she looked at the thesis in front of her.

"I'd love to know what this says… Can you read, Mea?"

"My apologies, but I'm not very good with human writing."

"I'm not surprised. Maybe I should use a communication ring to ask Niké— Aaaaah!"

Startled by Shizuku's sudden scream, Mea backed away.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

"No, it's just… I wanted to wait a while before contacting him. Or rather, I don't *want* to contact him."

"You don't get along?"

"I don't know if I'd say that, but things are kind of complicated…"

Shizuku couldn't understand why Niké did what he did when they said goodbye. She couldn't bring herself to feel angry *or* happy about it—just completely embarrassed. If his goal was to cause her emotional turmoil, he'd done a great job. Clenching her trembling fists, Shizuku started punching the air.

"Aaaargh! I can't stand it!"

Mea observed her master's strange behavior for a good five minutes before calmly saying, "What do you want to do with this, then?"

"…I'll…ask Erik."

Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Shizuku picked up the thesis.

It was abnormally thick, so she felt bad about asking, but Erik was the only person she could think of who would read it for her. She put the thesis back into the paper package and decided to visit his laboratory.

The castle of Farsas was not as convoluted as Kisk's, but it was still quite large. Shizuku cut across the courtyard, heading for the wing where the research rooms were located. As she was about to climb over the shrubbery, however, she spotted a small figure on the lawn.

Both the girl *and* the flashcards she was spreading out on the grass looked familiar to Shizuku. It was the little girl that she and Erik had encountered in the courtyard, and the vocabulary materials she was using were the ones that Shizuku had made. As soon as she saw Shizuku, she started beaming. Shizuku gave her a little wave.

"Hello. Long time no see."

"Hello!"

"You're using my flashcards. Are you having fun?"

"Yes."

The girl picked up a card to show to Shizuku.

"Octopus!" she exclaimed.

Sure enough, the card had a drawing of an octopus on it.

Shizuku crouched down next to her and pointed to another card.

"And this one?"

"Cat!"

"That's right. Great job. How about this one?"

"Deugo."

These prototype cards had been given to the children in the

castle who were suffering from language impediments, and the girl's set already looked well-worn. She must have already memorized all the words because she didn't show any hesitation when she answered. Shizuku smiled softly, recalling the time she'd spent with Rio. Since their separation, Rio had been sending her a letter every month, and it seemed like she was doing well. The memory of Rio's earnest smile soothed her, even in her busiest times.

"I'll be making some new materials soon. How does a picture book sound?"

As soon as the little girl heard the words "picture book," her eyes started sparkling with excitement.

At that moment, however, an adult voice that Shizuku didn't recognize called out from behind her.

"You really *do* like kids, huh?"

"What?"

Shizuku turned around in surprise. There stood a young woman who appeared to be a court mage. The child who'd been crouching on the lawn stood up and ran over to her.

"Lera! Play with me!"

"Not now. Later."

The mage called Lera smiled at the child clinging to her legs.

Shizuku hurriedly rose to her feet to greet her. "Um, nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too. You're that researcher from Kisk, right? I've heard a lot about you."

"I'm curious about what you've been told, but yes, that's me."

The suggestion that she'd come from Kisk made Shizuku feel somewhat uncomfortable—but since she'd spent only a month in Farsas and over four months in Kisk, it was more accurate. Shizuku —who'd been brought back to Farsas as a "spoil of war"—forced an awkward smile.

Lera smiled back, her lips a dark shade of red.

"I heard that Kisk stopped experimenting on children to identify the cause of the illness. Is that true?"

"Yes. Those experiments were rather cruel, so they were stopped. And they didn't identify the cause in the end, so the research is now

focusing on education."

"Oh? Is it a good idea to give up so easily, though? It's still a disease, even if learning can alleviate the symptoms."

"Uh…"

Shizuku was at a loss for words. This wasn't the reaction she'd expected.

So far, she had refused to view the epidemic as a disease, no matter what anyone else said. She was relieved the experiments in Kisk had been discontinued and that Ortea was supporting her efforts to create learning materials.

This mage from Farsas, however, had a totally different opinion—an opinion that seemed like common sense to her. She was giving Shizuku a worried look. Shizuku knew the woman's concern only stemmed from good intentions, which left her a little rattled.

"I feel terrible for these kids—they have a defect in their souls. We need to find the cause as soon as possible… I'm also involved in researching the cause of this illness, but we haven't really gotten anywhere. If we could find a clue, it would ease the burden on both the children and you."

Lera's voice was full of pure compassion. Her sorrow over the disease, her concern for the children, and her desire to lessen Shizuku's burden were clear to see.

In this world, children born without language skills were considered "abnormal."

Shizuku had been told that before, but perhaps she hadn't fully grasped its significance until now. For her, it was normal not to have innate language abilities.

That said, curing the disease would be far less taxing than providing educational materials and teaching language from scratch—for both the kids *and* their parents. Education was only the *second*-best tactic for tackling this mysterious disease.

The continent was vast. Not only that, but the epidemic was gradually spreading. If it was feasible, eliminating the cause would unquestionably help many more children.

Lera took the little girl by the hand.

"Let's both do our best," she said to Shizuku, before walking

away.

"A defect in the soul, huh?" muttered Shizuku hesitantly as she watched the woman leave.

Erik had raised the idea that innate language skills *weren't* reliant on the soul. If his hypothesis was correct, what else could be causing the illness? Up until now, Shizuku had believed that dispelling prejudice against the illness and using education to restore the children's language skills was the best approach.

Still, that might not be the solution that many people were hoping for.

Having finally come to this realization, Shizuku let out a big sigh and shook her head, then left the courtyard without another word.

Erik's laboratory was more like a university research lab than a typical experimental lab. Three rectangular desks were positioned in the middle of the room, and all the walls were lined with bookshelves.

The man sitting at one of the desks perusing books and documents looked up, having noticed Shizuku's presence.

"Oh, hey. What's up?"

"Sorry, but I have a favor to ask…"

There was no one else in the room. Shizuku sat down in front of Erik and handed him the thesis she'd brought with her.

"A paper by a follower of Aetea, huh? Interesting. 'The Manifestation of Divine Power in Innate Language.'"

"I tried reading it myself, but unsurprisingly, I couldn't make head or tail of it."

"That's okay. I'll have a look."

Erik placed the thesis back into its paper wrapping. He didn't seem daunted by its thickness at all. He placed it straight on top of the stack of books on his table. Shizuku brewed some tea and sat down opposite Erik, who said he was going to take a short break.

"You mentioned before that an infection could explain the existence of innate language skills, right?"

"Yeah. I still suspect that's the case. People may get 'infected' by something from their parents or those around them after they're born which gives them innate language abilities."

Spreading like cavity-causing bacteria, Shizuku thought to herself, but the comparison was too crude to voice out loud.

She tossed a piece of candy into her cavity-free mouth.

"Does that mean this epidemic is because children have developed antibodies against those kinds of infections?"

"'Antibodies'? You mean a resistance to them? I believe so, but we don't have any proof yet. There's no noticeable difference—physically or mentally—between the sick children and the healthy ones."

"Hmm. And yet for some reason, I'm able to understand your language."

Shizuku's body had been examined thoroughly, but she didn't seem to differ at all from the people belonging to this world. She thought hard about what distinguished those with language skills from those without.

Remembering what Lera had said earlier, Shizuku let out a big sigh.

"…I'm going to go jump rope for a bit to clear my mind."

"What's that?" Erik asked, as Shizuku began to walk out of the room holding the rope she'd had tied around her waist.

She held up the thin rope in her hand and showed it to him.

"This? I cut a suitable length of rope and added handles to it."

"I can see that; I mean what are you going to do with it?"

"Oh, I guess jump rope isn't a thing in this world," said Shizuku. "You swing it in both hands and jump over it. Don't you have a children's game like that?"

"Not that I know of."

Now that she thought about it, Shizuku hadn't seen any children playing jump rope during her travels. Perhaps it was a cultural difference. Shizuku mimicked jumping over the rope to show him how it was done.

"It's a great way to do aerobic exercise when you don't have much space. If I run around the castle grounds, the king might spot

me.”

If Lars caught her running, he’d make her either speed up or do more laps. That’d just be annoying—it’d be impossible to train at her own pace. Shizuku had thought about setting traps on her running course, but the ordinary officers would end up getting ensnared, so that wasn’t an option, either.

“I want to see how it works,” Erik said, so the two of them went to a corner of the training ground.

“You jump like this. Watch.”

Shizuku started jumping over the rope, maintaining a good rhythm. Erik looked impressed. The soldiers and officers on the training ground, meanwhile, were blatantly ignoring her. Initially, when Shizuku had started jumping rope there, they’d given her some bewildered stares—as if they were watching a bizarre circus act. Recently, though, they seemed to have gotten used to it. A few officers had even approached her, asking Shizuku to teach them how it was done, and some had apparently been spotted jumping rope in the training ground from time to time.

Shizuku, who was starting to get slightly out of breath, paused for a moment.

“With the ropes from my world, I could do the double under and the crisscross, but it’s harder with this one,” she said, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

“Is this a form of physical labor in your world?” asked Erik earnestly.

“No,” replied Shizuku.

“It looks like a pretty intense full-body workout.”

“That’s the point! It’s for building stamina!”

“Do they convert the exercise into some sort of energy, then?”

“No! Don’t make it sound like I’m cranking a pulley or something.”

Shizuku liked the idea of being able to charge stuff by jumping rope, but it wasn’t intended for that sort of thing. She then took some time to explain that jump rope was both a leisure activity and a type of sport in her old world.

Erik, who’d finally grasped what it was, watched as Shizuku resumed her exercise routine.

“Then, it’s a cultural activity that’s ingrained in the people of your country from childhood?”

“Yeah, that’s right. There are even a few nursery rhymes that go along with it. People would sing those songs and jump in while the rope was going.”

“That sounds difficult. Is it really a children’s game?”

Erik’s skepticism was understandable. Shizuku had used to play jump rope with her sisters in front of their house all the time.

“Many schools have a sports competition called ‘long jump rope.’ Two people hold the ends of a much longer rope and swing it around. About thirty people line up inside the rope and jump in unison. If just one person gets caught in the rope, the swinging stops, so the pressure is intense. Incidentally, ‘long jump rope’ is used as a metaphor in Japan for any activity where one person’s failure can ultimately ruin an entire project—”

“You’re sure that’s a leisure activity?”

“Things that are supposed to be fun tend to transform into a form of grueling training once they’re integrated into the education system—and they usually combine them with some sort of moral lesson, too,” Shizuku concluded with a sense of irony, bundling up the rope and attaching it to her waist.

The exercise had significantly lifted Shizuku’s gloomy mood. The pair moved to the shade at the edge of the training ground and, after borrowing a rope and jumping for a little while by himself, Erik sat down by Shizuku’s side.

“So what’s up? Did something happen?”

“Oh…”

He must have asked that because of the way she was acting. Shizuku’s lips contorted as she struggled to force a smile.

“Do you think it’d be better for this world if this language disorder was completely eradicated? Its symptoms are so common in my world that it’s odd to me, the way people here view it as an abnormality and something to pity.”

“Ahh.”

Shizuku hadn’t grown up in a world with innate language skills, so she didn’t see a problem if people didn’t have them. To her, this

wasn’t a disease at all—just how things normally were. Yet if the disease was considered an object of pity in this world, her casual refusal to acknowledge it would just make her look like an arrogant outsider.

Shizuku gazed at the sunny sky. She remembered how alienating it was to feel like an outsider—something she’d almost forgotten as of late.

Meanwhile, the young man’s voice resonated through the air, sounding positive.

“We need to understand the cause and the progression of the disease before we can say whether or not it needs to be eradicated. Are there people in your world who have difficulty speaking?”

“Huh? Uhh… There are some people who have language development issues due to physical impediments, and if someone isn’t exposed to language while they’re growing up, they’ll have trouble with it. Most people end up being able to speak, though.”

“Is there a possibility that, depending on the way it’s taught, some people may not acquire language skills?”

“I…don’t think so. One of the books I brought talks a little about language acquisition in early childhood. It says that children naturally acquire language—specifically, gestures and facial expressions—by observing how adults associate words with objects and actions. That is why I think the sick children here would learn to speak more quickly if they were taught how—but even if they didn’t receive any education, they would eventually pick it up.”

This was just speculation, but Shizuku thought she was probably right. When she’d been living with Rio, the young girl had picked up the words Shizuku frequently used even though they hadn’t been part of their study curriculum.

Having heard Shizuku’s opinion, Erik nodded with a serious expression on his face.

“I understand. I guess there’s no urgent need to eradicate the disease, then. As time goes on, being born without innate language skills may even become the norm.”

“You’re right… Amazing!”

“What is?”

It was easy for Shizuku to accept that innate language was unnecessary, but for people in Erik's world, it was a hard idea to come to terms with. Putting herself in their shoes, Shizuku could understand the shock of losing something that was considered innate. If, one day, people suddenly had to train themselves to feel emotions, stand, or walk, she'd be thrown for a loop, too. She'd felt uneasy about Lera's response earlier, but that was normal for people in this world.

Yet despite that fact, Erik had suggested that this might become the norm one day.

He wasn't merely viewing things with a philosophic eye; his calm perspective and open-mindedness left Shizuku in awe.

"It's amazing how you're able to view things that way," Shizuku said. "Don't you see this disease as more of a problem?"

"Well, we still don't know what's causing it. Besides, unlike other mages, I don't think it has anything to do with the soul. If I'm able to prove that, their stance might become more flexible. But if this actually *is* a deficit of the soul, then it really will be a problem."

"Oh."

In order to demonstrate that the epidemic wasn't related to the soul, they'd need to reveal that, despite being from another world and having a different soul from people here, Shizuku was still blessed with innate language abilities. There were reasons to be hesitant about saying something like that, however, with no assurance that people would believe it.

The order to kill otherworldly individuals on sight had been passed down to Lars, yet he was reserving judgment on Shizuku, unaware of the very idea that multiple languages existed. The king believed that Shizuku's language was the same one that they spoke in his world, just as Erik had previously assumed. If he realized that Shizuku's native tongue was, in fact, different, he'd be sure to pursue her more aggressively. Ortea had handed Shizuku over to Lars following formal negotiations, and Shizuku had this act of diplomacy to thank for her safety—but she couldn't get too comfortable. In fact, when Shizuku had explained that language wasn't innate in her world, Lars had jumped down her throat,

questioning whether she'd played a part in the outbreak of the disease.

The young man who'd debated with Lars on Shizuku's behalf continued to speak, seemingly unfazed.

"We still don't have a full understanding of the soul. Magic helps us comprehend it to a certain extent, but even then, our knowledge is only superficial."

"Whoa. Sounds difficult. The soul dissolves when someone's body dies, right? Is there no way to capture it?"

If they could capture a soul unattached to a body, it could propel forward research encompassing every aspect of the subject.

At that moment, Shizuku wasn't taking her usual people-focused approach. She was more interested in pursuing all of the possibilities available to her, a trait common in researchers.

This suggestion brought a subtle smile to Erik's face.

"There is a way."

"There is?!"

"But it involves a forbidden spell."

"Oh. So it's not feasible…"

There was no way they could cast a forbidden spell. Once Shizuku had retained her composure somewhat, Erik expanded on his answer.

"Souls are incredibly powerful. Since time immemorial, many forbidden spells have used human souls as a source of power. There's even one case where a forbidden spell destroyed an entire nation by absorbing the souls of its people and scattering them across the continent."

"Wow. Why bother converting souls into power, though? Isn't magic power strong enough?"

"There are a number of cases in which…"

Erik suddenly trailed off, giving Shizuku a wide-eyed look. It was rare to see such an expression from him, and Shizuku tilted her head in bewilderment.

"What's wrong?"

"…Something just came to me. It's not exactly proof, but it might be a good reference. Let's go back to the lab," Erik said, calmly rising

to his feet.

Once he was back in the lab, he took several books from a shelf and began piling them up in his arms. Shizuku still didn't know what was going on, but she rushed over to help, taking some of them before they tumbled onto the floor. With Shizuku carrying five and Erik seven, they took the books over to their seats. Erik immediately opened one and started scanning the table of contents. As he did so, Shizuku nervously asked him a question.

"Uhh, what are we looking for?"

"Past cases. They're not exactly forbidden spells, but there are instances where mages have converted their own souls into power to compensate for their lack of magic. More than half of them died from losing their souls, but some did survive, though they suffered various medical conditions because of the parts of their souls they lost."

Shizuku gulped, realizing where this was going.

"Among those conditions, were there any…language impediments?"

"Not as far as I remember."

If language was inherently linked to the soul, losing the part of the soul that corresponded to it would have also resulted in the loss of language abilities. If there were no such cases, however, it could suggest that language was independent of the soul.

Of course, some people might argue that this didn't prove anything—that it was just a coincidence that no relevant examples existed. If things worked out, though, they could still challenge the common belief that language was linked to the soul.

Shizuku smiled, feeling optimistic. Then she noticed something else.

"All of those cases involve adults, don't they? Couldn't it be said that they were unaffected because they'd already acquired innate vocabulary?"

"You could say that. But there *is* a very famous case of children missing parts of their souls."

"A famous case?"

A hint of bitterness appeared across Erik's otherwise blank face.

Shizuku had a feeling that this wasn't going to be a pleasant story—and it turned out to be worse than she expected.

The story dated back to the Dark Age, a period of constant war and upheaval.

Many a nation rose and fell during this time of unceasing chaos.

In the eastern part of the continent, mages were referred to as "devil fiends" and shunned as vile people with abnormal powers.

Eventually, however, the persecuted mages started being used as tools of war. Capable of killing people using their powers alone, they became valuable assassins, and eastern nations began to corral them all.

In those times, the intricacies of magic configurations were not well understood, and people believed the sole determinant of a mage's superiority was the magnitude of their magical power.

The amount of magical power someone has is fixed at birth. No matter how many mages a country gathered, they were no match for a single individual who possessed immense magical power.

In order to make his country more powerful than its rivals, the king of one small nation performed an experiment—one so gruesome that it would go down in history. The goal of his experiment was to create children with artificially enhanced magical abilities.

The king captured fifty women and had them impregnated by male mages. In the final month of their pregnancies, he gathered the women in a hall and cast a forbidden spell, offering up the women's flesh and blood to enhance their children's magical powers.

In the end, this experiment proved both a success and a failure.

The forbidden curse invoked enormous magical power, taking the lives of most of the mothers. However, the children who were born immediately afterward had parts missing from their souls—another price paid for the spell.

Of the fifty children, nineteen died as soon as the experiment ended.

Thirteen survived until the age of three, while four of them made

it to the age of ten.

At the age of fifteen, the fourteen children that remained used their powers to destroy the country that created them.

These children, who were burdened by defective souls from the moment they were born, were all impaired in some way. Some were devoid of emotion, while others couldn't form memories. The one thing they all had in common, however, was the astonishing magical power they possessed.

"That experiment, which took place in Losten, led to the birth of the 'Children of the Calamity.' We don't know much about the kids who died immediately after being born, but the medical conditions suffered by the other thirty-one were all documented in detail. Their symptoms varied, but there were no instances of any of them suffering from language impediments. They're similar to what we saw in the other cases… What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," replied Shizuku, her voice shaky. "It's just such a horrific story… What a blatant disregard for human rights."

"At the time, mages in the east of the continent were treated more like weapons than people. There are lots of tales just like that."

Erik shrugged at Shizuku, who'd turned visibly pale.

It was part of the continent's dark history, and there was no changing the past. The world wouldn't be the way it was today if not for both the reproachable and commendable things that had come before.

Shizuku, meanwhile, was struggling to grasp what a soul really was. She couldn't imagine what an incomplete soul would be like.

Erik told Shizuku how the experiment had left one girl unable to cry because she didn't know sorrow. That anecdote made Shizuku feel more helpless than angry.

When Erik saw the grief on Shizuku's face, he smiled awkwardly.

"I'll compile some information on other forbidden curse-induced impairments that relate to damaged souls. I'll take a look at that thesis you brought with you, too."

"Oh, there's no rush. Thanks."

Shizuku forced a smile as she said goodbye. With that, she left the laboratory.

There was a warm breeze blowing in the courtyard. Shizuku looked up at the blue sky.

The sky watched over the entire continent, yet it wasn't connected to her old world, nor her past. No matter how hard she worked, how hard she struggled, she could only change the present and the future.

The world was vast, yet not unlimited.

As Shizuku contemplated her place in this world, she held out her small hands toward the bright white sun.

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Shizuku carefully wrote the words next to the illustrations, which were drawn in pale colors. The sentences Shizuku had prepared were simple, and after a week of drafting and revising her picture book, she was finally happy with it.

She took another look at the rough draft in her notebook as she added short passages to every page, then waited patiently for the ink to dry.

"Okay, there we go."

After reviewing the completed draft, Shizuku wrapped it in paper. Next, she handed it to the official she was sharing a lab with and asked to have it bound.

It was only a prototype, but if the children reacted positively to it, the storybook would go into mass production. The same thing had happened with the educational flashcards she'd created before. Shizuku had never actually witnessed the production process, but she knew there were several ways of mass-producing written materials in her new world.

They used letterpress printing for monochrome, text-only books, but different methods were used for picture books. If a small number were being produced, a scribe could hand-copy the illustrations, but it was time-consuming and costly to create

something of such high quality. As such, the original work was usually given to artisans so they could make woodcut or lithograph prints based on the designs.

When Shizuku first heard this, she asked if they ever used silk screen printing, but the official just looked bewildered. It didn't seem like fabric-based printing was a thing—or at least, not in Farsas, anyway. To Shizuku, silk screen printing seemed easier than a planographic printing method like lithography, but maybe that was just a cultural difference.

She gathered together the rough sketches of a golden toad she'd drawn and tucked them under her arm.

"Okay, I'm going to get some lunch," she announced.

"All right. Take care," the official replied.

It was a little late to be having lunch, but as long as she met her work quota, Shizuku could be wherever she wanted whenever she wanted. Only researchers like Shizuku were allowed this flexibility—officials and officers adhered to strict schedules, arriving and leaving at the same time every day.

According to Erik, there were two types of royal court mages: those who studied magic, attended lectures, and carried out miscellaneous tasks, and those who were confined to research labs. Erik and Harve, who was also a court mage, had once split their time between both roles, but lately they had been fully dedicated to research.

As a result, their schedules were relatively liberal.

Once Shizuku got back to her room, she took out the lunch Mea had prepared for her and sliced into the tender, slow-cooked pork.

"Are you finished with work for now?" the demon girl asked.

"Yeah. I finished one of my tasks, at least. I have more to do, though."

The root vegetable soup was extremely delicious. Shizuku put a potato infused with flavor on her spoon and stuffed it into her mouth. Mea, who was sharing the meal with her, smiled.

"Make sure you take some time to rest. You've been staying up so late, Master."

"Huh? You think so? I thought I'd been going to bed early."

"Not at all. Study is important, but so is your health."

Shizuku didn't think she'd been staying up late, but apparently Mea had. The young girl's stern reminder brought a wry smile to Shizuku's face.

"Okay. I'll be more careful."

Shizuku somberly bowed her head. Her assistant demon looked worried, but this expression was soon replaced by a coy smile after Shizuku swiftly complimented her cooking.

"Are you going back to the research lab this afternoon, Master?"

"Hmm, I need to go and meet with the king. I have to give him regular updates on my progress."

Shizuku's direct superior was Leuticia, but she was also required to provide regular updates to King Lars. This was probably his way of reassuring himself that he wasn't being too easy on her. His unchanged attitude still angered Shizuku, but she chose not to complain. She'd come to accept that was just the way things were.

Mea handed Shizuku a cup of tea.

"Apparently, there have been loads of demonic spirit sightings in the north recently. One of the royal family's spirits mentioned it."

"Demonic spirits? That sounds like something out of a video game," Shizuku said, giving Mea an unintentionally silly response. She still didn't fully understand what demonic spirits were. Obviously, she knew that Mea was a kind of demon, but she didn't seem demonic at all; the scariest thing Shizuku had encountered so far was a giant snake from a forbidden curse, not a "demonic spirit." She couldn't quite grasp the reality of what Mea was saying.

Shizuku's assistant demon, who was taking the form of a young girl, gave her carefree master a warning.

"There are wards protecting the castle, so weak demons can't get in, but you still need to be careful."

"Okay. Thank you."

Shizuku wanted to avoid coming face to face with anything scary, whatever form it took.

As it turned out, Lars brought up a similar subject during their meeting that afternoon.

“—Demonic spirits? What kind?”

“Loads of different kinds. Some pretty crazy ones, for example.”

“I have no idea what you mean by that,” remarked Shizuku, responding nonchalantly to the king’s vague explanation.

She clutched the documents she’d finished telling him about to her chest.

Although she’d put a lot of effort into preparing this report for him, it was over in five minutes. For some reason, Lars then suggested they “go for a run,” a proposal which Shizuku declined. In the end, they met halfway and ended up taking a walk outside instead.

The sky was cloudy, but it was warm enough. Shizuku looked up at the leaves swaying in the wind.

“I thought you enjoyed a good fight, Your Majesty. Don’t worry about leaving the castle.”

“I left pretty recently, though.”

“It’s fine—Princess Leuticia is here. I’ll get to enjoy a brief moment of peace as well.”

“You look cheerful already. I haven’t even decided to go yet.”

Without shifting his gaze, which was fixed straight ahead, Lars tried to pat Shizuku on the head, but she sensed it and stepped aside.

According to the king, there had been an increasing number of demonic spirit sightings in the northern towns of Farsas. These spirits appeared at night and attacked people, but they weren’t especially strong, so the town’s guards were managing to deal with them by themselves. Still, the fact that they were showing up so frequently sparked speculation that they might have a nest or something similar in the area.

Shizuku glanced at the longsword hanging at Lars’s waist.

“A nuisance like this will be child’s play for Akashia, right?”

Akashia, the royal sword of Farsas, was famed for being exceptionally powerful against magic and demons. The weapon had been passed down through generations of kings and had numerous legends surrounding it, including one where the king himself went out to hunt witches at the request of a foreign nation.

It was hard to imagine someone like Lars bending to the demands of another country, but Shizuku was sure he'd stand on the front lines if there was internal strife in Farsas.

A renowned swordsman, the king sounded more irritated than scared.

"If I knew where their nest was, I'd head straight there. It just annoys me that we don't know its location. It'd be easier to kill them if they came straight to me, just like you did."

"I didn't come to Farsas to get killed by you, you know."

"Even if I wanted to send someone else in my place, the only ones able to use Akashia are me and that guy. Lettie doesn't like holding it because it prevents her from using magic."

"Why are you pretending not to hear me? Don't try to pass your job off to someone from another country."

By "that guy," he was probably talking about the king of Rozsark, who'd recently made an appearance at Weisuz Fortress. He was apparently a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal line, although that information hadn't been made public. The king of Rozsark didn't seem to want to reveal his connection to Farsas, either, in part because of the infighting that had gone on among the direct descendants of Farsas up until their parents' generation.

After thinking these things through, Shizuku posed a question to Lars, who was walking a step ahead.

"Does Akashia only work when it's wielded by a direct descendant of Farsas?"

"No. Anyone can bring out its power."

"Huh? Why does it have to be a direct descendant, then?"

"Wanna find out?"

The look in the king's eyes wasn't a benevolent one—not by any stretch of the imagination. Shizuku shook her head.

"No, I'm fine actually. Just forget it."

"Okay, come over here."

"You really don't listen, do you…?"

Lars started walking toward a side gate of the castle, beckoning Shizuku to follow. The guards who were stationed there stood at attention and saluted.

“Open the gate,” Lars demanded.

The iron gate was large—although not as large as the castle’s main gate—and once it was open, the two of them went and stood on the stone bridge spanning the moat.

“Now take this.”

“Okay… Uh, are you sure?”

Lars was offering Akashia to her. The sword was unsheathed and he was handing it to her by the hilt, but Shizuku was too overwhelmed to grab it. She was frozen in shock.

“What’s wrong? Hurry up and take it,” the king commanded, sounding annoyed.

“Easier said than done… I feel scared. Or nervous, rather.”

The double-edged longsword was polished like a mirror. Despite all the blood it had shed over the years, it gleamed like a newly forged weapon. Shizuku swallowed hard, remembering when she’d faced the blade head-on.

This time, its point wasn’t even directed at her, yet it still evoked a fear Shizuku couldn’t erase. Her body wouldn’t move, and she didn’t feel like herself anymore. She could feel her heart begin to pound, and the tightness in her chest made her gasp for breath.

“Come on, take it. Hurry up,” Lars commanded once more. There was a hint of iciness in his voice.

Bracing herself, Shizuku grasped the hilt of the longsword.

The royal sword possessed mysterious powers. If someone who wasn’t a direct descendant of the royal family touched it, Shizuku imagined they might get an electric shock or some similar punishment.

That thought fleetingly crossed her mind—but in reality, the only thing she felt from the sword was its hefty weight. It was heavier than she’d expected. In a panic, Shizuku lifted the tip, worried it was going to hit the stone paving below, and placed her left hand on the back of the blade to steady it.

She let out a single sigh, then looked up at Lars.

“I’m holding it.”

“Good. Now try slicing through this barrier.”

“Huh?!”

Shizuku was astonished. Lars pointed at an empty area in front of the gate.

"The castle wards are just here," he said, but that didn't tell Shizuku anything. She still had no idea where they were.

Shizuku readied the hefty sword. Although she wasn't wearing a blindfold, she felt as if she was about to take a swing at a piñata.

"Your Majesty! The sword's pretty heavy! It's hard enough just holding it up!"

"Is that right? Oh, then continue straight ahead."

"This way?"

"A little more to the right. Yeah, that's it. Okay, now strike."

Shizuku channeled all of her strength into her trembling arms. She somehow managed to lift the longsword up, then took a step forward and swung it back down, relying on its weight to help her. For a brief moment, she felt a strange sensation course through her body.

Unsure what the feeling signified, she almost asked Lars about it—but before she got the chance, an agonizing pain ran up her palms.

"Ahhh, hot!"

Shizuku reflexively dropped the sword, but that was the least of her troubles. The pain was so severe it felt like she'd stuck her hands into raging flames, and she screamed in agony.

"It burns! It burns! Oww!"

Shizuku wanted to cool her hands down in running water, but there was nothing of the sort nearby. As her eyes welled with tears, Lars approached her from behind.

"You wanna cool down?"

Shizuku had a bad feeling about what was going to happen. She automatically turned around, feeling something akin to déjà vu.

Before she had the chance to think, she grabbed the man's outstretched hand with both of her own. The king's eyes widened.

"I'm not falling for that!" Shizuku yelled.

The king tried to push her into the moat—so she yanked him by that very hand, putting all her body weight into it.

And, just as expected, the two of them tumbled into the moat

together.

In Japanese, the phrase “a nice guy dripping with water” is frequently used to describe a good-natured, handsome guy. The man standing in front of Shizuku, however, was the total opposite of “good-natured,” regardless of how favorably she tried to look at him.

Lars cast aside his soaking-wet jacket, picked up his sword, and resheathed it. Then he glanced back at Shizuku, who also looked like a drowned rat.

“Nicely done. It’s been fifteen years since I fell into the moat.”

“Someone pushed me in there five months ago, so it’s a more recent experience for me.”

“You said your hands were burning, so I was just trying to help you cool down.”

“And I thought *you* needed to cool your head,” responded Shizuku frankly.

She stared at her hands. The skin had gone red, but it didn’t look like they were badly burned.

“I thought it’d leave burns… What the heck were you trying to do to me?”

“Isn’t it more helpful to experience something for yourself? If somebody who’s not directly descended from the royal family wields Akashia and comes into contact with magical power or a magic spell, heat is emitted from the handle and blade.”

“You could have just told me that.”

Why did she have to get hurt and soaked with water when an explanation would’ve sufficed?

Lars, meanwhile, didn’t seem perturbed in the slightest. He was busy getting the water out of his hair.

“Anyway,” he said without a hint of apology, “that concludes our meeting for today. I’ll see you again in two weeks.”

“There’s no way you’re getting me to go outside next time!”

“That sounds pretty unhealthy.”

“Gahhh! You can’t bully your underlings like this!”

Shizuku’s heartfelt scream had no effect on Lars, who merely

waved a hand dismissively as he walked away, eyes fixed ahead. His infuriatingly poised demeanor made Shizuku scowl.

"Your Majesty… You were testing me, weren't you?"

Lars didn't reply. He didn't turn around, nor stop. Yet his silence only served to confirm Shizuku's suspicions.

Why had he made her experience something that he could have explained with words?

He'd probably suspected that holding Akashia would prompt Shizuku to reveal her "true nature." Shizuku picked up the parcel her documents were in, which she'd managed to toss onto the bridge.

"Oh well. It's not every day I get to even the score."

If she let something that insignificant anger her, she wouldn't be able to cope with life in the castle. Besides, this time, it hadn't been an obvious display of hostility nor an attempt to harm her. Maybe the king had started to trust her a little more, just like she'd grown a thicker skin.

Aware that she was being overly optimistic, Shizuku tidied up her soaked belongings and jogged back to her room.

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The three weeks Shizuku had spent back in Farsas so far had been very different from her days in Kisk. She didn't feel like she was under constant pressure anymore—but even so, the time seemed to be flying by.

Shizuku was walking down a familiar long corridor, holding the prototype of her second picture book.

Before arriving in this world, she hadn't read many fantasy novels, so she didn't know how stories about people traveling to other worlds typically ended. She had no idea if time in her old world was passing at the same speed, or if it had stopped entirely. Maybe decades had gone by, like in the Japanese folktale of Urashima Taro.

"It takes seven years before they declare someone legally missing, right…? So I have six more years to go," she murmured to herself.

If time worked the same way in both worlds, it would almost be a year since she'd arrived.

That wasn't a short period of time by any means.

Shizuku wondered if her family was still looking for her or if they'd already given up. Either way, she felt guilty. The days she'd spent living at home felt so distant, but every time she thought of her family, a dark cloud of anxiety seemed to descend over her. Recently, Shizuku's past self—the one who'd struggled with sibling rivalry and finding her own identity—had begun to feel like a distant memory.

Since entering university—and especially since coming to this new world—she'd been eager to become her ideal version of herself. In reality, however, navigating her hectic everyday life, she'd developed a new identity without even realizing it. When she thought about how nearly everyone she knew called her stubborn, a wry smile spread across her face.

"I guess that's the kind of person I've become, Umi," Shizuku said, but there was no way that her words would reach her sister's ears. Tinged with sentimentality, they drifted to the floor of the white corridor, and she walked over them with heavy steps.

Shizuku might not know how to get back home, but she was still happy. She was more than blessed by her circumstances.

"All right," she said, forcing a smile as she stood in front of the laboratory she'd been heading toward.

This room was for children with language impediments. She knocked on the door and stepped inside. It looked like a daycare center, with children playing on the soft mats that covered the floor, and toys and learning materials scattered around them.

Lera had apparently gathered the kids together to speak to them and hear what they had to say. The moment she saw Shizuku, she stood up.

"Hello. Is something the matter?" she asked.

"I brought the prototype of my picture book."

Shizuku offered Lera the book, which was wrapped in paper, and the other woman took it from her with a smile.

"Would you like some tea?"

Shizuku didn’t really have a reason to decline, so she and Lera took a break while the children played right beside them.

Holding her white mug in both hands, Shizuku looked around. She wanted to ask what kind of experiments they were conducting here, but even if she did, she didn’t know whether she’d understand the answer. She puzzled over whether to raise the subject while they made small talk, but in the end, it was Lera who mentioned it first.

“We still haven’t achieved any notable results… And Erik… He’s an acquaintance of yours, yes? He proposed a new idea. He suggested that there might not be a link between souls and innate language skills. Since then, the opinions of my colleagues have become divided, which has made things a lot harder.”

“Oh.”

Two weeks had gone by since Shizuku had given Erik that thesis, and it seemed like he’d already shared his thoughts regarding the idea that the language impediment might be caused by a missing part of the soul. Lera gazed at the papers at the edge of the table with a slightly troubled look in her eyes.

“If it’s unrelated to the soul, then what else could it be? Personally, I think that wild idea has only complicated the situation further.”

“Erik’s right, though.”

Innate language skills weren’t reliant on the soul.

Shizuku knew that better than anyone. Her blunt rebuttal made Lera’s crimson lips part in surprise, but she quickly pasted a smile back on her face.

“You’re not a mage, so perhaps you don’t truly understand. It’s likely just a coincidence that a deficit in the soul didn’t lead to language impediments in the cases Erik put forward.”

“Perhaps, but if you support the possibility that the absence of language impairment symptoms is coincidental, you must also explore the possibility that souls and language are *not* connected. Both possibilities are impossible to prove conclusively.”

Shizuku’s statement left Lera fumbling for words. She clearly hadn’t seen it coming. As Shizuku forced a smile, Lera awkwardly took a sip of her tea, then shifted her gaze away and changed the

subject as she watched the children play.

"Oh yes, I meant to tell you how fascinating your previous picture book was. It had a bit of a unique feel to it… How did you come up with the idea of an immortal toad?"

"Oh, that one was based on a true story from Medial."

"Hm? Really?"

The first picture book Shizuku had created was already in mass production. Shizuku smiled awkwardly as Lera reacted with shock.

"I did change the ending a little, but it's true. In reality, the king didn't drive the toad away—he swallowed it. Later, during a garden party, he fell off a boat floating in the lake and drowned…but obviously, I couldn't put that in a children's book."

"You've…really done your research. Where did you learn about that incident?"

"*Where*?"

Shizuku found this an odd question to ask. She hadn't heard that story in one specific place. It was just one of those things that she instinctively knew.

Even so, the question made Shizuku feel vaguely uneasy, and she cocked her head to one side.

Why do I know such a strange story?

Something similar had happened numerous times before. Yet no matter how deep she tried to dig, she never found an answer. She couldn't identify how she'd absorbed that knowledge—in the same way that people in Shizuku's new world took language for granted.

"…What's wrong?"

Lera's voice brought Shizuku straight back to reality. How long had she been out of it? Her teacup was empty.

Shizuku rose to her feet, flustered.

"I-I'm sorry. I have to go."

"Oh, I'm sorry for keeping you. Thank you for the picture book."

Lera escorted Shizuku out into the corridor. As Shizuku bowed, Lera gave her a self-deprecating smile.

"Umm… I'm sorry for the way I acted earlier. I must be tired. My experiments aren't yielding the results I was hoping for at all…"

"I understand. Don't worry. You have nothing to apologize for."

When Shizuku had been living with Rio, she'd often felt frustrated and anxious when things didn't go as planned.

In comparison, Lera's behavior had been much more composed and mature. Shizuku felt like she was the one who'd overreacted, which she felt bad about. The mages involved in experimental research faced anguish that nobody else could understand—especially when they didn't achieve the results they wanted.

As Shizuku was leaving, Lera looked down, anxiety clear in her eyes.

"To be honest with you, it doesn't matter to me whether souls are the cause of it or not. I just want this disease to be eradicated as soon as possible… My sister is pregnant at the moment."

Having said that, Lera waved to Shizuku and returned to her experiments.

Everybody had their own thoughts and desires. Sometimes, people's feelings inevitably clashed, but they were all still determined to make progress.

Feeling both unsettled and strangely relieved, Shizuku walked back the way she came.

That night, however, she had a different kind of encounter. One that was far more chilling.

※

The first part of the thesis that Erik received from Shizuku began with a mythological analysis—dissecting the meeting of the god Aetea and his future wife, Ludia.

According to the story, the god visited a village deep in a huge forest, asking for help. All of the villagers ignored him—with one exception. Ludia, the woman who would later become his wife, was the only person to converse with him.

Generally, people said that the tale of their marriage highlighted the importance of mutual understanding between married couples, to emphasize the sincerity and uniqueness of the god's wife. This thesis, however, concluded that the villagers did not actually ignore

the god—they had simply been unable to understand him.

In the same way that Erik hadn't been able to understand when Shizuku spoke English or German, the villagers found the god's words incomprehensible. Only the young Ludia had had the patience to communicate with Aetea until they were able to understand each other.

"Does that mean a common innate language had not yet been established in the era that this legend took place…?"

Erik was back in his room contemplating what he'd read. This hypothesis partially aligned with a question that had been nagging at him for some time.

There was a clear cutoff point in the written culture of the continent.

For some reason, there were no written records from before a fixed time in history—roughly a hundred years before the beginning of the Dark Age.

It wouldn't be surprising if these ancient writings had simply been lost over time. That said, it was strange that there wasn't even a record of any books or documents that might have existed. The continent was huge—and back then, it was far from unified. There had been many tiny, disjointed countries, yet for some reason, none of them had retained any written records. It was as if they'd all unanimously decided to leave nothing behind. Even small settlements that barely qualified as countries were devoid of any written records.

From Erik's perspective, there was only one possible explanation for this: They'd been deliberately disposed of.

They hadn't just disposed of a few risky documents, either, but every piece of writing on the continent. What could have motivated such a thing?

Erik had considered this a possibility before, but he'd never been able to work out a reason behind it. As a result, he'd kept his theories to himself.

The hypothesis presented in the thesis, however, gave him some extra context to chew on.

"Did they dispose of the documents…to hide the fact that people

spoke different languages?”

If that were true, it would also explain why legends from the early days of the continent only existed in oral form. All books that had survived were written in the continent’s common language, and everything predating it had been expunged, allowing only oral legends to persist.

As a result, people had understandably come to believe that all humans spoke the same innate language. If only one language was understood, nobody would ever suspect that there had originally been many different ones.

“But then…”

Erik ran his hand through his hair, a bitter expression on his face.

If his hypothesis was correct, spreading the innate language throughout the world must have required extraordinary power.

Not only had everybody started speaking the same innate language, but all traces of the original languages had been erased. This wasn’t a feat humans could accomplish, even by the most conservative of estimates. It was the kind of feat only a god could achieve, just as the thesis suggested.

Erik pondered this extraordinary problem for a while. Then, after he’d collected himself once more, he reached for the next page of the thesis.

At that moment, however, there was a knock at the door.

It wasn’t nighttime exactly, but it was late enough for everyone to have finished their work and gone back to their rooms.

“Yes?” Erik responded.

A faint voice came from the other side of the door.

“Erik, do you have a moment…?”

“Oh, it’s you. What’s the matter?”

When he unlocked the door, he saw a short woman standing in the dark corridor.

“I—I have a favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

“Will you…keep me company for the night?”

Her voice was shaking slightly. When Erik realized her narrow shoulders were also trembling, he scowled.

He fell silent for a few seconds, then asked a straightforward question.

"Why?"

Farsas was warm all year round, but the nights could still get pretty chilly at certain times of the year.

Shizuku had seemingly run over in just her nightclothes. She was trembling, but not because of the cold. The night reflected in her black eyes as she glanced up at Erik.

"I—I don't remember anything. I should have been asleep, but Mea said I was up and reading a book…"

"Slow down. What's the matter?"

Shizuku wasn't acting like her usual self at all. Erik took her shivering, outstretched hand and placed a hand on her shoulder, then led her into his room. He got her to put on his coat and offered her a chair.

"Try to calm down. Did something happen?"

He spoke slowly, as if he were talking to a child. His gentle, familiar voice seemed to help Shizuku regain some of her composure, and a more rational expression returned to her face.

She didn't know. She couldn't tell when it had all started.

Shizuku had only realized something was wrong after returning to Farsas. It had been three weeks since she'd started sharing her room with Mea. The young girl had warned her to stop staying up so late on several occasions, but Shizuku didn't think she was. She was just pleased that Mea cared enough to caution her about it—so recently, she'd started going to bed right after taking a bath.

That day, however, the topic of staying up late had come up again. It wasn't unusual for Mea to worry about her master's health, so Shizuku just smiled awkwardly.

"I've been going to bed straight after my bath lately," she reassured her.

Mea, however, replied with an unexpected complaint.

“But you always wake up again and read a book for hours.”

“You don’t have any recollection of reading that book?” asked Erik, who’d now grasped the situation.

Shizuku shook her head.

“I don’t remember anything. I thought I was asleep the whole time… But Mea says that when she talks to me, I respond exactly like I normally would. She doesn’t understand what’s wrong either…”

That was why Shizuku had come to Erik and asked him to stay with her. She hoped that he might know something about her sleepwalking-like behavior.

Erik thought things over for a moment, unable to make a decision on the spot.

Of course, Shizuku might just be sleepwalking. But if so, would she respond normally? Erik also considered the possibility that she was being targeted by psychological magic. He touched the earring hanging from his right ear.

“Is Mea in your room?”

“Yes. Before I left, I told her I was going to ask you for advice.”

“Okay. Then I’ll join you in your room.”

If Shizuku was doing things she couldn’t remember almost every night, it’d be quickest for him to see it in action. As Erik tidied up his desk and got to his feet, Shizuku looked visibly relieved. Erik patted her on the head.

“Another thing. When you find yourself in a situation like this, you shouldn’t come here by yourself. Get Mea to come and fetch me. I don’t want you walking alone at night.”

“But I don’t want Mea to walk around at night, either. I thought it’d be better to rush over quickly myself.”

“Mea is stronger than you,” Erik asserted bluntly, apparently surprised as well.

Did Shizuku view Mea as a little bird or a young girl just because she appeared that way?

“I’m sorry,” Shizuku said, hanging her head despondently.

When Erik walked Shizuku back to her room, Mea—who’d been

waiting there, stumped—appeared visibly relieved. The assistant demon greeted Erik and served him some tea. Meanwhile, Shizuku, following Erik's instructions, lay on her back on the bed.

Mea bowed by her master's bedside.

"I'm sorry, Master. I didn't realize…"

"Don't apologize. I seemed normal, so I can't blame you."

Erik placed his hand on Shizuku's forehead.

"I'm going to put you to sleep. Are you ready?"

"Go ahead."

Erik started chanting gently. Power flowed into Shizuku's body. Her eyelids grew heavy, and she began to drift out of consciousness.

Shizuku began to sleep, her breathing slow and regular. But about ten minutes after Erik had started drinking his tea, she woke up again, just as Mea had claimed.

Shizuku combed her bangs back with her fingers.

She gazed at the ceiling for a moment, then slowly sat up. That was when she noticed Erik and Mea were observing her every move.

"Huh? What's going on?"

There was nothing unusual about her expression or tone. Mea looked flustered, unsure what to think. Erik, meanwhile, swallowed a mouthful of tea and went back to normal.

"Nothing. I just came to hang out."

"Huh? You startled me."

"Sorry. I'm just reading a book, so carry on as normal."

He started leafing through an English-Japanese dictionary. Shizuku cocked her head to one side. She got down from the bed, put on her jacket, and took a book of her own out of the bookshelf. It was dark blue and had no writing on the cover. As far as Erik knew, it wasn't one she'd brought from her world.

Shizuku sat back down on her bed and opened the book. There was no bookmark in it, but she seemed to immediately know how far she'd read. Shizuku found her page, then glanced down at the text. Erik looked up from his dictionary and observed her intently.

He could hear her turning the pages at regular intervals. She was

reading the thick book without any difficulty, despite the fact that it wasn't from her world. Sitting there with the book, Shizuku definitely didn't look like anyone but herself.

Erik watched her for a while, then tapped the table lightly with his fingers.

"Shizuku."

"Yes?"

"What are you reading?"

"A history book."

"You can read it?"

"Yeah."

Shizuku looked suspicious, as if she didn't understand why he was asking this. Then she shut the book and tried to come over to Erik—but he stopped her with a hand.

"Stay there… Where did you get it?"

"Seilené gave it to me, back in Kisk. I think she brought it with her from Rozsark."

"Why did she give it to you?"

"…I don't know. She said she didn't want Farsas getting its hands on it, so maybe that's why."

"Farsas? What did she mean by that?"

"…I don't know."

Shizuku still seemed confused. It was as if some sort of strange creature had climbed inside her head and was rattling around in there. The look in her eyes was just as uneasy as it had been before she'd fallen asleep.

"What does it say in that book? What part are you reading now?"

"Right now, I'm reading about how the disgraced king of Farsas descended into madness sixty years ago."

"Does it say who killed Dysral?"

"It just says he was killed by 'it.'"

That told Erik everything he needed to know.

He let out a deep sigh. All contemporary official records stated that Dysral had been killed by his younger brother, Rodeus, but the truth written in the royal family's sealed records was different. The one who'd killed the murderous, mad king was someone Erik had

been curious about—an "unnamed direct descendant of the line of Farsas." That man had likely wielded the cursed artifact made in this world, spoken of by Lars. Created to counter the cursed artifacts belonging to the interlopers, its powers defied established convention.

This was a fact that only the royal family and Erik—who'd sorted the sealed records—were supposed to know. And yet, here was a book that revealed the truth.

There was only one conclusion this could lead to: There was more than one book that contained the secrets of history.

"That should have been obvious, now that I think about it…"

The continent's history spanned over a thousand years. There was too much to squeeze into just one volume, no matter how thick it was. The red book they were searching for wasn't the only book of secrets—there were a number of them.

Erik clicked his tongue, frustrated that he hadn't considered this possibility before.

This book was probably a cursed artifact—the very thing they'd been searching for all this time, hoping it would provide the key to help Shizuku return home.

What kind of effect had it had on her? Her vacant eyes roamed about as she sat with the book propped up on her knees.

"Erik, I've been feeling scared recently," she said.

"Scared? Why?"

"I know things I'm not supposed to, and I don't remember how I learned them. I can't remember this book."

It didn't look like Shizuku was suffering from a split personality. She seemed like her usual self—both now and when she'd come to Erik's room. Hearing her speak about her fears, she didn't seem to distinguish between the two versions of herself, either.

Erik calmed his racing thoughts and asked her a question.

"But you remember now?"

"Yes, for now."

"Do you know where that book came from?"

"It came from the floating city outside this world."

Erik gulped, having predicted this answer. This almost confirmed

that the mysterious book was a cursed artifact made by the interlopers.

"Is that book controlling you?" he asked, trying not to let his impatience show in his voice.

"Is it controlling me…? No, I don't think so. The book only exists to be read. Nobody wants it to control anybody."

"What's its desired purpose, then?"

"To record and preserve the history of this world," she said with a deep sigh. For a moment, Shizuku looked like a weary old woman.

That illusion dissipated as soon as she lifted her face and looked at him, though. She had the same lost look in her eyes as when they'd first met in that dark library.

"Erik, I'm scared."

"I know."

Her outstretched arms were trembling.

Erik stood up and wrapped his arms around her, gently patting her narrow back.

How long has she been feeling scared?

During the daytime, Shizuku had been suspicious of the knowledge she wasn't supposed to possess, and at nighttime, she was being controlled by the mysterious book.

She had been living this double life for a long time, and no one had noticed—not even Shizuku herself.

She pressed her face against Erik like a weeping child.

"Can I take this?" he whispered, stroking her head.

For the time being, he needed to separate her from that book. It was undeniable that it was having some kind of effect on her—but when Shizuku heard his suggestion, she looked incredibly apprehensive.

"But then you'll be…"

"It's fine. I'm just going to take a look at it. If I ever feel like I'm in danger, I'll keep my distance, but it's better for you not to have it."

Shizuku's eyes widened.

They had probably never looked at each other this closely before. Erik looked deep into her eyes, trying to read something from them.

As Shizuku gazed up at him, her brown-tinted black eyes looked

like a melting pot of emotions, something that seemed like a mixture of anxiety, loss, fear, and sadness.

Erik took the book from where it was pressed against her thigh and placed it at his feet. Shizuku tried to follow it with her eyes, but he blocked her view and lifted her onto the bed. He got her to lie down and placed his palm gently over her eyelids, just like he had when he put her under the sleeping spell.

"Go on, get some proper rest. I'll take care of everything else."

"Erik…"

He crafted a spell far more potent than the previous one and channeled it into Shizuku. Her lips moved as she searched for the words to say.

The few seconds before the spell took effect felt like an eternity. Time seemed to move so slowly as Shizuku tried to shake off whatever was pursuing her. Her throat moved, and a feeble whisper escaped her lips.

Erik watched as Shizuku finally let go of her anxiety and fell into a deep sleep, an inescapable bitterness lingering within him.

But that wasn't everything.

Shizuku had said one last thing before giving in to sleep:

"There are three books."





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Shizuku had woken up to this particular surprise several times before, but seeing it that day was a shock.

Clutching her groggy head, she called out to the man who was sitting in a chair reading a book.

"Erik…?"

"Oh. Good morning."

"Huh? Uh… Did you stay up all night?! I'm so sorry!"

"It's nothing to worry about. I was just reading."

The previous night, Shizuku's fear surrounding her strange situation had driven her to ask for Erik's help, but she'd never expected him to stay up all night. She leaped out of bed in a panic and bowed her head.

Mea was also in the room, and she was just serving Erik his breakfast. It wasn't clear whether she'd slept or not. As Shizuku's assistant demon left the room, she said, "I'll bring some for you, too, Master."

Once she was gone, Shizuku turned back to Erik.

"S-so what happened?"

"Nothing. You slept fine."

"Aghhhhh, I'm so sorry!"

Shizuku squatted down and covered her face, which had instantly turned bright red. It was extremely embarrassing that Erik had watched her all night and nothing had ended up happening. She wanted to roll around on the floor in agony.

"I-I'll make it up to you someday…"

"You don't have to. It's no big deal."

Erik was sipping his tea and reading a navy-blue book. Once he finished his light breakfast, he stood up, casually raising the book to show it to Shizuku.

"Well, I'm going to borrow this. Let me know if anything happens."

"Oh, okay! Thank you!"

The man showed no sign of exhaustion or discontent as he left, and she watched him go, holding her reddened cheeks. When Mea came back, Shizuku frowned with confusion.

"That book he borrowed… Is that one of mine?"

The answer to that question had already submerged itself deep inside Shizuku. She had no memory of what had happened and no way to recall it.

Mea smiled sadly.

"Come now, Master, please have something to eat. I'm sure you have another busy day ahead of you."

And with that, another uneventful day began.

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A new paper cover had been put on the navy-blue book.

Erik had made it from some paper he'd found to hide the leather cover. Putting paper covers on books wasn't customary in Erik's world, but he'd made a number of them by now, having been inspired by the ones he'd seen on books from Shizuku's world.

Erik carried on reading in the privacy of his room, summarizing the contents of the book on paper as he went. He organized the information into a table, noting which country and what time in history each part of the book referred to, while skim-reading the detailed passages.

Deciding to take a rest after finishing a chapter, he closed his weary eyes.

"I should have known there was more than one book…"

He'd realized there were gaps in this book's knowledge as he'd been making his notes. It wasn't that specific countries, regions, or eras were missing entirely; accounts of a time period would describe events that occurred in certain countries and omit those that happened elsewhere, while particular eras of a country's history might be covered and others ignored. Such haphazard and incomplete coverage was unusual for a history book.

Regardless, the contents *were* arranged in chronological order.

Erik had managed to confirm that much, even though there was no table of contents or index.

"The missing sections must be in another book…"

He knew about the red book, at least. Erik tried to discern a pattern that linked the omitted sections, but he had yet to find one. It was as if pieces of history had been picked at random, like children fighting over a bowl of candies trying to grab whatever treats they could get.

Still, there were two things that were undeniably intriguing.

Firstly, some of the accounts from ancient times contradicted one another.

The earliest sections of the book—which dated to around a century before the Dark Age—were among the oldest known records. Multiple contradictory versions of these accounts appeared, spanning a period of roughly eleven hundred years that ended about three centuries ago.

The very beginning of the book, for example, claimed that an elder brother had ascended the throne after a succession dispute, whereas the second time this story was told had the younger brother stealing the throne from his brother. The last of the several different versions most closely aligned with the "history" Erik knew.

There weren't just one or two contradictory accounts, either. The majority of the first half of the book was filled with them. There were no page numbers, so it was hard to know for sure, but it also seemed to have a lot more pages than one would expect at first glance. If someone who didn't know about the book read it, it would come off as a confusing mix of historical records, some hypothetical and some true.

Erik, however, had an idea as to why things were so incomprehensible.

"Could these be…erased experiments?"

The owner of the missing red book claimed that the continent was a testing ground, and that the books chronicled experiments that had been erased from history.

If these were records of such experiments, it meant that history had been repeatedly overwritten. It seemed like these experiments

had ended about three hundred years ago, as only one version of each historical event was reported from that point onward, but even if it had happened in the distant past, it was unsettling to think that history had been manipulated.

Staring at a spell diagram on the page, Erik let out a frustrated sigh. There was no record of a forbidden curse like that in Farsas's archives, and according to the version of history he was familiar with, it wasn't even supposed to exist.

"There's one other thing that's bothering me…"

If he hadn't been paying such close attention, the overlapping versions of history would have hidden it from view, but the table he'd made to check the time and location of each of the records had helped him realize something.

The number of "omitted sections" began to decrease after a certain period at the beginning of the Dark Age. Until that point, Erik estimated that the book included about a third of all historical accounts, and if Shizuku's claim about there being three books was correct, one could surmise that the accounts were distributed equally among the three books.

After that, however, the book seemed to chronicle about *half* of everything that happened.

Why was that? Erik racked his brains, trying to remember what had happened on the continent at that point in time: the establishment of what would become the magic kingdom, the appearance of spirit sorcerers, the turmoil in the east of the continent, the development of weapons, the improvement of sailing ships, the creation of highways, the spread of belief in Aetea, and—

"…Is *that* it?"

The next thought that entered Erik's head, as well as the deductions that followed, left him at a loss for words.

He felt vacant, almost dazed. The conclusion he'd come to was hard to believe. Any ordinary person might have been crushed by the emptiness Erik was feeling, but he just tamped it down.

Erik sighed and took out the portrait wedged into the book after the last page. It had been there when he'd borrowed the book from Shizuku. It depicted two people, likely a husband and wife. Erik

knew who they were.

"They look a lot like…Lyshien and Oscar."

The princess of a fallen kingdom and her protector. Why had their picture been inside this book? Apparently, Lyshien had spent a while in Rozsark after her country crumbled. This book had also been in Rozsark, so it was certainly possible the portrait been drawn during that time.

Still, the version of Lyshien in the picture looked several years older than she did in real life. A spell had been placed on the picture to stop it from deteriorating, so it was probably pretty old. It made more sense to assume that the portrait was of one of Lyshien's ancestors.

Why would someone go out of their way to put a picture like that in this book? Erik wondered to himself.

"She said not to let Farsas get hold of it, huh…?"

The clues led Erik to one conceivable possibility—but not only did he lack the resources to prove it, the risks were huge. It was probably wise to leave it alone for the time being. First, he had to verify his hypothesis regarding the accounts it contained.

After putting the portrait back in the book, Erik put it on the shelf and set a barrier to prevent anyone from touching it. He gathered up his notes spread out on the desk, then trotted out of the room.

※

Shizuku awoke at the same time every day, even when nobody woke her up. She'd been like that for as long as she could remember.

After washing her face with cold water, she started to comb her hair.

Ever since the day she'd asked Erik for advice, Shizuku had stopped "staying up late." This came as a relief to Mea, too, who had woken her master up the past few days by saying, "It seems you slept well." Shizuku was probably the most well-rested she'd been since arriving in her new world. Thanks to that, she'd been feeling pretty good.

Shizuku looked at the list of things she had to do that day as she quickly dressed herself and got ready for work.

"Okay, I'm off! See you at lunch."

"Have a good day."

Shizuku left the room, carrying a bundle of documents under her arm. In the past, knee-length clothing had felt easier to move in, but lately she'd found herself more comfortable wearing ankle-length skirts, likely as a result of the formal clothing she'd had to wear in Kisk.

She looked up at the sunny sky through the window and stifled a yawn. Shizuku had been back in Farsas for a month and she'd already produced a range of learning materials, including several flashcard sets and picture books. Most of these were inspired by her successes in Kisk, but she'd started to wonder whether the flashcards, initially targeted at young children, could be adapted to help older children learn compound words, too. Moreover, when Shizuku had asked if there were any tools she could use to record and play back audio, she was told that there was a magic implement that could do this, so she'd started thinking about those kinds of learning resources as well. With only one month left on Erik's contract, she wanted to try everything she could think of.

When Shizuku arrived at the lab, she was surprised to find an unexpected person there.

"Lera. What's the matter? Is there something wrong with the picture book?"

It was the first time Lera had come to Shizuku's lab, so her presence startled Shizuku. She wondered whether there was a problem, but Lera just smiled.

"No. I have some good news… We might have found a potential treatment for the disease."

"What?! Really?" exclaimed Shizuku, eager to hear the details.

Lera gave her explanation, a slightly troubled smile on her face.

They still didn't know the cause of the disease. However, after Erik had suggested that the soul and language might not be related, Lera and the other researchers had started taking a different direction with some of the experiments. Working under the

assumption that the disease might be caused by some sort of infection, one of these experiments had involved gathering children around the age of ten—an age when kids had already acquired more than half of their innate language skills—and having them interact with younger children.

As these experiments were repeated, some changes were observed in the children. More specifically, the younger children who were symptomatic began to regain their innate language skills.

"Wait, are you suggesting that this change *isn't* because the younger children learned from speaking to the older ones?"

"Obviously, that's one possibility. But we also instructed the older children not to use certain words, and even got them to sit in the same room without speaking at all. In both cases, the younger children got their language skills back. We're currently investigating whether the magical force field placed in the room during the experiments had an effect. Still, this is a significant breakthrough in itself, right? We hadn't found any clues until now."

"That's amazing… Congratulations!"

Was this the first step in unraveling the mysteries of innate language? Shizuku was eager to know more.

Lera noticed Shizuku's enthusiasm and promised she'd give her a summarized report of the results later on. Then she explained her main motive for swinging by.

"Could you pass on my gratitude to Erik? I've gone to thank him in person, but he never seems to be in his lab lately."

"He doesn't?"

Now that Shizuku thought about it, she hadn't seen Erik since the night she'd gone to ask for his help. She didn't realize he hadn't been in his lab; that was incredibly strange.

Shizuku nodded, agreeing to pass on the message.

Once Lera had left, Shizuku couldn't help but frown. It felt for a moment like something she couldn't recall was threatening to resurface, as if there was an amorphous anxiety looming in the back of her mind. And yet, like sand slipping through her fingers, the feeling was quickly buried deep inside her.

All she was left with was that desert landscape. Shizuku thought

back to when she'd looked up at the sky, having first arrived in this world, and could almost feel the heat. Her head felt hazy, and she vigorously shook her head to try to clear it.

2. Piles of Dust



At first, it was his intense curiosity that motivated him.

The idea that she'd come from another world was fascinating in itself, but it was the peculiarity of her writing that truly enraptured him. How were the sentences structured? How were the words formed? He wanted to work out the writing system and study it for himself.

Yet their relationship had gone past being merely transactional. He'd helped her, impressed by how strong and positive she remained despite the incomprehensible situations she'd been thrown into. She didn't curl up and cry or give up and abandon everything. Instead, she stayed determined to move forward, even if that meant taking baby steps. She didn't lose faith in people's good nature and the decency of the human spirit, and she was also determined to remain sincere. That was what he admired about Shizuku.

At times, he wondered if this was how it would feel to have his younger sister by his side, who he hadn't seen in so long. Perhaps he could have spent days like this with the princess had she survived.

But Shizuku was her own person. There was no one like her—the speed with which she grasped new ideas, her earnest attitude toward studying, her consideration for other people, her unwavering warmth. Most importantly, though, she'd become someone who didn't give up or accept defeat.

Although she was powerless, Shizuku refused to surrender, and she valued her dignity more than her life. In that sense, Erik found her stubborn and foolish. He'd once warned her not to lose sight of the bigger picture, but in reality, that wasn't what she did. She saw

the whole picture, then chose the one thing she couldn't compromise on.

Her own free will meant so much to her that she'd reach into flames to grasp it.

Her stubbornness also undoubtedly caused her pain.

The world and its people weren't kind enough to meet her expectations.

Still, Erik wanted to make sure that *he* did—even if he was the only one.

He knew perfectly well how much she worried and how hard she worked. He wanted to support her through all of that.

He enjoyed their time together, so he was also doing this for himself.

That was why he'd taken her hand and come on this journey with her.

But could he make it to the end without betraying her?

※

"You have cocoa?!"

"Of course we do. Those bitter beans, right? You dissolve the powder in water and drink it. They use it a little in the south, but it's a medicine… Is something wrong with you?"

"Y-you mean…you can make chocolate…?!"

"What's that?" Leuticia asked, looking confused.

The two of them were enjoying a casual chat after Shizuku had shared her latest report.

This topic had come up because, on this particular day, there happened to be a plate of fruit on Leuticia's desk. The two of them had begun to share the fruit and decided to list plants and animals that were common to both their worlds, leading to the discussion about cocoa.

Her boss seemed curious to know what chocolate was, and

Shizuku began to think seriously about the topic. Although she knew how to make cakes using baking chocolate, she didn't know how chocolate itself was made. She often knew the raw ingredients for things, but not the production process. It was the same with miso and soy sauce.

"When chocolate's seventy percent cocoa, it's bitter… So what's in the remaining thirty percent? Wait, is it even okay for me to introduce a recipe from another world? If I don't know what I'm doing, maybe I can experiment…"

"Uhm, Shizuku…?"

Leuticia was looking at her subordinate—who'd started muttering under her breath to herself—with a puzzled expression. Shizuku raised her head.

"I'd like some of those beans so that I can make some sweets! Could you get them for me?!"

"I—I should be able to."

For some reason, Shizuku was much more enthusiastic about this than her progress report. Overwhelmed, Leuticia nodded and said, "I'll send away for some…"

Shizuku's face lit up, but she quickly remembered her manners and bowed subserviently.

"I'll make a start on my next manuscript, then," Shizuku announced.

"Y-yes, please do. Your picture books with the talking animals are very interesting. The children seem to love them."

The new picture book Shizuku had just completed was about a lost child who encounters different animals in the forest and receives their help. The goal was for children to learn the names of the animals that showed up in the story, so Shizuku had put a lot of effort into the illustrations.

"It doesn't seem like anthropomorphized animals are very popular in this world. I've looked through a lot of picture books since taking on this job, but I haven't found any examples."

"In the past, talking animals tended to be mid-ranking demons. That's probably why."

"Oh. Maybe putting them in picture books isn't such a good idea."

Shizuku didn’t want her picture book to make children less cautious around demons, but Leuticia just laughed and shook her head.

“Such demons are almost nonexistent nowadays. Most were exterminated during the Age of Witches, so it’s rare for humans to encounter them now.”

“Oh, I see…”

That sounded like a pretty interesting slice of history. If any research had been done on it, Shizuku wanted to see it.

Leuticia gently snapped her fingers at Shizuku, who seemed fascinated.

“By the way, do you mind if I borrow Erik for a while?” she asked.

“Erik? Sure, I don’t mind. Why are you asking me, though?”

Leuticia was his boss, not Shizuku. She couldn’t fathom why the princess was asking for her permission, but Shizuku agreed anyway. Her response seemed to come as a relief to Leuticia.

“You two really are… No, never mind. We’re leaving the castle city the day after tomorrow. We’ll be gone for a little while, so if there’s anything you want to say to him, now’s your chance.”

“Where are you going?”

“To the north. There’s been a spate of demonic spirit appearances, so we’ve decided to set up barriers around all towns and villages there. It’ll take about a week, and it’s only a stopgap measure, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Yeah…”

Shizuku didn’t really understand what these demonic spirits were like, but she was worried about Erik heading off on such a mission. She hadn’t conveyed Lera’s thanks to him yet, so she made a mental note to go and see him before he left.

Leuticia gave Shizuku a beguiling smile.

“We’ll also do some research into the woman with the red book, since we’re going to be in the north anyway… Oh—and if my brother causes you any trouble while we’re away, report it to Royal Chief Mage Truce. I’ll tell him to expect you.”

Shizuku wasn’t sure if Leuticia was giving her a work instruction or not, but she listened with the same serious look the princess was

giving her. And with this warning, Shizuku's meeting with Leuticia came to a close.

After leaving Leuticia's office, Shizuku headed straight to the lab where Erik worked—but he wasn't there. It seemed Lera's comment about him not coming to his lab for a while must have been true, so Shizuku decided to head to his room instead.

Shortly after knocking on Erik's door, she received a response. The door was also unlocked. The fact that he was there brought Shizuku a strange degree of relief.

"Do you have a moment, Erik?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"I heard you're going away for work, so I wanted to say goodbye."

Erik was acting like his normal self, but his desk, which was usually tidy, was covered with a shocking number of books and notes. Erik began to sort out the mess, creating a set of piles. Thinking it was best not to interfere, Shizuku stayed one step away and watched him work.

"You're headed to the north, then?"

"Yeah. Do you remember the border gate we passed through when we entered Farsas from the west? It's north of there."

"That's super far away. Is it cold up there?"

"Yeah. The area's really high up, even by Farsas's standards. It's probably getting cold."

Erik sounded calm. Knowing him, he'd probably handle the work just as he always did, no matter how cold it was. Shizuku wasn't particularly worried about that.

"I heard there are demonic spirits. Will you be all right?"

"Yeah, probably. The princess will be there, and we'll have guards."

Shizuku couldn't sense any tension or fear from his monotonous comment. Feeling somewhat reassured, she passed on Lera's thanks and shared the results of her experiments with Erik. He seemed

surprised by how the experiments had progressed. Once Shizuku had finished explaining, Erik asked whether the younger children and the older ones had spoken to one another. Like Shizuku, he'd suspected that that was the source of the kids' progress. The similarity between them made her chuckle.

"I knew you'd suspect the same thing. That's what I asked her."

"It's the first thing you need to check… But I see."

Erik pondered to himself. Then he glanced at his pile of notes, looking as if he'd remembered something.

"Oh, by the way, don't touch anything in my room while I'm away."

"Okay. I probably won't come in here anyway, though. Who goes into somebody else's room when they're not there?"

"I know, but I thought I should tell you just in case. If I die, leave my belongings to someone else to sort out. There are some dangerous things in here."

"Well, this conversation took a morbid turn all of a sudden."

"It's just a what-if scenario."

Hypothetical or not, it left an impact. Still, Shizuku grasped that some of his possessions were dangerous to touch. He was probably referring to magic implements.

Erik lowered his eyes slightly and flashed Shizuku his signature bittersweet smile. His ordinarily clear voice now held a tinge of melancholy.

"If, one day, you find that red book and it *is* the interlopers' cursed artifact, but it contains no clues as to how to return home… what would you do?"

It was an unexpected question—yet at the same time, it felt overdue.

It surprised Shizuku slightly. She wondered why he was asking this question now, of all times.

Still, as astonished as she was, the answer was already inside her.

Shizuku closed her eyes, as if she was falling asleep, and smiled.

"If it turns out that going home truly isn't a possibility, I'll draw a line under the issue."

"You'll carry on with life in this world?"

That still wasn't a future that Shizuku was able to come to terms with. She knew what lay on the other side of that river, but she wasn't able to cross it. At some point, however, she'd realized that the river was gradually narrowing. She was slowly adjusting to a world that had once seemed so distant, just as her journey had shaped the present version of herself.

"…I'm not sure yet," Shizuku said with a shake of her head.

Erik didn't speak. The silence seemed to weaken and melt away Shizuku's sorrow, and in its place, her throat began to burn with emotion.

Maybe I'd feel better if I verbalized things…especially the things that haven't taken shape inside me yet.

The moment she did that, however, her thoughts would become something else. Something *different,* no matter how similar or connected it was to now. It was a point of no return. She wouldn't be able to take it back.

So Shizuku decided not to say a word.

How much time must have gone by?

By the time Shizuku came to her senses, Erik was standing right in front of her. He stretched out his hand and carefully touched her cheek.

Her gaze was drawn to the seemingly vast depths of his familiar dark-blue eyes.

"Well, you don't have to give up just yet. The continent is massive. We can go to another country next."

"That would mean so much to me… But at this rate, we'll be able to write a guidebook."

"What's that?"

"A book full of sightseeing information about different places."

The time they spent together was so enjoyable, Shizuku wished it would last forever. They could travel across countries, learning new things as they went. They could write what they'd learned in a book, then move on to their next destination. Perhaps that was one path Shizuku could choose.

She thought about the diary she kept from time to time. Shizuku used it to write about her travels and her day-to-day life, and she planned on swapping it out for a new notebook after a year.

As it turned out, however, her journey would come to an end before she replaced her diary—something Shizuku was just about to discover.

※

An icy wind blew through the air.

The castle stood on barren land shrouded in an eerie silence, as if it had been forgotten by all. The only sound that could be heard was the wind swirling through the air.

This was a place where an ordinary person would freeze within minutes—yet a man and a woman were walking through the castle unperturbed. The man, tall and dressed in black, led a woman with strikingly bright red hair. She didn't bother hiding her non-human hair color and looked at her limbs in frustration.

"Having a body is so awkward. Why did you summon me to such a low-level realm, Elzard?"

"I've signed a contract with a human. I'd like you to meet her."

"A human?" The woman's eyebrows shot up. Her words, tinged with disdain, pierced Elzard like a knife. "One of *those* worthless beings? You summoned me to this lower realm for one of *them*?"

"Yes," Elzard replied, glancing back at her.

The woman's beauty almost made her look human, but her vibrant hair and eye color gave her true identity away. They were common features of high-ranking demons, a race that often dismissed humans as insignificant—and this demoness harbored a particular disdain for them. Elzard, who was also a high-ranking demon, had summoned her for this exact reason. He smiled, his face angled so she couldn't see.

"You should meet her. I summoned you because you're the ideal person for the job."

"Ideal in what way?" the woman demanded.

“The ideal person for me to choose.”

This wasn’t entirely untrue, but neither was he giving her the full picture. Regardless, Elzard’s statement seemed to have aroused her prideful nature. The woman nodded, albeit with a discontented expression on her face. She fiddled with her ruby pendant as she followed after him.

Elzard’s comment only kept her quiet for a moment, however. She soon asked another question, an irritated tone in her voice.

“What am I supposed to do when I meet this human?”

“Nothing,” Elzard replied firmly.

The black-clad man looked out of the castle window that was coated in frost. He gazed down at the frozen landscape below.

“You don’t need to do anything. It’s Aviella who will make that decision.”

※

The first of the demon’s victims was found in a small village at the northernmost point of Farsas.

One day, at the edge of a forest on the outskirts of the village, a young woman was discovered in a peculiar state. She was unconscious, her body frozen from her feet up to her waist.

When she was found, her upper body was still warm, and she had a pulse. Despite receiving treatment for her frozen legs, she never regained consciousness and died three days later.

The woman’s unusual death sent shockwaves throughout the small village, but it soon faded from conversation when recurrent demon attacks began to occur.

The villagers evacuated to a nearby town, but the demons appeared there as well. The string of attacks began to weigh heavily on the people’s hearts, and before long, the woman became just one of a long list of victims.

“Northwest Farsas is massive, but the region doesn’t have all that much history. Its climate is unique, and most of the towns are

relatively new. Well, I say that, but even the oldest is over two hundred years old."

"After *two hundred years*, I don't think it counts as new anymore," Shizuku replied.

Her comment drew a chuckle from Harve, a royal court mage. For the magic kingdom, whose origins stretched back to the beginning of the Dark Age, two hundred years was no time at all. Shizuku glanced at the map beside her as she colored in her sketch.

Leuticia had left the castle with Erik the day before, leaving Shizuku behind. Harve had come to check in on her, so Shizuku was asking him about the towns in the north as she carried on with her usual work.

Harve was Erik's friend, and it seemed he would be keeping an eye on Shizuku in Erik's absence. Harve's area of expertise was history, so he'd briefly explained the backstory of the northwestern region to her, which, it turned out, had once been inaccessible due to a forbidden curse.

"There's no country above northwest Farsas, then?"

"Nope. Just tall mountains that'd be challenging to live in, and in some places, there's a dense miasma. There used to be a country called Helginis that circumvented the miasma using powerful magic wards, but I doubt anyone lives there now."

This sounded like an incredible story. Shizuku cocked her head in curiosity.

"I don't really get what you mean by 'demons' and 'demonic spirits.' What are they exactly?"

"Hmm. Generally speaking, 'demonic spirits' can be largely grouped into two categories. One type meddles with us from the realm below this one…close to the Sea of Negativity. They take shape by imbuing miasma with Negativity or possessing animals in order to change form. That's what we're usually talking about when we mention 'demonic spirits,' which are also sometimes referred to as 'low-ranking demons.'"

"Oh, I see."

Shizuku nodded, recalling the giant snake she'd encountered at Candela Castle. It probably fit into that category. She really hoped

she wouldn't have to see one again.

"The other type resides in the realm above this one, where magic configurations are assembled. These are high-ranking demons. They rarely appear in the human realm or interfere with it."

"Weren't they revered as gods in the past? Like the water god of Lake Nevys?"

Shizuku glanced at the small green bird perched on her desk.

"They were. The creator of that bird and Princess Leuticia's spirit, Silfa, are two such demons. From what I've heard, high-ranking demons have their own hierarchy, but I don't know much about it."

Harve had started patiently stacking the wooden blocks scattered across Shizuku's desk. As Shizuku watched his tower getting taller and taller, she let out a sigh.

"So both types are called 'demonic spirits,' but they're entirely different? Even the place they come from is different?"

"Yeah. Basically, all creatures that originate from different realms get lumped together as 'demons.' Some people even refer to fairies and magical creatures as demons. It has a pretty vague definition."

"I see…"

To ordinary people, any monster they couldn't quite identify seemed like a "demonic spirit."

When you sorted them based on the world's realm structure, it became clear that there were significant differences between them. The creatures from the upper realms and those from the lower realms were literally worlds apart.

Shizuku stroked Mea's head and back with her finger.

"If high-ranking demons come from the realm above us and low-ranking demons come from the realm below us, does that mean that mid-ranking demons originate from *this* world?"

"Oh. I see your logic, but no. Mid-ranking demons are the most diverse type. Extraordinary low-ranking demons who've gained power and knowledge are referred to as mid-ranking demons, as are some low-ranking demons that are created by high-ranking ones. The term has more to do with their strength than from where they originate. Your assistant demon, for example, is a mid-ranking demon created by a high-ranking demon, which is incredibly rare. In

the past few hundred years, mid-ranking demons that spawned from low-ranking demons have been exterminated. No one sees them anymore."

"Oh, Princess Leuticia mentioned that, too," said Shizuku, recalling the "talking animals" the princess had told her about. They must have been mid-ranking demons.

It made sense to her now.

Harve smiled.

"All this talk of demons must be unsettling, since you're staying here by yourself, but if you ever find yourself in danger, I'm sure Erik would come back immediately. You can communicate with him using magic whenever you like. Do you want to put in a request?"

"No, it's fine. I don't have any new information to share with him. I wouldn't want to disturb his work, either."

"…Shizuku."

Harve slumped his shoulders in disappointment—but at that very moment, there was a forceful knock on the laboratory door.

"Excuse me! It's an emergency! We have an injured person, so if there are any mages in there, please come and help!"

"Someone's injured?"

Shizuku and Harve exchanged glances, but only for a moment. Harve swiftly rose to his feet and dashed out of the room. Shizuku found herself following him.

When Shizuku joined Harve in the treatment room and saw the woman lying on the bed, she was left speechless.

She was a young woman, probably around Shizuku's age, but the color had already drained from her face. Her body looked healthy, and she was wearing the sort of outfit you saw most city girls in. As far as Shizuku could see, she wasn't bleeding, and she had no external injuries.

Instead, frost covered her body from the waist down.

"…What's that?"

It was as if her lower half had been put into a freezer. Two mages were touching her legs and chanting spells. Although the frost was gradually melting away, there was no change in her complexion. One of them noticed Shizuku and called out to her.

“Oh! A girl? Perfect timing. There’s some hot water over there, so soak a cloth in it and rub her legs!”

Shizuku was the only other woman in the room. She hurried over to the basin, took a cloth soaked in hot water, and, as the mage had instructed her, started rubbing the parts of the woman’s legs where the frost had melted. The water was hot, and the woman’s legs were as cold as ice, but she couldn’t worry about things like that right now. Shizuku put all her strength into warming up the woman’s skin. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

But no matter how much Shizuku rubbed, the warmth didn’t return to the pale skin. The frost had disappeared, but the woman’s body remained chilled to the core. Shizuku’s hands trembled with anxiety as she wrung out the cloth, and at that moment, she heard Harve’s voice.

“Oh…”

Everyone’s eyes, including Shizuku’s, turned to Harve.

“It’s no use… Her soul has been taken.”

He was effectively pronouncing the woman dead. His statement caused the atmosphere in the room to freeze over, dispersing the effort that everyone had put in like tiny bubbles on the wind.

※

About twenty royal court mages had accompanied Leuticia on her journey north, meaning there weren’t many mages left in the castle. Still, even if the king’s sister had stayed behind, there was nothing she could have done.

When a soul is stolen from a living being, the body eventually dies unless the soul is recovered. However, since nobody knew who’d taken the woman’s soul, they had no way of dealing with the situation.

“So her body was found in an alley in the castle city… Who do you think did it?”

Harve frowned, hearing Lars’s question. The king was doing a handstand on the courtyard lawn. Unpacking her lunch nearby,

Shizuku found it hard to tell whether Harve was stumped by the king's question or troubled by his strange behavior, but she figured it was probably the former. Harve had been involved in treating the victim and investigating her case.

His brow furrowed deeper.

"To tell you the truth, we have no idea who the perpetrator is. Taking a soul from a living person is no easy feat."

"Why? Can't you just pull it out?"

"If it were that easy, we'd have a problem on our hands. There are spells that can do it, but obviously, they're forbidden curses. Apparently, they don't work very well if the target struggles, and the soul doesn't come out neatly if they're unconscious or dazed… To put it bluntly, it's easier to kill the person first and then take their soul."

Harve had obtained his knowledge of these forbidden curses via magical communications with Leuticia and Erik. Lars finally righted himself and snatched a pork-wrapped vegetable roll out of Shizuku's lunchbox.

"If it wasn't a forbidden curse, could it have been the work of demons? It wouldn't be the first time they'd done such a thing."

"The previous victims were all men, and it was succubi and water spirits extracting their souls… But that hasn't happened in two hundred years. Besides, demons that target women consume them whole—flesh and blood included. Women are more stable in terms of magic, which makes it more difficult to extract their souls."

"Maybe the victim was actually a man."

"It was a woman."

When the female victim was found unconscious in an alley near the west gate of the castle city, there had been no sign of anyone suspicious in the area and nothing to suggest there'd been a struggle. Her legs had simply been frozen to the road.

Lars kept snatching away more of her side dishes, and Shizuku—having initially put up a fight by moving her lunchbox out of his reach—eventually gave in and handed the whole thing to him. His arms were just too long for her to stop him.

With her lunch disrupted, Shizuku instead decided to join in the

conversation.

"Do you think they froze her legs so that they could extract her soul?"

"I wondered that, but I suspect it takes a pretty long time to restrain someone with ice. The victim would usually escape before the job was done, wouldn't they?"

"Hmm. Something about this doesn't sit right with me. What would they even do with the extracted soul?"

It was a basic question, yet a pensive look crossed Harve's face. The man who'd stolen Shizuku's lunch, on the other hand, sounded unfazed as he gave his response.

"If a human did this, it must be for a forbidden spell. You can get more power from a living soul than a dead one. Or maybe it's just for fun."

"Ugh, I don't like either of those options," said Shizuku. "By the way, Your Majesty, if you want a lunchbox, I can make you one of your own. Just don't take mine."

"But you sneak in carrots when I let you make my food."

"Of course I do. You've got to stop being so picky. You're twenty-seven."

"The food you make has a really interesting flavor."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?!"

The conversation had gone totally off track. Harve let out a sigh, making sure that the other two couldn't hear it.

Neither of them seemed bothered by this mysterious incident. Maybe that was because they had thick skin, or maybe it was because Erik and the princess were due back in a week.

The next day, however, both Lars's and Shizuku's expressions had turned bitter.

In the time between that conversation and the following afternoon, ten more victims were found in the castle city.

Eleven victims had now been brought to the castle, including the first one. They were of varying ages, and they all looked different. The only thing that linked them was the fact that they were female.

Emergency medical treatment was carried out on their bodies, which were being kept inside the castle, but unless their souls were retrieved within three days, they'd all die anyway. Over ten search parties—four-member teams consisting of both mages and soldiers—had been dispatched since the incidents began to occur, but no perpetrators or stolen souls had been tracked down.

"What a creepy story…"

Inside the bustling, agitated castle, Shizuku was talking to Mea as she added color to her picture book.

There was nothing Shizuku could do about incidents like this. She knew that, but the fact remained that her anxiety was weakening her concentration. Having accidentally dropped her paintbrush on the edge of her paper by its point, she let out a deep sigh.

She reached out to the little bird, who was sitting on the table pecking at candies.

"Can you extract people's souls, Mea?"

This question prompted Mea to return to her girl form and take a seat opposite her master.

"No, I can't. I have been blessed with a great amount of magical power, but I don't know complicated spells like human mages do."

Having been created as a type of magical equipment by a high-ranking demon, Mea was powerful when it came to simple attack or defense magic, but complex spells like those required for healing weren't her strong point.

"I see," Shizuku replied, then after a few moments asked, "Do you think it'd be out of the question for other demons, too?"

"I'm not sure. I know there are some female demons who have successfully extracted souls, but I doubt they'd go after women. Female souls are hard, and I'm sure they take a lot of time. I think it's highly likely that this is the result of a man-made spell."

"Hmm. I guess it really must've been a human."

It was easier for Shizuku to imagine this being the result of a human's evil deeds than the work of a "demon," a being she didn't fully understand. The possibility that a person was using a forbidden curse was likely the cause of the unrest within the castle.

The magic kingdom of Farsas was famed worldwide for its lack of

tolerance toward forbidden curses. The string of incidents that had occurred within its castle city was definitely a test for the country. If they didn't solve the case before more victims appeared, it would raise doubts about the nation's competence.

Shizuku frowned.

"There are five whole days until Leuticia gets back."

The princess and her team had their hands full skirmishing with demons and helping the local residents in the north of Farsas. Shizuku also found herself worrying about Kisk, where the people's suspicions still hadn't been completely cleared.

Mea noticed her master was distracted and gave her some hard advice.

"You should focus on your work for now, Master."

"Ugh, you're right."

Shizuku could only do what she was capable of. That was how she lived her life in this new world.

Following Mea's advice, she picked up the brush she'd put down and carefully started painting again.

That same day, Shizuku ended up having lunch outside the castle. Harve had come to pay her a visit and invited her out.

"I'm going back to my parents' place to pick up some stuff. Want to come and have lunch with me?" he'd asked.

Harve's family ran an inn in the castle city. Shizuku had stayed there before. It was the perfect spot to go for a change of scenery, only a short distance away from the castle.

"Sure. Lately, whenever I make my own lunch, the king just steals it from me."

"He only does that because he enjoys winding you up. Just ignore him."

"Easier said than done…"

The streets of the castle city were less crowded than usual, presumably because of the ongoing incident. Most of the people around were travelers and merchants, and there weren't many young women about.

Shizuku ran her fingers through her loose hair. Every so often, there was a strong gust of wind, which threatened to tangle it.

Harve, walking beside her, suddenly asked a question.

"Your assistant demon didn't want to join you today?"

"She said she wanted to do a deep clean of my room. Besides, Mea doesn't really need regular meals."

"I see. Being a demon, she must be powered by her own natural magical energy."

"You make it sound like she runs on solar power…"

It was an overcast day, and the sun was hidden behind the clouds. Shizuku closed her eyes as the wind sent a swirl of dust into the air.

Once the familiar inn came into view, Harve cocked his head to one side.

"Huh? It's closed."

"Why's that?"

"Maybe we're early. I'll go around the back and open up. Wait here."

Harve left Shizuku at the front of the inn and disappeared around the building. Alone, standing before the door, Shizuku looked up at the sky.

The town seemed normal enough, but the criminal who'd been stealing women's souls was still at large, presumably lying low somewhere. Shizuku glanced back at the door. The curtains were drawn.

At that moment, she heard a faint scream.

"Huh?"

Shizuku looked around, but she couldn't see where the scream had come from. She knocked gently on the closed door, but there was no response. Just as she was about to call out for Harve, there was another scream, clearer this time.

It was the cry of a little girl.

Shizuku wavered for a moment—but there was no time to hesitate.

She took her notebook out of her pocket, left a note by the door, and started running in the direction the sound had come from. She

turned a corner, entering a narrow alley.

As she ran down the branching alleyways, Shizuku felt something strange brush against her ears, almost as if the air pressure had changed. She grimaced as she searched for the source of the scream, peering around every corner she went past.

"Help…!"

It was a feeble cry. If it had sounded more like a grownup's voice, Shizuku might have been more cautious.

When she finally found the person sobbing in a dead end, it turned out to be a girl around the age of five. She had long blond hair and a slender frame. Her small feet and the red shoes covering them were frozen to the cobblestones.

The child's face was contorted in fear. As soon as she saw Shizuku, she started to shriek.

"It hurts! It hurts so bad!"

"J-just give me a moment!"

Shizuku hurried over to the girl and took a closer look at her feet. Her frost-covered calves were icy to the touch, just like the first victim's had been. Trying to put the girl a little more at ease, Shizuku forced a smile.

"You'll be okay. I'm going to help you."

Shizuku tried to take the girl's frozen feet out of her shoes, but they wouldn't budge. She wasn't fastened very firmly to the ground, though. If Shizuku melted the ice a bit, she would probably be able to yank the shoes free from the cobblestones.

"I'm going to go get some hot water… Wait, maybe I should stay here. Can anyone hear me?!"

It was dangerous to leave the little girl here by herself. Still, despite Shizuku's shouts, nobody seemed to be coming to help.

Shizuku quickly came up with a new idea and placed her palms on the thin layer of ice covering the ground. It was so cold that it was slightly painful to touch, but nevertheless, Shizuku began to melt the ice with her body heat. She continued to wipe her wet hands on her clothes as she melted the ice.

"M-miss…"

"It'll be fine."

The ground itself seemed to be frozen solid, and Shizuku felt a chill gradually seep into her body as she knelt on it. She began to lose feeling in her toes, but this was no time to complain. The little girl's foot seemed to be getting looser, so she clung onto that hope. Shizuku kept calling for help as she rubbed her hands on the ice, trying to melt it.

The dizziness hit just as the girl's foot was about to come loose.

Shizuku placed a hand on the ground to keep herself steady. It was a familiar sensation—one she felt she'd experienced before. Something was writhing around in her body. She looked up at the child, her vision blurred.

The young girl wasn't crying anymore. All traces of fear had disappeared from her face.

Instead, she was staring at Shizuku, her eyes crimson and inhuman. Once again, something shifted *inside* Shizuku.

"It's…like that…huh?"

Shizuku was on the verge of collapsing, using her hands to hold herself up. Her lower legs were now covered in multiple layers of frost where they touched the ground, cutting off the sensation. The moment she realized this, an icy pain surged through her veins.

How had the women's souls been extracted? Had a human used a forbidden curse, or was it the work of a demon? The answer was the latter.

Shizuku tried to force blood into her frozen legs. Extracting a woman's soul took a while—so the "child" pretended to be a victim to buy herself time.

Fastened to the ground, Shizuku felt nauseous as the force groped around inside her, attempting to extract her soul. She slapped her hands against her legs, which were beginning to go numb from the pain.

"You hurt me. You tricked me… Why don't you just give up?"

There was a note of defiance in Shizuku's voice. The demon's expression had been blank until that point, but her eyes widened, surprised by her prey's unexpected shift in attitude.

Shizuku gave her a caustic smile.

"Having trouble pulling it out? I can't say I'm surprised—my soul's

a little different from other people's. Sorry to disappoint."

"…What are you?"

"An anomaly. Mea!"

An intangible force appeared, ready to fight back in response to Shizuku's cry. The demon sensed it and leaped away, confused. The small bird hidden in Shizuku's bosom transformed into a young girl and stood in front of her.

"Your orders, Master?"

"Capture her, if possible. Do you think you'll be able to?"

"I'll try."

Mea unleashed her power, not even needing an incantation. The frost covering the ground shattered, and Shizuku staggered back to her feet. Her legs hadn't completely frozen, and she rubbed them, facing straight ahead.

"It's your job to act as the bait."

That was the concise command Shizuku had been given earlier that day.

A person whose soul had been stolen could only survive for about three days, meaning that Farsas needed to catch the perpetrator as soon as possible if they wanted to prevent the victims' deaths.

Lars had made the decision to get Shizuku to walk around as bait. At the same time, he would increase the number of people on patrol and keep ordinary citizens off the streets. It was a dangerous plan, designed to resolve the issue as quickly as possible. Harve had been against it, worried it might fail—but after careful consideration, Shizuku had agreed to go along with it.

She'd have Mea with her. Since she possessed no magical power of her own, she would seem defenseless. Plus, her soul was unique.

If everything went according to plan, she could catch the culprit off-guard. Yet by no means was it a low-stakes gamble.

"…When I saw you, I felt the urge to help—but I also suspected it might have been a trap."

And so, Shizuku had tried to save the child on her own, keeping

Mea hidden to avoid revealing her trump card to any lurking enemies.

"Now this is your chance to surrender. Give back the souls you've stolen."

Shizuku's confident demand made the red-eyed demon step away, grasping the white beaded necklace she'd been hiding beneath her clothes. Shizuku's eyes were drawn to the murky pearls, which were glowing from the inside.

You don't think… Are they the human souls?

This was just a hunch for Shizuku, but Mea seemed certain. She took a big step forward.

"I'm going to get them back."

The red-eyed demon turned away and leaped high into the air, landing on a rooftop. Shizuku's eyes bulged with shock at the girl's inhuman movements.

"Mea! Lift me up onto the roof!"

Shizuku was enveloped by a floating sensation, which made her feel as though she were on a roller coaster. By the time she'd instinctively hunched over in a ball, Mea had already let her down on the roof. When the demon saw Shizuku, she leaped onto the next rooftop.

I can't let her get away.

Shizuku forced her unsteady legs to move and started running. With Mea's assistance, she leaped from roof to roof.

"Eek, this is scary! Wait up!"

There was no way the demon was going to comply with Shizuku's command. Shizuku took out the knife she'd been given to capture the demon with and hurled the magic implement toward the fleeing demon's back.

The silver blade whizzed gently through the air, homing in on the demon—but just as it was about to pierce her narrow back, the girl dodged to the side, causing the knife to bounce off the roof with a *thud*. However, dodging the knife had caused the demon to become unsteady on her feet, creating an opening that Mea wasn't going to miss.

"Here I go!"

Mea kicked herself off the roof and leaped through the air. She held her right arm up above her head, then cut down her enemy from the side. The small, red-eyed demon was sent flying, crashing into the roof with such force that it made the entire building creak.

"Agh…!"

She looked just like a human child as she writhed around, letting out pained cries. But Shizuku repressed the swell of sympathy and rushed over to the demon, reaching out for her neck. She located the white pearl necklace and pulled it directly upward. The necklace was too big for a child's neck, so it slipped off into Shizuku's hand easily. Before she knew it, Shizuku had started running her eyes across the white pearls, counting them.

"Master!"

Shizuku heard Mea trying to warn her—but by that point, she was already aware of the threat. The demon whose necklace Shizuku had taken was transforming, her childlike hands changing into giant, reddish-black ones.

Shizuku saw it, but she wasn't going to be able to get away. She instinctively took a step back, but the massive hand came crashing down toward her at an alarming speed.

Don't close your eyes, Shizuku thought to herself—but she didn't want to see herself getting crushed, either.

She closed her eyes and shielded her head with her hands.

A huge sound reverberated around her, like something being deflected by the air. The impact made Shizuku lose her balance, and she thumped down on her backside.

She couldn't help but let out a small shriek—but then someone pulled her by the arm.

"Well done keeping her pinned down."

Shizuku heard someone speaking to her, their voice familiar and pompous. Shizuku let out a sigh, having realized her work was complete. She opened her eyes to discover two men standing beside her.

"Are you all right?" asked Harve, who'd cast the protective barrier around her.

The king had also shown up with him. Wielding Akashia, he made

a single elegant motion to sever the arm of the demon, who'd penetrated the barrier.

"Gyaaahhh!"

Still holding the necklace in her hand, Shizuku instinctively covered her ears at the sound of the demon's shriek.

As Lars stepped forward, however, the screaming soon vanished into thin air. The demon turned and fled, seeing the king of Farsas preparing to strike again.

"Hey, come on. Don't run away," he complained.

Nobody would obey an order like that. The demon, still in the form of a little girl, was unsteady due to her missing arm, but she still managed to jump onto the next rooftop.

Lars began chasing the demon himself. Harve had been holding Shizuku up, but he quickly hurried after his master. This movement must have acted as a signal, as more mages and soldiers began to appear on the ground.

Relieved, Shizuku examined the stolen necklace.

"It's…so warm."

The white beads were warm to the touch. It almost felt as though they were alive. Shizuku counted more than thirty pearls. If the souls were returned to their respective bodies, the people who were being cared for at the castle were sure to wake up.

She turned to Mea, who was standing beside her.

"Mea, could you take me down to—"

But before Shizuku could finish her sentence, Mea suddenly disappeared from sight.

"Huh?"

Her demon assistant slammed into the glass window of a neighboring house and vanished.

With Mea gone, a man reached out toward Shizuku.

His hand appeared out of nowhere, grabbing the necklace she was holding.

"I'll be taking that back."

His voice was low. As he tugged hard on the string, Shizuku pulled it back in a panic.

"N-no!"

Shizuku's defiance made the man smile. Dressed entirely in black, it wasn't clear how he'd appeared on the roof. He elegantly raised his empty left hand.

"…"

Shizuku was instinctively distrustful. The predator's intense gaze made her cower in fear.

Yet, despite this, Shizuku still refused to let go.

With a casual snap of his fingers, the air transformed into several blades. Shizuku could hear the king shouting furiously in the distance.

"You fool! Let go!"

A barrier formed in front of Shizuku's eyes.

Truce, the royal chief mage, shoved her aside.

A moment later, he collapsed, fresh blood spurting from his body.

The same blade that had sliced his skin started descending toward Shizuku's right hand—the one she was clutching the necklace in.

Time felt like it was passing at a crawl.

Shizuku stared at the white beads in her hand.

Each of those beads must contain a person's soul.

She couldn't let someone snatch those lives away.

So Shizuku refused to let go.

And without a sound, her five fingers were sliced off.

"Aaaaaaaaahhh!"

Shizuku's scream echoed throughout that corner of the castle city.

Overwhelmed by confusion and agony, her mind went blank. Her fingers had been severed and the string of the necklace had been sliced through, leaving the beads to scatter across the rooftop. The vision of the white balls and her fingers seemed to merge into one.

However, only the white beads gradually moved toward the hand of the man in black, as if pulled by invisible threads.

Shizuku's mind was close to breaking point. She was about to pass out from the pain—but her fear of having the beads stolen

jolted her into action again.

She raised her left hand and stretched out her arm, trying to grab the white beads floating away from her, but her body wasn't moving the way she wanted it to. Several of the beads collided with her hand and fell to the ground.

"What a boring attempt to interfere…"

The man looked displeased as another blade formed in his hand. Before he had the chance to use it, however, he leaped out of the way, and Akashia's blade sliced through the spot where he'd just been standing.

Without saying a word, Lars moved a step closer, swinging his sword at a remarkable speed.

Having taken a big step back to avoid the weapon, the man looked down at the dozen or so beads he'd drawn into his hand. He flashed a sinister smile.

"This is all, huh? Oh well."

The man vanished into thin air, not even using an incantation.

All that remained was pain, confusion, and the smell of blood.

With that, the inexplicable chain of events that occurred in the castle city drew to a close.

※

"How much damage was done in the end?" Leuticia asked with a sigh.

The king, sitting at his office desk with his chin in his hands, couldn't conceal his bitterness when he heard his sister's query. He ruffled up the front of his hair with his hand.

"Nineteen souls have been retrieved. Of those nineteen, we only saved eight of the bodies. The rest are being searched for in nearby towns, but if these incidents happened in an ordinary town, the victims are likely already dead."

"That's true. There were some similar cases in the north a while ago, and the victims died within three days."

Through her investigation into the incident in the castle city,

Leuticia had discovered that cases involving people having their legs frozen and their souls extracted stretched from the northwest of Farsas all the way to the castle city. In all, there had been a total of about a hundred cases.

This major incident hadn't come to light before now because it had gotten lost amid the chaos of demon attacks in the north, and any other town had only had one or two casualties. The people who discovered the victims were suspicious of the circumstances, but since there were such few cases, they didn't think it was worth reporting to the castle.

Over a dozen people had been attacked in the castle city, but that was probably simply because its population was far larger than that of those other towns.

Lars let out a deep sigh, the report lying in front of him.

"According to that girl, there were about thirty soul beads. The rest were taken away."

"They probably hired several water spirits for the job. What did the one we captured say?"

"Not much. It's hard to interrogate demons."

"Let's have Silfa do it, then."

The mention of the royal family's spirit brought the conversation to a pause. Leuticia shook her head decisively, then picked up a piece of paper.

"Putting that aside for the moment…the man who attacked Shizuku is a high-ranking demon, according to everybody's testimonies. It's fortunate there were no casualties, whether you were there or not. It's a shame we couldn't get all the souls back, but there's nothing we can do about that now. If a demon like that was serious about escaping, he would be impossible to catch."

"Don't soften the blow. I'm the one who messed up."

Leuticia looked troubled by her brother's unusually curt tone. She wasn't trying to make him feel better—she genuinely believed the situation was inevitable. Even so, Lars probably had his own thoughts on the matter. He was the only one at the scene who could have taken on the high-ranking demon, so he should've had his subordinates capture the fleeing demon and focused on retrieving

the necklace himself.

They'd never expected a high-ranking demon to intervene, however, and he had them completely at his mercy. As a result, Truce and Mea had been severely injured and Shizuku's fingers had been cut off. While their wounds had been healed with magic, it was far from an ideal outcome.

Lars kicked his desk and leaned back in his chair. He rarely let his true feelings surface, but they were coming to the fore now, tinged with self-recrimination.

The expression on her brother's face was one Leuticia hadn't seen for a long time. She puzzled over what to say to him, but ultimately chose to remain silent. She just waited quietly, neither interfering in the matter nor consoling him.

It wasn't a difficult thing to do. Even if he needed a long time.

After all, they'd ignored this distance between them for over twenty years.

※

The curtains in her room were drawn, blocking out the daylight.

It was silent. On a small sheet near the window, a little green bird was asleep.

The woman to whom the room belonged, meanwhile, sat on the bed clutching her knees against her chest.

Her eyes were closed, but she wasn't sleeping. She only looked up when the door opened.

"Shizuku."

The man who'd called her name paid no mind to how dark the room was. He lit the lamp and stood in front of the bed. Then he reached out and took her right hand. There was no sign that her fingers had been sliced off. They were just trembling slightly. Once he'd checked that she was fine, he let go.

"Looks like you still have your fingers. That's a relief."

"Erik…"

"I heard what happened. That was way too reckless. You mustn't

underestimate demons."

He was reprimanding her, but his tone was neither warm nor aggressive. His words just showed that he cared.

Upon hearing this, Shizuku felt the tension inside her dissipate. She closed her teary eyes and buried her face in her knees.

"I—I wanted to get their souls back."

"I know," Erik replied.

"But I couldn't. So many of them got taken away…"

"What's done is done."

Shizuku hadn't been able to retrieve the souls of three of the women whose bodies had been kept in the castle.

She was relieved to see some of the victims regain consciousness, but she'd also witnessed the ones they couldn't save being handed back to their families. "Why couldn't you save her?" a boy had cried as he clung to his mother, who grew colder by the second. That was something that would stay with Shizuku forever.

The regret of failing to grab the white beads bothered her much more than the horror of losing her fingers.

Erik sat next to Shizuku as she shed silent tears. He lowered his faraway gaze, then gently patted her small head.

"If you're spending time thinking about the lives you couldn't save, you should think about the ones you *did* save, too. You need to look at the whole picture if you're going to learn from the experience."

It was hard to tell whether he was trying to encourage or scold her.

This form of consolation was very characteristic of Erik, and Shizuku couldn't help but bite her lip. After an extended moment of silence, she finally strained a raspy voice from deep down inside her throat.

"It's difficult," she said.

"I know. Well, hopefully you never encounter a high-ranking demon again."

What would she do if there *was* a next time?

Shizuku didn't know the answer. Still, she was grateful that the pain had dulled a little. And that she wasn't alone.

※

The corpses were piled high.

Their arms were bent. Their legs had turned dark and discolored. Their wings were tattered, and their eyes had clouded over.

Countless destroyed bodies were haphazardly tangled together, creating a grotesque scene.

Nothing moved. There was no sign of life, no sense of individuality. Occasionally, a cold wind from outside would come through, gently ruffling an unidentifiable person's hair.

The cold space resembled a temple hall. A lone woman gazed down at the atrium of the abandoned castle.

The corpses of both humans and demons were piled up inside the room, which stretched across multiple stories. Confronted with the stark reality of death, the woman's eyes were devoid of emotion. She simply saw the scene for what it was: a mound of dead bodies.

"—Aviella."

The man's calm voice made her turn around. Having returned to the castle, he opened his hands to reveal a dozen white beads. Aviella nodded magnanimously.

"Oh. You got them back? I appreciate the effort."

"I don't mind. But those would-be low-ranking demons are a liability. It was fine to have them roam the towns, but they ended up going all the way to the castle city of Farsas."

"I see. Does that mean the Farsasian royal family has caught on?"

"The wielder of Akashia chased after me."

This blunt report made the woman burst out laughing. Sensing there was no danger in her response, the man shrugged his shoulders.

"You're pretty calm. Is it because you're a witch now?" he teased, peering over the railing at the pile of corpses below.

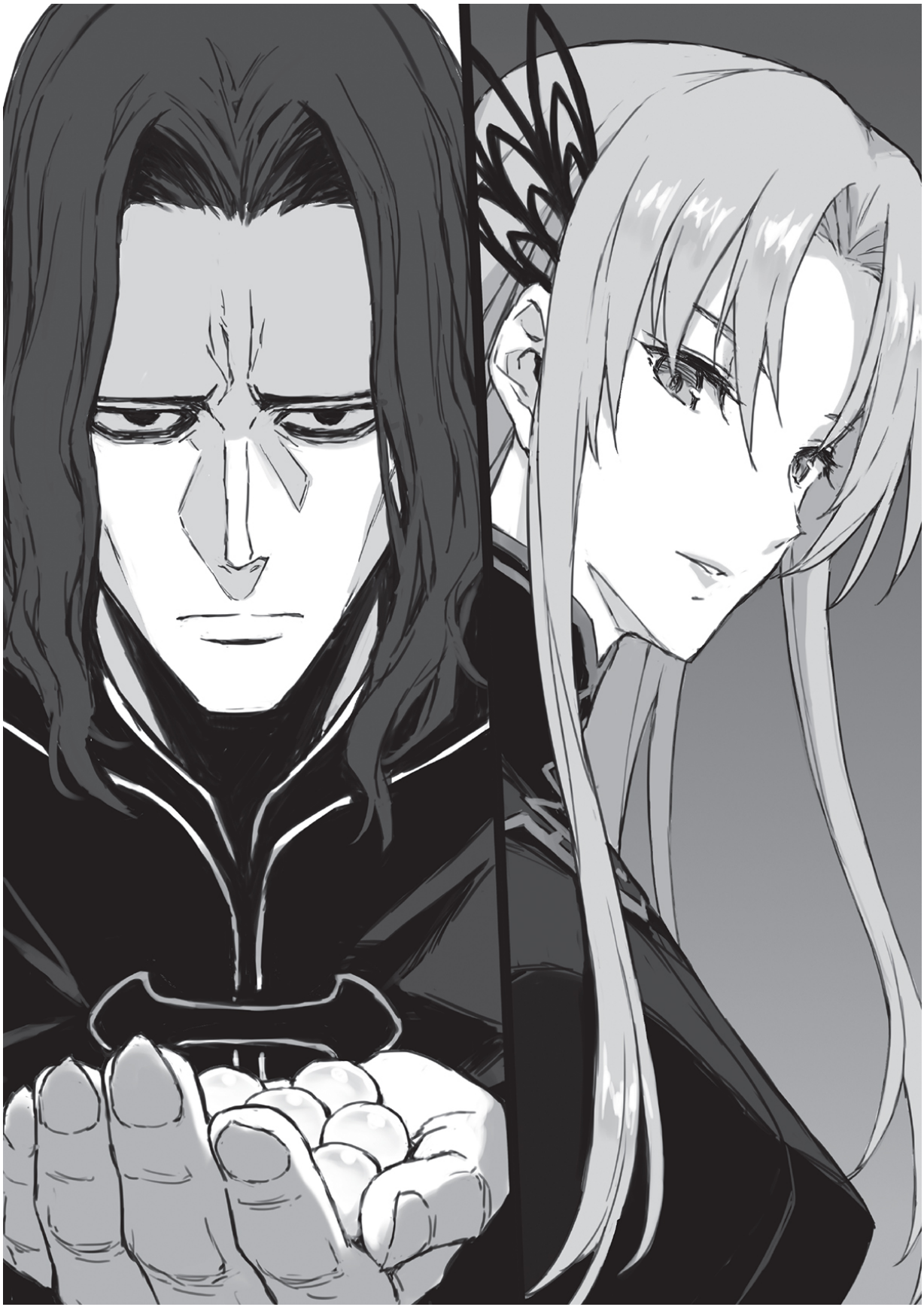
They were the bodies of the summoned demons and the humans who had tried to defeat them.

The demons who'd been drawn to power, and the people who'd been abducted.

By now, the bodies that formed this small hill were nothing more than a chaotic jumble of broken remains.

It was a gruesome yet solemn picture of the end, where the barriers of species were well and truly meaningless. The woman smiled weakly, then looked down at a necklace that had fallen at her feet. The large ruby pendant had a deep crack running through it.

"I'm not exactly a witch. I'm no different from you at the end of the day. Just to be clear, though, I had no particular desire for magical power. The woman you brought here simply insulted humans too much, so I decided to trap her within the prison of her own body."





There was a certain affection in her elegant smile, but no pity. The man responded to her predictable response in a haughty tone.

"I knew my comment would irritate you. I brought her here to feed her to you."

When a high-ranking demon dies, they don't leave a body behind. After all, they are inherently conceptual beings.

The woman thought about the demon whose power she'd taken. She was gone now.

Aviella let out a small snort.

"I don't care if Farsas has caught on. All possibilities are equal. In fact, they need a test. We can see whether the power and bloodline they've inherited are necessary for the era to come."

Her firm, powerful voice made her sound like someone who oversaw and controlled everything from above.

The man looked amusedly at the master he'd contracted himself to.

"Do you intend to be the touchstone for that test?"

"No. I'm just going to teach them a lesson. They need to learn that this continent and its humans have fallen into an idle slumber in which they have forgotten the many cruelties of the past."

The woman extended her right hand toward the atrium below her and started reciting an incantation.

The complex spell rained down upon the pile of corpses, gradually turning their decaying remains into a dry powder.

The breeze blowing through the open castle doors swept away every last vestige of the dust.

By the time the atrium was empty, the man and woman had vanished.

3. Twilight



"It's gone… It's not here."

Shiron had grown tired of hearing this complaint.

Ignoring his elderly father's distress, he flipped through the letters he was holding, skim-reading the pleas people had made.

"It's gone! Shiron! Don't you know where it is?"

"I don't. The thieves must have sold it off to someone."

"Without it, our family is finished!"

"It's been over a year since you started saying that, Father, and nothing's happened yet."

"*Demonic spirits* have appeared! How are we supposed to apologize to His Majesty…?"

Shiron frowned, no longer hiding his annoyance as his father continued arguing back. His father truly did have a retort for everything. Shiron was impressed with his own patience for enduring it for the last year and a half.

Once he'd finished reviewing all the letters from the western part of the country, Shiron moved on to his next task. The old man was still muttering to himself, hunched over in his chair; although Shiron wanted nothing more than to throw him out of his office, he couldn't. His father, the previous prime minister, still wielded considerable influence over the castle. If Shiron did something rash, it was *him*, the young, inexperienced one, who would be on the receiving end of the criticism.

Struggling to fully hide his irritation, Shiron went through the texts that had been offered to him. One of them was a thin bound book. Picking it up, he suddenly went still.

"This is…"

Why did something like that exist? Shiron sat frozen in shock, but after a few moments, he hurriedly began drafting a letter, hoping to change the situation.

※

Inside the thick-rimmed cup in front of her was a viscous, light brown liquid.

At first glance, the foamy surface looked suspicious. Even a magic potion would have looked more normal.

Leuticia sniffed it warily. Then, having steeled herself, she lifted the small cup to her lips.

Bitterness, richness, sweetness, and fat spread throughout her mouth. The princess swallowed the drink, her beautiful face devoid of expression. After a short pause, she spoke.

"It's peculiar."

"Riiiiight?!"

Having drunk the same thing, Shizuku let out a groan of anguish and thumped the table with her fist.

Leuticia had sent for some cocoa beans, as Shizuku had requested, but since Shizuku had no idea how to make chocolate, she'd experimented and ended up creating a cocoa-like drink.

"It should taste better than this," said Shizuku. "I wonder what I did wrong…"

"Can't you do something about this fat? Even if you just strained it a little."

"Ah… I'll try that next time."

It seemed like she had a long way to go until she could make chocolate. When Shizuku thought about the people in her original world who'd gone to even greater lengths to create new foods and dishes, she couldn't help but feel a deep admiration. Shizuku had been eating all of her failed experiments so she wouldn't waste any ingredients. She slumped her shoulders dejectedly and got the conversation back on track.

"We still haven't worked out why the kids got their innate

vocabulary back, have we?”

“No,” replied Leuticia. “We don’t even know where the innate language originates from, though, so that’s no surprise. That said, even if there *was* a realm for innate language and some kind of issue causing an obstruction between that realm and the soul, it’s still hard to investigate matters involving other realms. They’re usually impossible for us to perceive.”

“I understand… Oh, but I heard that magic spells exist on higher planes of existence. Can’t you interact with other realms that way?”

“A mage can only come into contact with the realms of magical power and spells. Perhaps you could define a mage as someone who can perceive the realm where spells are found. Any other realms are impossible for them to reach, even if they exist in the same space. It’s just like how spells are invisible to people who aren’t mages. That is our limitation as humans.”

Leuticia threw her hands in the air as if to say that she was at a loss.

In short, there was no way of checking whether a realm that controlled innate language actually existed.

Conversely, the possibilities were limitless if you claimed that something was “in a different realm.” The vast nature of the topic made Shizuku sigh.

“Still, the main thing is that, for some reason, people are starting to recover from these language impairments.”

“Yes, you’re right…”

They had repeated the experiments under various conditions, but the cause of the children’s recovery still hadn’t been identified. Only the children who’d been brought to the castle had seen an improvement, and the same hadn’t been observed across the entire castle city. This implied that some aspect of the experiments was having an effect.

Shizuku gazed absentmindedly at the ceiling.

“Come to think of it… Erik told me there’s a record of a fishing boat picking up a person from another continent a long time ago. Was that person from the eastern continent?”

“Hm?” replied Leuticia. “…No, I don’t think so. They were from a

continent we had no contact with."

"Did that person speak the same language?"

This simple question made the princess's eyes widen. Shizuku was wondering whether people on completely unconnected continents shared the same innate language. If, as Erik suggested, innate language was triggered by some sort of infection, it wouldn't make sense for it to have spread to a continent that people hadn't interacted with.

Leuticia didn't know what to say. She must have realized what Shizuku was hinting at.

"I'm…not sure. I think records were made about the castaway's home continent, so it's likely that people understood their language."

"Ngh, good point…"

It felt like they were going around in circles. Shizuku adjusted her grip on the prototype picture book she was holding. Leuticia, who seemed intrigued by the cocoa-like drink, took another sip and looked up.

"Anyway, we don't know what causes this impediment, so we can't be sure that another outbreak won't occur. I'd like you to continue with your work."

"Understood."

"If you stay, Erik might stick around, too. How do you feel about staying in Farsas forever?"

"I-I'll have to think about it…"

Leuticia, who'd valued Erik's talents for a long time, seemed genuinely disappointed that his contract was nearing its end. He hadn't been spending a lot of time at his laboratory lately, but that didn't bother Leuticia. She'd once said to Shizuku on the subject, "People like Erik, their talent comes from their ideas. It's best to let him do what he wants."

The princess was the perfect boss in a sense, and she concluded the exchange by handing Shizuku a piece of paper. Shizuku took it and read out the words that caught her eye. She couldn't read the whole thing.

"A language, invitation, request…in Medial?"

"Yes. A while ago, I sent a report on our measures in response to

the epidemic—basically, the nature of your work—to the other major countries. Since Kisk is approaching it in the same way, I thought sharing some information would minimize confusion."

"Okay."

"Medial responded by saying that they wanted to look at your learning materials and 'receive an explanation directly from the person who created them.' That wouldn't be a problem for Farsas as a country…but how do you feel about that? If it's a nuisance, I'll decline their request."

"Whoa, a business trip?"

Shizuku had never expected a job like this to come her way. The map of the continent unfolded in the back of her mind.

Medial stretched out across the north of the continent. It was even further north than northern Farsas, where Erik had gone some days earlier. Under normal circumstances, it would have taken a long time to get there, but since this was state business, she'd probably be able to teleport.

Shizuku thought about it for a moment, then asked a totally unrelated question.

"The person with the red book was last sighted in Medial, weren't they?"

"Yes. We haven't heard anything since."

"I'll go, then."

The Farsasian investigation team hadn't been able to track down the book, so Shizuku was under no illusions that she'd manage to. Still, if she had the opportunity, she wanted to see the problematic country with her own eyes. And if Erik quit his job at the castle, the pair of them might end up going to Medial together, so it would be wise to check things out now, while she had the backing of Farsas.

When she saw how quickly Shizuku accepted the invitation, Leuticia gave her a teacherly smile.

"I'll be counting on you. Oh, and I'll assign Erik as your chaperone, along with a few other people."

"Erik? Isn't he busy?"

"Don't you worry about that. Given what happened the other day, he'll probably volunteer to go," she said. "Besides, he's strong now."

The king's sister, a woman famed for her beauty, gently tapped an elegant finger against her right ear.

And so, it was decided that Shizuku would visit the Great Nation of the north as a researcher affiliated with Farsas, with Erik by her side.

※

The power was moving around.

It used the souls of women as its driving force, tracing a circle in an area of barren land surrounded by tall, rugged mountains. Flowing counterclockwise, it increased the concentration of magic in the land and transformed that desolate place into the underworld.

The air was filled with miasma and a bitter cold.

The sunlight was obstructed, and the ground was decaying.

In a silent, abandoned capital with a cursed history, a towering castle stood in solemn grandeur. Now the castle existed in the company of death, in a state of deep slumber.

The day when its massive, tower-like presence would be exposed to the public was drawing near.

※

Farsas was a temperate country. Kisk wasn't quite hot, but it was warm.

It was, therefore, understandable that Shizuku had assumed that everywhere on the continent would have warm weather. But, of course, that wasn't true.

"It's s-so c-c-cold…," Shizuku said, her teeth chattering.

Erik stood next to her, a look of exasperation on his face. He glanced at Shizuku, who was freezing underneath her thick shawl.

"I assumed you were trying out some kind of health regimen, dressing so lightly."

"Well, I'm not. Why didn't you warn me?"

"How's Mea?"

"She's bundled up in my bag so she won't get cold…"

"Good thinking. If only you'd applied some of those smarts to your own well-being."

"Haha…"

Shizuku felt like crying, but her tears would probably freeze if she did. She looked around the castle hall. It had columns and a ceiling, but no walls.

"Why are there no walls here? It's like it's on stilts."

The view *was* spectacular. The castle must have been built on a very high spot, and the land sloped gently toward the castle city, where brightly colored buildings could be seen. Past that, the walls and forests that surrounded the castle city stretched out into the distance.

To her left, Shizuku could see steep, rugged mountains, exhibiting the harshness and beauty of nature in its best light. The striking contrast of black and white which dominated her field of vision would make for a popular postcard. As Shizuku was using these thoughts to distract herself, Erik responded to her question.

"I don't know why there aren't any walls, but it seems as though the castle city was built here to make it harder to attack."

"Even Napoleon considered retreating in the face of General Winter."

The open hall, which the cold wind blew directly into, had no unnecessary decorations. Just a black stone floor and white pillars.

Shizuku pressed her hands against her frozen ears. She was wearing her formal attire from Farsas with an extra coat and a shawl on top. Erik, meanwhile, was just wearing a coat over his usual mage's outfit. And he didn't look cold at all.

"E-Erik, can I huddle up to you?"

"…You're here as an official envoy and scholar from Farsas."

"Gaaah! Just let me go insiiide already!"

"We *are* inside."

This exchange brought confused expressions to the faces of the soldiers escorting them. They weren't sure whether to take Shizuku and Erik seriously or not.

Fifteen minutes had passed since they arrived at the castle hall.

They had traveled there using a teleportation ring, then gone through the castle gate. Erik might have been okay, but if they didn't move to a room with walls soon, Shizuku was going to reach her breaking point. However, no one from Medial had shown up yet.

"Can I just run around a bit to warm up?"

"Let me say it again: You're an envoy of the state. If you start running around, your sweat will freeze on your body and make you even colder."

"I'm gonna die!"

At that moment, the door at the far end of the hall finally opened and an official appeared. He bowed, then signaled for them to proceed through the door.

"The king is ready for you. This way, please."

Never before had a stranger's words made Shizuku so happy. Overcome with relief, she stood up straight and stepped into the royal court of Medial.

Of all the castles Shizuku had visited, this stone one felt the oldest. Some of the timeworn floors had holes in them, and drafts were coming through the windows. These things made the place feel a little unsettling.

"Uhm, I was just wondering, why didn't that room have any walls?" Shizuku asked the official as they walked down a corridor of the castle.

"So snipers can aim from there, should they ever need to," the official explained calmly.

"Whoa… Thanks for explaining," Shizuku said, feeling deflated.

She didn't ask him why snipers might be necessary.

King Vicas of Medial was a small old man in his sixties.

The average human lifespan in this world seemed to be around seventy, so this made him quite an old king.

Standing in the audience chamber, Shizuku politely looked up at the elderly man, who was seated on his throne several steps above the ground. The king began to speak, his raspy voice emanating

from beneath his white beard.

"Welcome. It has been long since I last met a foreign guest… especially one as young as you."

"It is an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. I have come to answer your questions regarding the education that serves as a substitute for innate language abilities."

"Very good. Naturally, I am also very interested; however, it is my prime minister who was keen to hear from you directly."

The king gestured toward a man standing nearby. He appeared to be over a decade older than Shizuku, and he gave her a slight bow.

"My name is Shiron."

"I'm Shizuku. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Shiron had a gentle-looking face, but he seemed to be sizing Shizuku up with his gray eyes. Noticing his glare but feeling it would be rude to pay it too much attention, Shizuku remained stoic.

After exchanging initial greetings, everybody sat down at a table to begin a more in-depth discussion.

Shizuku did some subtle digging before starting her presentation, but it seemed as though children had regained their innate language abilities only at Farsas Castle. Ostensibly, Shiron's tone seemed regretful.

"We are also isolating children who have shown symptoms and conducting experiments on them here in Medial, but the results haven't been promising."

"Farsas has started incorporating older children into our experiments, too. This has a positive effect on the younger children, but we're yet to find out why."

Was their success the result of an infection or the effect of education? Shizuku glanced sideways, but Erik's face was blank. He didn't tend to be very expressive, but in this situation, his poker face was even more unreadable than usual.

"Now then, let me tell you about my educational materials."

Shizuku spread the materials she'd brought out on the table. She explained how they were used, their visual and auditory effects, and what kind of outcomes had stemmed from their implementation. As she explained each main point, the king's face lit up with the

curiosity of a much younger man. He took the initiative of asking more questions about Shizuku's work.

"This magic implement is fascinating. You're telling me it produces different images and sounds depending on the angle you look at it from?"

Vicas had picked up a small silver box.

The beautiful box had glass windows on each side. Pictures would appear when you peered into it, and when you touched the crystal button embedded in the corner of the glass windows, the name of the image was read aloud in a recorded voice. It wasn't cheap to make, but the children loved it.

"The rest of the materials are made on the assumption that adults will read the text aloud. This is the only one that we tried incorporating a voice function into. After all, listening is the quickest route to language learning. By having a magic implement play the audio, the children can continue learning even without a grown-up's assistance."

"I see. What a useful tool."

"Still, it's best for the child to have an adult by their side to patiently attempt to converse with them. As long as you don't give up on talking to them, the child will eventually learn to speak, even without these educational materials."

Shizuku's words weren't overly forceful, but they offered a glimpse into the confidence she had.

Vicas nodded thoughtfully in response to her explanation. His sharp gaze from earlier was gone, replaced with a serene look that he fixed on the young woman.

"Truly fascinating. Listening to you makes me think this ailment might not be something to fear after all. How very peculiar."

This was exactly the reaction Shizuku had been hoping for. She gave him a shy smile, slightly embarrassed.

"When it comes to educating children, teaching language itself is certainly not a roundabout method of doing things," Shizuku explained. "Language is used to form coherent thoughts, even if the words aren't spoken aloud. We only recognize things as distinct concepts because we give names to them. Language is both a tool

to express thought and the foundation that greatly influences it. I think that getting children to build that foundation inside their own minds significantly aids their cognitive development."

"I understand. If you become aware of the role language plays as you learn it, you can improve your thinking skills, too," the king said with a satisfied smile.

With that, their meeting that day concluded without a hitch.

※

"That was interesting."

Erik was the first person to speak once he and Shizuku had been shown to a guest room—one *with* walls. Shizuku turned around from her position near the semicircular fireplace and glanced at her companion.

"What was interesting? The room without any walls?"

"What you said. About words making you cognizant of the subject, and how language affects thought. That really made sense to me."

"Oh… In my world, the origin of words is something we study. I learned the basics of that stuff in my classes. I'm sure I've discussed it with you before—that thinking is really difficult without words."

Why is sadness called "sadness"?

It didn't just refer to a single emotion. It was only because several feelings were grouped together and labeled "sadness" that they were seen as one thing, or viewed as similar.

An ache in the chest, the urge to cry, a sense of loss, pain—some or all of these things were lumped together under the word "sadness."

Amorphous ideas only became something when a name was given to them.

In other words, although language was a product of thought itself, it was also a key to forming more complex thought.

"Even words from different languages that are 'roughly equivalent' to each other might have differences in nuance. And when foreign loanwords are incorporated into a language, they can bring new concepts with them," explained Shizuku.

She moved away from the fireplace, got out her notebook, and went back over to Erik. In her notebook, she wrote down the word "dream" in both Japanese and English, then pointed to it.

"For example, the Japanese word for dream, '*yume*,' used to only refer to the illusions we see when we're asleep at night. However, when the English word 'dream' was imported into Japan—which signifies both the dreams we see when we're asleep and our hopes for the future—we started to use the word '*yume*' to refer to our hopes, too."

"…Huh. So '*yume*' acquired a second meaning later on."

"Exactly. In Japanese, we use kanji characters to write, so writing the same word with different kanji can change its nuance. Like '*ishi*' and '*ishi*'… Does that make sense?"

Shizuku wrote these two kanji compounds in her notebook. Although they sounded the same and both meant "will," one used the kanji for "mind" to refer to a person's internal resolve, while the other used "thought" to mean the determination shown through their actions. Since her speech was being translated into a common language, she wasn't sure whether Erik would fully grasp what she meant—but when Erik saw the difference between the two kanji compounds, he nodded.

"Basic definitions can vary, so I guess this is a way of specifying the meanings more precisely. To put it bluntly, the amount of meaning packed into a single word tells us something about history and culture… Am I right?"

"You probably are. New words and usages continue to emerge as time goes by. Even during my lifetime, some words have gained new meanings over the course of just a few years."

Erik picked up the notes Shizuku had scribbled down and stared at them intently.

Shizuku suspected that he might have become fascinated with kanji again, but what he said next was something entirely

unexpected.

"I'd never really considered how much language could influence thought."

He spoke in a nonchalant tone of voice, but his handsome face held a hint of sadness.

Shizuku recognized this look. It was the expression he wore when he was deep in thought. Still, she couldn't help but think he seemed glummer than usual. Despite her confusion, she replied, "It's only natural that you wouldn't notice things like that in this world, right? Here, language is something that comes naturally, like body language or hand gestures… It'd be like speculating whether how you move your hands affects your thoughts, right? That's too big of an ask. It's easier to study this sort of thing in my world, where there are multiple languages and they evolve."

Erik didn't agree nor disagree, but simply gave a slight, self-deprecating smile when he noticed Shizuku looking at him.

Outside the windows, everything was covered in white. Heavy, oppressive clouds filled every inch of the sky. Before they realized it, snow had begun to flutter down from above.

They planned to stay in Medial for three days.

Once Erik had gone back to his own room, Shizuku took out her notebook so she could write a diary entry before dinner, and Mea, in her girl form, brewed some tea.

As Shizuku was writing the date on a new page, she suddenly realized that the numbers looked familiar.

"Oh, it's been a year…"

"What has?"

"Since I came to this world. It's gone by so quickly."

In this world, each month was exactly twenty-eight days. While a year was still a year, it didn't completely line up with her old world.

Still, the fact remained that an entire year had passed. As Shizuku recalled her travels throughout the continent, she became lost in thought for a while.

“I need to buy a new notebook… Maybe I’ll go into town once we get back.”

“I’ll come with you.”

Smiling at her assistant demon’s reply, Shizuku began writing in her white notebook, her pen racing across the page. She wrote about the open hall without any walls, the snowy scenery, the questions King Vicas had asked her and her responses, and the conversation she’d had with Erik.

As Shizuku continued to write, she remembered Shiron, the man who’d been introduced to her as the prime minister. Although he’d expressed a strong desire to speak with her in person, he’d only asked one question and hadn’t made much of an impression. Had he been polite because he was in the presence of his king, or was he simply not the type to take the initiative when asking questions? Unable to work out which was the case, Shizuku simply noted down the one question he *had* asked: *“How did you come up with the stories in these picture books?”*

The dinner they were served consisted mostly of stewed dishes, but each one was delicious.

Shizuku scooped up some of the green leaves floating in the golden soup with her spoon. It looked like cabbage, but was that really what it was?

When she took a bite, the leaves melted in her mouth, exuding a gentle, sweet flavor. The natural, vegetable-like sweetness brought a smile to her face. As she took another spoonful, Shiron, who was hosting the guests on behalf of the king, posed Erik a question.

“I’ve heard rumors that demons have been showing up in northern Farsas lately. Is that true?”

“It is indeed,” Erik responded calmly.

Shizuku rarely had anything to say about such questions, so this left her free to focus on her meal. The main dish—a beef and vegetable stew with cheese on top—was particularly delicious. The local cuisine of Farsas tended to incorporate a lot of herbs and

spices, so it packed quite a punch, but the underlying flavors themselves could be pretty bland. Medial's food, on the other hand, was simple yet rich in flavor. The melted cheese that oozed down over the sliced meat made for a very appealing sight.

While Shizuku was enjoying her meal, Shiron and Erik continued their conversation.

"We've seen an increase in demon sightings in the western part of Medial for some time now. At one point, someone hired mercenaries, and a considerable amount of extermination squads were assembled, but it seems most of them were killed."

"Fighting demons is a unique challenge. It's hard to drive them off unless you're in a large group or at least used to dealing with them."

"You're right about that. In this day and age, there aren't many people who have experience fighting demons—even among the castle staff."

Reading between the lines, Erik stopped eating and furrowed his brow. His aloof gaze turned toward the prime minister of Medial.

"If you're hoping for help from Farsas, I'd advise you to formally request it from the king. Other than serving as Shizuku's escort, I hold no authority here. There's not much I can offer in terms of answers."

"M-my apologies. I wasn't trying to take advantage of your position."

Shiron was rattled. It seemed Erik had hit the nail on the head with his admonition.

Shizuku had watched the conversation out of the corner of her eye. She didn't think Lars was the type of person who'd accept an off-the-cuff request, but she couldn't see a genuine appeal working, either. Although the king appeared to act on a whim, he could also be uncompromising. Shizuku knew that better than anyone, and she reached out for some decoratively sliced fruit. It seemed like you were supposed to eat it with your hands, so she carefully bit into it, paying attention to the dripping juice.

She ate more like a well-mannered girl than a scholar from a Great Nation. Shizuku suddenly noticed that Shiron was staring

intently at her, his gaze almost piercing, and she tilted her head slightly.

※

Medial was the only country on the continent where the position of prime minister was hereditary.

Generation after generation of kings had had a prime minister to assist them, but that didn't mean they were relied on to provide an heir. By law, prime ministers were forbidden from marrying or having children of their own. Although the position was technically hereditary, in reality, the prime minister would adopt a promising child and educate them, maintaining non-emotional ties that spanned generations.

Shiron, the current prime minister, felt no special sense of affection toward his father. Naturally, he was thankful that the man had recognized his talent and given him a proper education, but that was just gratitude—not the kind of sentiment you might hold for a biological parent.

Until recently, Shiron had respected his father for serving as an excellent prime minister for over forty years. However, his respect had been crushed when he'd learned about the existence of *that*.

One of the emotions he'd started to experience from that day on was disappointment. Shiron was disappointed by the fact that his father—a man who had a deep knowledge of history and understood other nations like the back of his hand—had been relying on *that*.

Another emotion that arose was doubt. He couldn't believe that something like *that* could even exist.

These conflicting emotions occupied his mind, fluctuating in proportion depending on the moment.

Then, about a year and a half earlier, *that* had been stolen from their estate, and Shiron's feelings toward his father were set in stone.

Its loss left Shiron's father deranged with anger, and he started to vent his desperation to Shiron on a daily basis. "We're done for," he'd

say, his cool-headed, thoughtful nature that had earned him his reputation as a great prime minister gone. He would wander the estate, muttering deliriously to himself, and at times, Shiron even found himself wishing his father would just hurry up and die. Shiron felt disgusted with himself every time he noticed himself feeling that way.

However, as these gloomy days dragged on, he found a clue regarding the unexpected whereabouts of *that*.

※

On the second day of her stay in Medial, Shizuku found herself using her educational materials to teach the children under the watchful eyes of the royal mages and scholars.

That said, since her pupils were so young, it just looked like she was playing. When Shizuku lined up several small animal figurines in front of the children, one of the mages quietly sneered and said, "A child playing with other children."

Shizuku, however, refused to react to this remark. If it looked like she was playing, that was perfect. The children wouldn't learn much at all if she didn't attract their interest.

"Okay, do you know what this is?" she asked.

"A rabbit?" one of the children said hesitantly.

"That's right. *Rabbit*. Can you say that for me?"

The children all repeated "Rabbit!" in unison. Shizuku placed the rabbit on her hand and moved it around, making it look as though it was alive. The children's eyes were instantly drawn toward the figurine, and their tiny hands reached out to touch it.

Shizuku laughed as she put the rabbit back. Then she picked up another figurine.

She got the kids' attention, made them say the animals' names, played around with the figurine a bit, then moved on to the next one. Occasionally, she'd come back to one she'd already used.

After Shizuku patiently repeated this process for an hour, all of the children were able to name the twenty different animals.

Shizuku ended up spending three hours in the morning and two hours in the afternoon—interspersed with breaks—showcasing her work and answering questions. Once she was done, she collapsed onto the bed, understandably drained. The fatigue of working under pressure in an unfamiliar place washed over her like a wave.

The scholars of Medial seemed curious and interested in her methods, but it appeared that not all of the mages were as accepting. Judging by their expressions and remarks, it was obvious they saw Shizuku's approach as nothing more than a shallow, short-term solution. Yet she just calmly ignored them.

No matter what people said, she didn't think she was in the wrong. After all, she was acting as a representative of Farsas. If she came across as servile, it would make Lars angry and Leuticia would end up having to apologize to her. It was best to act confident.

Still, the stress was starting to get to her.

Shizuku lethargically sat up and gazed out the window, her eyes half-closed.

"Ugh… I need to let off some steam," she murmured.

"Why not go outside and let off some body heat, instead?" Erik said unenthusiastically.

"If I did that, I might lose *all* my body heat."

The man smiled a little, but he didn't look up from his book.

Shizuku got up and walked over to the window. There, she peered down at the snow-covered courtyard.

"…You could build an igloo out there," she remarked.

"An igloo? Is that a kind of fortress?"

"Oh, good guess!"

The courtyard was piled high with snow. It looked as though no one had stepped foot in it for a long time.

After thinking to herself for a moment, Shizuku put her arms through the sleeves of the coat she'd taken off. She smiled and waved at the man as she headed for the door.

"Okay, I'm gonna go play around a bit!"

"Hang on."

Predictably, Erik brought her plans to a halt.

The court ladies of Medial had been puzzled when Shizuku asked to borrow winter clothing, but they were still kind enough to lend her a thick outfit and gloves. Erik, dressed in his usual mage's uniform, looked at Shizuku in dismay. She was bundled up like a snowman.

"Sometimes I just can't grasp how your mind works."

"But we never get this much snow where I come from. What's wrong with having a little fun?"

With a gloved hand, she patted the head of the child standing next to her. The person in charge had happily agreed when Shizuku asked if she could take the kids outside. The other adults all seemed to have their hands full, so it worked out perfectly. After that, they'd all made their way to the courtyard.

"Okay, let's play!" Shizuku called out to the children.

She began building a mound using a snow shovel. Large and concave like a spoon, the shovel was on the heavy side, but the snow was easy to dig in since it wasn't packed down yet.

As Shizuku's mound of snow grew bigger, the children attempted to climb it, but ended up slipping down its smooth, semicircular surface.

"I'm going to make a hole in it. Just give me a moment."

It was smaller than a typical igloo, but since she was the only person working on it, that was the best she could manage. Erik was standing in the corridor facing the courtyard, still reading his book, with Mea by his side in her girl form.

Shizuku didn't want to get so carried away that it gave her muscle pain. She crouched down and started digging a tunnel into the side of the mound, then carefully began scraping out the snow, keeping an eye on the children around her.

When Shizuku was that absorbed in something, she looked like a slightly overgrown child.

Erik, who'd simply put up a protective barrier and was watching the fun from the sidelines, looked up from his book and gave a wry smile.

"She really can't sit still, can she?"

"That's just the way my master is," replied Mea.

“Maybe you’re right.”

Shizuku had started making small snowmen out of the snow she’d scooped out, putting them in a row in front of the children. At this rate, she was never going to finish carving out the hole. Erik finally decided to lend a hand and closed the book he had been reading—but just as he went to stride across the courtyard, he sensed someone’s presence and turned around.

Shiron was standing behind him, holding some documents under his arm. It wasn’t obvious if he’d just happened to be passing by, or if he’d come over on purpose, but his gaze was clearly fixed on Shizuku.

“What exactly is she doing?” he asked, still staring at her.

“She’s playing,” said Erik.

If Shizuku had heard his frank response, she probably would have said, “Couldn’t you have phrased that better?” Erik, however, had no intention of sugarcoating things. Shiron, the young prime minister of Medial, looked perplexed.

“Please be careful. It will be dark soon, and there have been reports of demonic spirits appearing in this area lately.”

Medial’s capital was located near the northwestern highlands of the large kingdom. The mountains blocked out the sun, making the nights longer. Due to its location, demonic spirits from the northwestern part of the continent would occasionally make an appearance there.

Erik simply said, “Understood,” and watched Shiron walk away.

He couldn’t really tell what the prime minister was thinking. It was probably fair to label him as suspicious, but he didn’t want to jump to conclusions.

“Every castle has its share of unique characters, doesn’t it?” remarked Erik.

After leaving his book with Mea, he took the snow shovel from Shizuku. She was clearly having a hard time, so Erik started expanding the opening for her. Fifteen minutes later, the small igloo was complete.

“M-my arms are trembling…”

Having said goodbye to Erik and returned to her own room, Shizuku hung her head dejectedly, her arms drained of all their strength.

She hadn’t intended to overexert herself, but nearly two hours of shoveling had taken its toll on her body. She tried to write in her diary but soon realized that her hand wasn’t steady enough, so she gave up and lay down.

“I knew it’d be unbearably cold, but it’s actually pretty fun being in a snowy country. I imagine living here would be tough, though,” she said to Mea, who was tidying up.

“I suppose the summers would be pleasantly cool,” the young girl replied.

“A place to escape the sweltering heat, huh? Farsas is way too hot.”

Just remembering the scorching heat of summer in Farsas a few months earlier made Shizuku feel drained. She raised her tired arms straight up into the air and let them sway back and forth. Shizuku was just considering taking a bath and going to bed when she heard a knock at the door, so she hurriedly threw on her jacket and went to open it.

“Yes, who’s there?”

The court lady standing at the door gave her a deep bow.

“By the order of the prime minister, you have been invited to a nighttime tea gathering.”

“Like, drinking tea at night?”

“You will enjoy a diverting conversation as you gaze at the snow and the moon. Your companion has also been invited.”

“Oh, how elegant. I’ll come right now.”

If Erik was also going to be there, there shouldn’t be any problems. Shizuku turned around and beckoned Mea over, who was deep inside the room and had transformed into her small green bird form. She fluttered over to perch on Shizuku’s shoulder, and with that, the two of them began making their way down the castle’s hallways, following the court lady.

The castle hallways were fully submerged in the darkness of the

night, illuminated by the light reflecting off the snow outside the windows. The intricate window frames created shadows on the floor like paper cutouts, and Shizuku found herself avoiding them as she walked, choosing only to step on the areas where the light fell.

Soon after, the court lady guided her into a small hall on the third floor. Shiron was already waiting inside, but there was no sign of Erik.

"Please, take a seat," Shiron said with a serene smile. "Your companion will be here soon."

"Okay… Uh, where's everybody else?" Shizuku asked, remaining standing.

Shiron was the only other person in the room.

"They'll be here momentarily," the young prime minister said, still smiling.

"In that case, I'll wait in the corridor until they arrive," replied Shizuku.

She felt slightly unsettled. Getting entangled in the power struggles surrounding the throne in Kisk had sharpened her instincts.

Shiron's expression didn't change. He simply poured some tea into his cup from a nearby pot.

"Please, don't be like that," he urged her. "I have some questions for you."

"Other than what we talked about earlier today?"

"Yes. That story in that picture book—where did you learn it?"

"The picture book?"

Why was he bringing that up now? Shizuku had created six picture books so far. Three of them were adaptations of fairy tales from her original world, two of them were based on stories from this world, and the last one focused on the names of animals.

"Sorry, which picture book are you talking about?"

"I see right through you," Shiron spat contemptuously. "Don't play dumb. That story…is one nobody else is supposed to know. But *you* know it, don't you? Where is the item that was stolen from my estate a year and a half ago?"

"Something was stolen?"

None of this rang any bells, but even so, Shizuku tried to respond

to Shiron’s interrogation honestly.

“I don’t know which of the picture books I’ve drawn you’re taking issue with…but I know nothing about any stolen items. Don’t you think you might be mistaken?”

As Shizuku spoke, she remembered what her last picture book was about.

It was the tale of a poor blind girl. The true story it was based on left many questions unanswered, so Shizuku had removed the mystery from it to make the story suitable for children. In Shizuku’s version, the honest young girl was saved by her good nature. If this was a story that nobody was supposed to know about, where had Shizuku learned it? No matter how hard she tried to remember, she wasn’t sure.

Shiron’s gaze was knifelike.

“There’s no way I’m mistaken. Listen—I’m not accusing you of stealing anything. I just want a lead on it. No matter how much of a ruckus my father made, we weren’t able to search for that item in public.”

What exactly was “that item”? Shiron sounded completely serious, but Shizuku had no idea what he was talking about.

The prime minister ignored her confusion and continued to speak.

“I don’t plan on using it myself. I’m even starting to doubt whether it’s real—but if we don’t get it back, I’m going to be tormented by my father’s ramblings forever. That’s why I’m asking you: Where did you hear that story?”

“Where…?”

Why did she possess knowledge that had no traceable source? Shizuku didn’t know what to say, but Shiron assumed she was just trying to dodge the question.

He lowered his voice.

“I won’t let you leave until you tell me.”

“Huh?”

Shizuku suddenly felt something push against her back. She stumbled, almost falling over, and heard the door close behind her. Turning around, she saw the court lady standing in front of it, blocking her exit.

Shizuku frowned and looked back at Shiron.

"This kind of behavior will harm diplomatic relations," she warned him.

"I don't plan on hurting you, as long as you tell me what I want to know."

"I honestly don't know what you're talking about. What are you looking for?"

"…It's an item that contains hidden historical records."

"Huh?"

Shizuku knew what he was referring to.

She felt slightly dizzy, but it was so subtle she might have been imagining it. She stared into the man's gray eyes.

"Do you mean…?"

The red book that mysterious woman had in her possession. Was he talking about that tome, which contained forbidden spells and chronicled the royal family's major secrets?

Seeing he'd finally garnered a reaction from Shizuku, Shiron's expression changed, and his tone grew firmer.

"Do you remember it now?!"

"I think so… I'm looking for it, too. A certain woman has it, and she was last spotted in Medial—"

At that moment, the castle they were in shook violently.

They heard a deafening boom from outside.

Shizuku didn't know what had caused it. Shiron didn't seem to know, either. Having almost toppled over, he regained his footing and rushed to the windowsill. The glass had frosted over, and Shiron opened the window to look out at the night sky.

"What's that…?"

Even from where she was standing, Shizuku could see a swarm of creatures flying in the dark sky. They looked like birds, but much bigger…

"Dragons?"

"N-no. They're…demons."

“Demons?!”

Shizuku’s discordant exclamation was interrupted by a distant scream.

The castle was under attack by demons. Shizuku could hear something collapse. In the blink of an eye, the calm night had descended into chaos. Shizuku swiftly spun around and thrust aside the court lady blocking her path. She placed a hand on the door—but at that very moment, she heard the window behind her shatter.

Shiron’s scream intermingled with a strained, high-pitched cry. Shizuku automatically looked behind her, and her gaze landed on the strange figure there.

“…You’ve got to be kidding.”

Those sharp talons were presumably what it had used to kick in the wall and the window.

It most closely resembled a bird, yet it was around a meter tall. Its body was covered in black and brown feathers, and one of its three gawking eyes was fixed on Shizuku. Shiron, who’d fallen over onto his backside at the demonic spirit’s feet, looked up at the ominous creature, his breaths coming in strained gasps.

“H-help me…”

His plea didn’t inspire any sympathy in Shizuku. Still, after she’d thrown open the door she was touching, she turned back around to face the demonic spirit. The bird on her shoulder chirped.

“Mea. I want to help the man sitting there *and* meet up with Erik. Do you think we can manage both?”

Hearing her master’s question, the little bird changed form.

A green-haired girl now stood in front of Shizuku.

“Please don’t go anywhere, Master,” she said. “I’ll push it back.”

As soon as the words out of Mea’s mouth, the giant body of the demonic spirit was flung outside. Shizuku seized the opportunity to rush over to Shiron and grab him by the arm.

“We have to run! Now!”

“R-right…”

Shiron somehow managed to get to his feet, and Shizuku pulled him along, heading for the hallway. The court lady was nowhere to be seen. She must have run away or gone to call for help.

Shiron himself had said that there were very few people in the castle accustomed to fighting demonic spirits. If the distant shouts and screams were anything to go by, chaos was unfolding everywhere.

"Erik's room is—"

The moment Shizuku stepped out into the hallway, she came to a halt, startled.

A monstrous black bird, just like the one she'd seen earlier, was blocking their path. Under its claws lay the court lady, motionless on the floor. A pool of blood had spread out beneath her body.

"…Uh."

"Master, it's too late. She's gone."

Mea was just pointing out the facts, and Shizuku suppressed the scream rising in her throat. She instantly noticed a large shadow on the floor below her and instinctively jumped back, just as the window in the hallway shattered.

A third monstrous bird had appeared, glaring at them with its bulging eyes.

"Get down!" Mea shouted.

Shizuku dropped to the floor, and a split-second later, a gust of wind surged down the hallway.

The wind had likely been unleashed by the monstrous bird. It shattered window after window of thick glass, and as the shards rained down over her head, Shizuku felt a chill run down her spine. When she glanced up, she saw the bird trying to peck Shiron, who'd fallen to the floor.

"Mea!"

The body of the demon was flung down the hallway. Its giant form slammed into the window, destroying the wall around it, and it fell outside. But it wasn't long before another monstrous bird entered through the gap. And another giant beak emerged from the door to the room they'd just left.

"Ugh, we're in trouble here."

Shizuku had said that she didn't really know what a demonic spirit was, but she'd never imagined ending up in a situation like this.

There were demons in front of her and behind her. She could have had Mea get rid of the birds and bulldozed her way through, but from what she could see out the window, there weren't just one or two shadows flying in the sky.

Shiron, who'd been dragging himself along the floor, looked up. His eyes found Shizuku.

"What should we do…?" he asked, his voice trembling. "You must know, right?"

"Not really…"

Shizuku wasn't a mage, and she'd never encountered a demonic spirit before. While she was puzzling it out, the giant birds on either side of her were inching closer. So she made up her mind.

"Let's keep going. We need to force our way ahead."

The castle was unfamiliar to her, but she did remember the corridors she'd been down. It was a fair distance away, but she was pretty confident she knew which direction Erik's room was in. Once she was reunited with him, they could escape using a transportation ring.

Mea nodded when she heard Shizuku's plan, then positioned herself in front.

"Understood. Tell me when you want to stop."

"I'll do my best to keep up. Let's run to Erik's room."

Hearing this, Shiron hurriedly stood up. Shizuku nodded, and Mea lifted her hand toward the monstrous bird in front of her.

"Let's go."

At the young girl's words, the three of them set out at a run. The birds blocking the hallways were knocked sideways by an invisible hand and tumbled through the gaps in the walls, letting Shizuku and her two companions race past them. The wind blowing in through the gaps was cold enough to freeze her breath, but Shizuku couldn't let that bother her. She sprinted down the stone hallways, making sure she didn't get separated from Mea, who kept exterminating the demonic spirits that appeared before her.

Suddenly, they heard Shiron's scream echo from behind. Shizuku looked over her shoulder. It looked like Shiron had tripped and was staggering precariously, falling toward a gap in the wall.

“Watch out!”

Before giving it any thought, Shizuku turned around and reached out to grab him. Mea realized something was amiss and looked over her shoulder.

At that moment, the stone floor that the three of them were standing on collapsed with a loud crash.

※

Erik felt the ground shake a little.

He looked up from his book, confused. Had there been an avalanche nearby or something?

He looked at the book in his hand. The mysterious, untitled tome had far more pages than it seemed at first glance. He’d been reading it alongside the thesis, but decided to pause to check on what was happening.

The very next moment, however, there was a forceful knock at the door. Erik opened it without responding, to reveal a pale-faced court lady standing there.

“W-we’re in trouble. Demonic spirits…”

“Demonic spirits?”

Had the recent spate of demon attacks in the northwest of the continent finally reached the castle?

Erik ran out of the room. First, he needed to make sure Shizuku was safe. He headed to her room, which was just around the corner.

“Shizuku!”

The door was unlocked. Erik peered inside, but there was nobody there. There was no sign of the little green bird, either, although her belongings had been left behind. Erik called Shizuku’s name again, but there was no response, so he went back out into the corridor.

Another rumble shook the castle, followed by the sound of something heavy collapsing. Distant screams echoed through the halls.

At that moment, the guards from Farsas came rushing toward him.

“Sir Erik! Demonic spirits are attacking the castle! What should we do?!”

This was Medial Castle. Erik and his companions were just guests, so it was Medial’s responsibility to repel the attack. If they carelessly intervened, Medial might expect further assistance at some point in the future, which would prove bothersome for Farsas.

As such, the safest option was to teleport back to Farsas.

However…

“We’ll join in the defensive effort. Shizuku’s missing. She might have gotten caught up in some sort of trouble, so prioritize searching for her.”

“Yes, sir!”

The most important thing was to make sure Shizuku was safe. That was the very reason Erik had started working for Farsas in the first place.

Erik cast a protective barrier over himself and his guards, and they hurried down the drafty corridor.

Yet an hour later, after the demonic spirit attack had been repelled, there was still no sign of Shizuku or Mea.

Shizuku had vanished without a trace in the castle of a foreign land.

※

The unforeseen demon attack left over thirty people dead, injured, or missing in Medial Castle.

Much of the building was destroyed, and the bloody scenes where the victims had met their end in the hallways, on the castle walls, and in the outer garden were horrifying to behold.

Prime Minister Shiron was among the wounded, having been caught up in the destruction of the castle. He’d fallen down into the outer garden and managed to survive due to the piled-up snow that softened his landing.

“It was due to our inadequate defenses that your companion has

gone missing. We are deeply sorry for that. She was likely abducted by the demons. We're investigating the matter to find any potential witnesses, but so far, nothing…"

Listening to Shiron's apology and report on the situation, Erik fell silent for a short while.

Having been the target of an unexpected attack, Medial Castle *had* been thrown into a terrible state of confusion—yet not one person had admitted to seeing Shizuku while it was unfolding. Medial was justifying that by saying she'd been kidnapped by the demons.

When Erik replied, there was no emotion in his voice.

"No. I'm the one who was assigned as her escort. I failed to fulfill my duty."

If Shizuku's whereabouts were unknown, then *he* was the one who was accountable. If Erik had foreseen this, he would have carved protective sigils into the floor to strengthen the barrier—even if they were in another country's castle.

That said, there was something else that didn't sit right with him.

Shizuku's assistant demon was always with her, but why had she also disappeared? There was no way the demons would kidnap one of their own. And if Mea had died, Erik would've been able to tell, as his name was also on her contract.

Yet Mea had vanished along with Shizuku. Erik used magic to search for her, but it didn't detect anything inside the castle.

With a blank look on his face, he directed his analytical gaze toward Shiron.

"Do you know where the surviving demons fled?"

"West, most likely. They tend to show up in towns near the border."

"Thank you. Would you mind if we inspected the castle first?"

This swift request made Shiron's expression tense up. Erik was essentially accusing Medial of concealing information. The young prime minister stared daggers at Erik, but the mage simply met his stare, unperturbed.

They glared at each other for only a few seconds.

Shiron looked away and responded to Erik's request in a polite tone.

“That shouldn’t be an issue. Do as you please. However, please refrain from making such statements again once you are satisfied with your investigation. I am terribly sorry about what has happened, but my country intends on building a longstanding relationship with yours.”

Shiron bowed and left the room. Erik watched him with an icy look in his eyes.

Once he was alone again, he went back to his room. He wanted to get in touch with Farsas before commencing his search of the castle.

“What a disaster,” replied Leuticia, sounding appalled. Erik had just summarized what had happened at the castle.

The magic implement that allowed him to communicate remotely via audio didn’t have a video feature. Despite this, it was easy for him to imagine the princess’s expression. She continued speaking, her dismay evident in her voice.

“I sent you with her so there wouldn’t be any trouble. Honestly, you two need to stay in the same room.”

“We’ve tried to do that as much as possible. Still, this is my fault.”

Unsurprisingly, Erik hadn’t expected a country’s castle to be subjected to such a devastating demon attack. It never could have happened in Farsas, where they had defensive wards surrounding the entire castle city.

Leuticia let out a soft sigh.

“So? Do you think Medial had nothing to do with it?”

“No. Many aspects of the situation are still uncertain. Shizuku’s room was untouched. If she left the room of her own accord, she must’ve had a good reason to do so. Yet there are no witnesses at all, which is also clearly suspicious. And if it *is* true that nobody saw her, it’s odd that their conclusion is that she was kidnapped by a demon.”

“Well, yes. But what could be Medial’s goal?”

“A simplistic answer would be that they’re trying to avoid having

to take responsibility. Something happened to a guest they invited from Farsas, and they don't want to be interrogated about their mistake. That's why they're feigning ignorance."

"But they already admitted their defenses were lacking."

Medial might have wanted to deny playing a role in Shizuku's disappearance, but if Farsas criticized the country for not protecting their guest, there was no way for them to evade responsibility. In that case, they'd be better off asserting that Shizuku had gone missing as a consequence of her own actions.

What other motive could Medial have?

Erik glanced at the book in front of him. It had a black cover on it, but it was the interlopers' cursed artifact he'd taken from Shizuku. After her disappearance, he'd checked the final section of the book, but he hadn't found what he was looking for.

Erik thought to himself for a moment, then recalled his conversation with Shiron.

"…Maybe they're pretending Shizuku was kidnapped to encourage Farsas to dispatch troops to take care of the demons."

"That's ridiculous."

Shizuku was, in a sense, an irreplaceable asset, but Farsas would never mobilize an army for her alone. Lars had chief authority over the military. Nobody who knew what the Farsasian king was like would come up with such a stupid plan.

However, even if they couldn't get the army to mobilize, there was still a possibility that individuals would take action.

Erik, one of the best mages on the continent, and Leuticia, a member of Farsas's royal family, were two people who seemed likely to help. If Medial had come to this conclusion after seeing Erik protect Shizuku from a careful distance over the past two days, then his efforts had worked against him. Erik flicked the pen lying next to the magic implement he was communicating through. It fell off the desk, but he didn't make any attempt to pick it up.

"Have you searched the castle to find out whether or not she's really there?" Leuticia asked.

"Not yet. But they've told us we can go ahead and look, so if they *are* hiding her somewhere, she's probably not somewhere she'll be

easily found."

"That, or she actually was kidnapped by a demonic spirit."

That was the biggest issue. It was true that there had been a demonic spirit attack.

And what if she'd met an even more tragic end?

"…No."

It was too early to consider that possibility. They needed to work on the premise that Shizuku was still alive.

That said, if she was actually missing, kidnapped by a demon, there wasn't a moment to spare. Erik started recalling all the towns in the west of Medial that were equipped with teleportation rings.

The voice of the princess resonated through the magic implement as she asked Erik for his judgment on where Shizuku had gone and what he thought was right.

"What do you want to do, Erik?"

There was no time for dilly-dallying. He was going to narrow down the possibilities, starting by eliminating the most dangerous one first.

As soon as he heard Leuticia's acknowledgement, Erik left the room hoping to use the teleportation ring, with only the black-covered book in hand.

※

When Shiron returned to his office, he summoned his most trusted soldier.

"I wonder if this issue regarding that girl will work out okay," he asked in a low voice.

"I'm confident that it will," replied the soldier. "We dumped her in a section of the forest that's off limits. It's near the castle, but nobody will set foot in it until the snow has melted."

"Good work."

Even if someone were to find her, the location made it easy for them to claim she'd run away from the demonic spirit by herself and gotten lost in the woods. Shiron sensed what felt like a throbbing

pain in his side, where his wound was supposed to have been healed, and he covered it with his hand.

When the three of them had fallen through the collapsed floor, they'd ended up in the castle's outer garden.

Shiron must have lost consciousness for a while. When he finally sat up, he had a horrendous pain in his side. It seemed like he'd come down hard on something when he fell. Looking around, he saw Shizuku lying a short distance away.

There was a chance she hadn't passed out. Several dead demonic spirits were on the ground around her. But in the middle of them all, Shizuku hugged her chest as if trying to protect something, unconscious.

This is bad, Shiron thought to himself.

If Farsas discovered what had happened, he'd lose his position. He'd been the one to separate her from her chaperone and interrogate her, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to blame him for what had occurred.

Shiron surveyed his surroundings, but luckily, none of her guards had arrived. No demonic spirits were nearby, either. His soldiers stuck their heads through the hole in the third floor, likely having come to look for them.

"Prime Minister Shiron, you're alive!" one of them exclaimed.

"Don't make too much noise. Hurry down here. There's something you need to do."

Shiron pointed at Shizuku.

"Dump her somewhere nobody will find her."

The castle was surrounded by nothing but forests and cliffs. There were plenty of places that even the nation's citizens were forbidden from entering and, better still, it'd be almost impossible for Farsas's citizens to initiate a search.

It was all over now. It hurt that Shiron still didn't know the whereabouts of "that item," but not even the person who'd made those picture books knew where to find it. The only information he'd gleaned was that it was in the possession of a woman who'd last

been spotted in Medial.

It felt like he was clutching at straws, but he'd half given up anyway. At least he hadn't lost his standing.

Reminding himself of that, Shiron set about dealing with the aftermath.

And all the while, he turned a blind eye to the ever-increasing demonic spirit appearances in the northwest and the fact that the attacks had finally reached their castle.

※

Belb, located in the northwestern corner of Medial, was a town built on mountainous terrain. Apparently, it was impossible to reach by foot or on horseback during the winter season, but to make up for this, the town had plenty of teleportation rings linking it to other parts of the country. This turned Belb into a key hub that many traders and explorers passed through.

Cold air flowed down from the northern highlands. Only the main street had been properly cleared of snow, likely due to the number of people that used it, while the snowdrift piled up on the roofs and alleyways had frozen solid and wouldn't thaw until spring.

The travelers on the street were bundled up in thick winter clothes. If you walked around outside without any extra layers, you'd be chilled to the bone in no time, and maybe even suffer lasting consequences.

Despite this, Erik was strolling along with nothing more than a cloak imbued with warming magic over his usual mage uniform.

After meeting up with the soldiers who'd come with him from Farsas, Erik received a brief situation update on the demonic spirit attacks in the western part of Medial.

"I knew it; they're more frequent than what we've seen in Farsas. Are there any cases of people being kidnapped?"

"Yes, but only women. A large number of them have been taken away. Numerous cases like those in Farsas, where the women's souls have been extracted from their bodies, have also been confirmed."

"Oh. They have, huh?"

They'd found out that it was difficult to extract Shizuku's soul during the incident a few days ago, but that didn't mean it was impossible. Erik stroked his chin pensively, then asked the most important question.

"Do we know where to find the demons' headquarters?"

"Not for certain. However…when the demons first started appearing, mercenaries were hired and large-scale extermination squads were assembled. While the extermination efforts ended in failure, the few surviving fighters claimed there was a castle in the mountains."

"A castle?"

That sounded odd. There were no castles or castle remains in the area aside from Medial Castle itself. Most crucially, the mountainous region that lay further to the west was a stateless, barren area. You could find small nations if you traveled west or north to the coast, but their borders didn't touch Medial's. They were countries "beyond the void."

After hearing the soldiers tell him about a few taverns and lodges, Erik started making his way toward one of them.

That was when he ran into someone unexpected.

"Oh. You're alive, then."

This nonchalant comment was the first thing Erik heard upon entering the tavern. Unsurprisingly, he was taken aback. Once his eyes adjusted to his dim surroundings and he knew who he was dealing with, he responded.

"It's you, huh? I didn't know you survived."

"I have you to thank for that."

He'd only met the person once, but there was no way he'd forget the mercenary who'd attacked Candela Castle during the forbidden curse incident, taking Shizuku along with him.

The tall, muscular man—Tarkis—sat there grinning, bottle in hand. He glanced up at Erik, who'd remained standing.

"How's Shizuku? I'm sure she's fine, right?"

Shizuku and the man didn't know what had become of one another after going their separate ways at Candela Castle. Yet in the

same way that Shizuku thought Tarkis must have escaped unharmed, Tarkis seemed to presume the same about Shizuku. Erik suppressed his emotions and replied to this sarcastic question by saying, “She was until yesterday.”

“Yesterday? What happened?”

“She’s gone missing. That’s why I’m gathering intel.”

This succinct but ominous-sounding response made Tarkis scowl.

Erik sat down opposite him and immediately got to the crux of the matter.

“I want you to tell me everything you know about demons.”

※

It may have been an unfamiliar foreign castle, but they couldn’t leave any stone unturned.

Harve, the mage, and Yura, the military officer, had been dispatched to Medial under Leuticia’s orders. They had been conducting a search of the vast castle, giving instructions to their respective subordinates as they did. It had taken them about half a day to inspect all the conspicuous areas of the castle, but they still couldn’t find Shizuku. Evading the suspicious glares of the people from Medial, they reconvened in a small meeting room to exchange information.

“How did your search go?” Harve asked as he brewed some tea.

“It was useless,” replied Yura. “Honesty, this castle is a real maze, and if she’s outside the castle, we’re never going to find her.”

“I feel the same way. The king of Medial seems genuinely clueless, too…”

Before he traveled west, Erik had left a message saying that the prime minister was suspicious, but there wasn’t any decisive evidence against him.

Harve took a sip of his tea and let out a deep sigh.

“Maybe she really is in the west. That’d be terrible.”

“It’s a possibility, but this castle is suspicious.”

“Huh? It is?”

Seeing Harve's shocked expression, Yura nodded and started sharing the findings of the investigation she'd conducted alongside her search.

"There's one spot where the walls and hallway were destroyed in the attack yesterday, but judging by the state of the debris, both were wrecked from the inside—using magic. And yet, none of Medial's royal mages fought in that area. There are very few of them, so we were able to verify this from their statements."

"Are you suggesting that Shizuku's assistant demon was fighting?"

"It's a strong possibility. It's strange that there are no eyewitness accounts at all, though. There were signs of combat in the outer garden right outside the hallway in question, and several sets of footprints had been left behind. Not only that, but a whole lot of blood had seeped into the snow."

"Do you think the people who witnessed the conflict were killed?"

A silence fell between them. If Shizuku had been kidnapped during such a fierce fight, it was unlikely that she was safe. However, Yura was considering a more realistic possibility.

"I think the witnesses were silenced. Several individuals were acting suspiciously."

"If that's the case, then Medial knows something about Shizuku and is hiding it."

"I don't know why they'd do that, though," Yura said offhandedly.

She poured some tea into a new cup and took a sip. She didn't even try to force a smile, and deep creases had formed across her brow.

The plot was thickening. If Medial was involved in Shizuku's disappearance, it was going to be a tough search. It might not be as big as Farsas, but Medial was still a large country. If Shizuku was outside the castle, it wouldn't be easy to track her down.

"Dammit… Why her, of all people?"

"They specifically asked for Shizuku by name, right? At the request of the prime minister. If all they wanted to know was how she taught language, would they really ask for her by name? You'd usually request a magical researcher if you wanted to speak to

someone from Farsas."

Yura's misgivings made Harve's eyes widen.

Why had they asked for Shizuku?

It was a question that neither of them had given any thought to before. They both fell silent for a moment, then reported in to Leuticia as planned, who ordered them to leave Medial.

"That's what they told me, Lars."

"Doesn't it seem like our country's being mocked lately? Who's to blame for this?"

"You, I believe."

"Well, whatever. If Farsas doesn't scare them, I'll send someone even more frightening."

※

So…cold.

That was the first thing Shizuku felt as she opened her eyes slightly.

She couldn't see a thing. It was cold. *She* was cold. She let out a shallow breath.

Her body hurt. She was freezing. Half-conscious, she tried to move her hand, but it wouldn't do what she wanted it to, as if it was restrained. She dragged herself out of her hazy state of consciousness and raised a heavy arm. After what felt like an eternity, she brushed away the snow that had fallen on her face with her free hand.

"…Where am I?"

The sky was almost light, but Shizuku's surroundings were far from well lit. A thick cluster of trees stretched upward toward the heavens. Shizuku moved her face, which was almost numb, and she realized she was lying in the snow.

Her body was soaked and frozen to the core—which was only to be expected, since she was half buried in the snow.

Dazedly, Shizuku retraced her memories.

"I… I was…"

She'd fallen into the garden after being attacked by demonic spirits in Medial.

Outside had been the ideal battleground for flying demonic spirits, but Shizuku had resisted with Mea by her side. The endless stream of enemies left her exhausted and seriously wounded, but she'd still continued to— "Ah! Mea…"

Shizuku could hardly move her hands, but she managed to use them to feel around her chest. Her fingertips came into contact with the soft feathers of a small bird. Mea's tiny body was ice-cold, but it twitched slightly at the touch of Shizuku's fingers.

"You're…still alive…"

Mea had been fighting alone, but once she started to reach her limit, Shizuku had ordered her to turn into a bird and shielded her in her chest. At that point, they'd tried to escape, but a monstrous bird had grabbed hold of her from behind. She couldn't remember anything after that, so she figured she must have lost consciousness.

"I need…to find Erik…"

Her body was so cold it hardly even felt like it belonged to her anymore, but Shizuku forced it to move. She sat up and took a look around, only to realize that she was deep inside a forest with no clue as to where she was. That monstrous bird must have carried her there and left her behind.

She had no idea which way would lead her back to the castle. But then again, was it even safe to go back there? She'd been separated from Prime Minister Shiron in the chaos, and he suspected her of being a thief. If she went back, she might be placed under house arrest. She couldn't let that happen.

Where could she find Erik? The castle was on top of a mountain, so if she went downhill, would she find herself in the town?

Shizuku tried to stand up, but her legs were trapped beneath the snow. After thinking things through for a moment, she rummaged around for a handkerchief, took it out, and wrapped it around her right hand with its broken nails. Once she had dug out her legs with her hands, she finally managed to stand up.

"Where am I…?"

She looked around at the gently sloping ground. After deliberating over which way to go, she began to descend the hill.

With every step Shizuku took, her feet got buried in the snow. Her strength was being drained from her. She was so tired, she just wanted to go to sleep. Still, she had no choice but to keep walking. Her entire body was in pain, but she urged it to keep going.

"B-but it's…so cold…"

The snow captured her feet as she continued trudging deeper into the dark forest.

She was extremely tired. She staggered from side to side, feeling like she was about to collapse at any moment.

"So…tired…"

Her feet were sinking into the snow. Everything was hurting. She was finding it hard to think.

She continued making her way through the snowy forest and down to the foot of the mountain, albeit somewhat unsteadily.

Her back, meanwhile, was soaked with bright red blood.

※

A towering castle loomed over the dark land. In one of its rooms, a woman closed her eyes.

The icy cold that permeated the outside world and the miasma that ate away at people's minds couldn't get inside. Enclosed by gray stone walls, the room felt like it existed beyond the bounds of reality.

Sitting in a chair, the woman opened her eyes and glanced out of the window.

Her silver hair shone so brightly that it put the snow to shame, and her face, as unchanging as if it had been carved from stone, exuded a sense of calm. She didn't say very much, especially when she was with him. She simply lay her pale fingers atop the red book that had changed her life, while Elzard looked at it as if it were totally alien.

"I'm starting tomorrow, Aviella," he said.

The two of them were the only people who knew what this

statement meant. She smiled at him as though he were a child.

"So impatient. I thought high-ranking demons were more lenient with time."

A human like Aviella and a conceptual being like the demon had significantly different lifespans.

"Do as you please," said Aviella. "There will always be someone eager to challenge you."

"Will any of them amuse me, though?"

That was the reason he was obeying her. She let out a small, melodic sigh.

The most powerful of all high-ranking demons was a group called the Twelve Kings, and among them was a heretic who was fascinated with humans. It was something all Elzard's kind were aware of.

Usually, demons saw humans as little more than dirt. It was absurd for a demon to take an interest in them. The heretic, however, was the sole exception. For nearly a thousand human years, he'd descended to the human realm to involve himself with them. He'd forced his way into places where the powerful gathered and had fun controlling minds and causing disputes.

He'd been acting on meaningless impulses. It was a childish game gone too far.

But before he knew it, he'd stopped just playing around.

In the end, the man fell in love with a powerless human. He protected her and supported her, and after she passed away, he left the human realm. Ever since her death, he'd shut himself inside his own territory, refusing to show his face in front of his fellow demons.

Elzard couldn't understand why someone so powerful had been so mesmerized by humans. He couldn't see the point.

It did make him a little curious, though. He was intrigued by the unstable, ever-changing nature of the human realm, which was a far cry from the consistency of his own. He was also curious about the humans who spent their lives creeping around inside it and the emotions that developed while living among them.

That was why he'd responded to the woman's summoning. He'd lent her his power as they traveled the world and built the castle

together.

It had only taken a decade or so. He still didn't know what was so interesting about humans.

"Humans are so beautiful, Elzard."

She'd often say this to him with a smile on her face, but he didn't agree. Humans were weak, stupid, and ugly.

He was happy to keep a human company for a little while longer, though. He didn't understand the things she said, but her actions were fascinating. Before long, the humans would be thrown into a panic, and a huge commotion would spread across the continent. It would be like a little festival.

Aviella, the witch who was bringing that turmoil to the continent, spoke to Elzard in a remonstrative tone.

"Elzard. If something no longer exists, does that mean it never did? If it is forgotten, does it cease to be? When humans focus solely on the peace of the present, what becomes of the corpses buried beneath that tranquility? If they turn a blind eye to the countless things that *could* happen and retreat into their tiny little worlds, then they're nothing more than lumps of mud lacking the spirit that makes them human."

"Weren't they always lumps of mud, though?" responded Elzard. "They're weak, fragile garbage."

The corners of Aviella's lips curved into a smile. Pride and affection appeared in her reddish eyes. Aviella looked at him that way whenever he pointed out the fragile nature of humanity, but Elzard could never understand why.

But if he ever uncovered the reason behind it, he had a feeling it would fill in a few of the gaps of the burning curiosity inside him.

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When he heard that Shizuku had gone missing, Tarkis was eager to hear the details. He must have understood how urgent the situation was, because he agreed to tell Erik everything he'd learned during the two months he'd spent in Medial so far without demanding

anything in return.

Clutching the drink Erik had bought him as compensation, Tarkis noticed that the mage hadn't even touched his own glass.

"I feel bad drinking alone."

"It's fine. Just hurry up and tell me what you know."

"Gimme a sec. It's hard to talk about this sober. It was one of the worst jobs I've ever been involved in."

Tarkis was a brave mercenary with a wealth of experience, so the severity of this claim made Erik frown. There had been demon attacks in Farsas, too, and Erik had gotten the opportunity to fight in them himself, but the battles hadn't been that horrific.

The man in front of him, meanwhile, had a gloomy look on his face. He lowered his despondent gaze to his glass.

"It was over two months ago now. I came to this country because I heard there were plenty of demon-hunting jobs going around. I don't exactly specialize in that kind of work, but the woman I was traveling with preferred it over warfare. We found work almost immediately after arriving in the city. A woman was hiring a large number of mercenaries to lead in battle against the demons throughout the region."

"A woman? Was she from the castle or something?"

"No. She wasn't a lord or a member of the nobility, just a private citizen. She was a pretty impressive mage, though. She was opening teleportation gates all over the place, transporting the mercenaries around."

Shiron had mentioned that lots of mercenaries had been gathered to fight back against the demonic spirits when the attacks first began. Yet now, most of them were nowhere to be found. Tarkis had witnessed the bloodshed firsthand, and after seeing him, Erik had a rough idea of what that signified. He felt a heavy sense of gloom inside of him, but he didn't let it drag him down.

Sensing that Erik wanted him to continue, Tarkis set his glass down on the table.

"After defending the town a number of times, we finally crossed the border and headed to the highlands to the west. Our boss guessed that the demons were coming from somewhere in that

mountain range, and as it turned out, we encountered demonic spirits unlike anything we'd ever seen before."

"Were there many of them?"

"Heaps, and all of them powerful. We fought them in a barren land surrounded by mountains, and most of us didn't make it out alive. It was a horrific sight, even just thinking about it now. The battered corpses of countless humans and demons were piled up on top of one another. The bodies of women who'd been kidnapped from the city were mixed in among the dead, too. They'd started to decompose, so the stench was unbearable."

His eyes took on a faraway look for a moment. It was as though he could see something that nobody else could. He must have witnessed some truly horrifying things.

Tarkis closed his eyes and smiled.

"After that, those of us who survived retreated as quickly as we could, but a few people insisted on going back into combat. The woman who'd hired us was dead, so we all told them it was a bad idea. In the end, about ten people ignored us and went back to that barren land—but they returned almost immediately, their faces pale with fear."

"Because there was a castle there?"

That was the thing Erik was most curious about. It wasn't just a concern of his, but a serious suspicion—one he hoped Tarkis would deny. To his disappointment, however, Tarkis nodded without hesitation.

"Oh, you know about that? Yeah, that's right. A castle had appeared where, only a short time earlier, there'd been nothing. We went back to the town with the mercenaries who'd been scared away, but they refused to say anything else about it. Who was gonna believe that a castle just appeared out of nowhere?"

There was a heavy sigh, but it was impossible to tell which of them it had come from. Erik pressed his fingers against his forehead and responded with bitterness in his voice.

"I would've believed them. A high-ranking demon is able to do something like that."

"A high-ranking demon?!"

During the Dark Age of war and betrayal that had once engulfed the entire continent, some people referred to high-ranking demons as gods. Tarkis's big mouth fell open with shock.

Erik didn't have time to explain further. He gently snapped his fingers to get Tarkis's attention, then asked the question that had been weighing on his mind.

"Can I ask you something else? What kind of person hired you for that task? Do you know why she was trying to take on the demons all by herself?"

Typically, mercenaries were paid upfront, in full. It would have cost a lot of money for one person to employ such a large team.

Why had that woman gone to such lengths to exterminate the demonic spirits, instead of leaving the task to the state? How had she acquired intel about where their base was located?

There were too many questions that Erik didn't know enough to answer.

Tarkis folded his arms and tilted his head.

"Hmm. I dunno what her motive could have been. I never asked. She didn't seem driven by revenge or a sense of duty—she always had this carefree air about her. She was a real beauty with silver hair, probably in her late twenties. Her eyes were…reddish brown, I think. Like I just said, she was a powerful mage. She was pretty strong, but she ended up disappearing in the chaos of battle. I reckon she probably got eaten alive, a young woman like that."

"What was her name?"

"Aviella."

Something was stirring.

A sense of foreboding rustled through the air, like waves lapping against the sand.

It felt like a blustery night. Like darkness untouched by moonlight.

There were plenty of women who looked like that.

And yet, his thoughts whispered to him:

"We've found her."

Erik picked up the book he'd set aside and placed it on the table. Stripping off its cover, he revealed the navy-blue binding underneath.

"Did that woman have a book like this, but in red?"

This question was tied to the very fabric of the continent.

A mixture of fear and anticipation filled the air as Tarkis peered at the book.

"…She did, now that you mention it. Leather-bound, with some embellishment but no title. I didn't get a good look at it, though."

It was a book without a title, its navy-blue cover revealing nothing. There were no clues about its contents until you turned its pages.

Despite this, the mysterious artifact granted immense knowledge to those who desired it. When Erik realized just how fraught the situation was, he covered his face with one hand and let out a sigh.

After almost a minute of contemplation, he raised his head.

"I want to go to that castle. Tell me where it is."

"Huh?! Are you out of your mind?"

"I couldn't be saner."

Tarkis gaped at Erik, who'd begun to spread out his map on the table at the same time he'd made his outrageous request. He began to suspect that Erik hadn't believed his story about the two hundred mercenaries that had been killed, but one look into Erik's blue eyes told him that wasn't the case. Not only did the man fully comprehend the situation, but that was precisely why he'd made his declaration.

Tarkis frowned in response.

"Shizuku's not there, is she?" he asked.

"I don't know. They're saying she was taken by demons, but it's unclear whether that's true. That's why we've split up the search, with me checking the most urgent places."

"Urgent… What if you're wrong? You could die, you know."

"I'll call for backup before it gets to that stage. I'll be fine," Erik said lightly. But it wasn't that simple.

Tarkis still had a bitter expression on his face as he raked his fingers through his hair, turning it into a mess. Then he let out a

heavy sigh.

"If she was kidnapped, it might already be too late."

"Maybe," Erik conceded, "but if the woman you mentioned is involved, I doubt she would have killed her."

"Why not?"

"Shizuku is valuable to the owner of that book."

Tarkis had no clue what Erik meant by that. Even Erik himself knew it was just speculation.

Still, all the dots connected—Shizuku's uniqueness, and everything else.

Whether Aviella realized it or not, this wasn't an opportunity Erik was willing to give up on.

"Tell me. Where is that castle?" Erik firmly asked again.

Tarkis hesitated for a moment, looking at the map of the northwestern region of the continent. Eventually, he sighed defeatedly and pointed to a specific spot. It was a barren stretch of land surrounded by tall, rocky mountains—a place where a nation had once stood during the Dark Age.

Erik stared at the blank area and muttered the name of the kingdom that had vanished nearly six hundred years earlier.

"…Helginis, huh?"

It was the destruction of Helginis that had marked the end of the Dark Age, after being wiped out by witches in a single night. And it was at that very spot where the man's rough finger now pointed.

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Snow covered the ground, clouds veiled the sky, and the world was dreary.

The man intensified his dissatisfied gaze as he looked at the gloomy landscape that stretched out before him. There was nothing he hated more than the biting cold, which hurt his nose with every breath he took. After reciting a short incantation, he erected a barrier around himself and raised the temperature inside it.

"Dammit… Curse that fool woman for putting me through all this

trouble.”

His work was always a bother, but this particular job was proving to be especially annoying. Still, ignoring it wasn’t an option, so he was better off finishing it as quickly as possible.

Everything he could see was white. If his memory served him, the castle would be at the top of the mountain. There was a town at its base, but he’d used his own teleportation coordinates to avoid being spotted. All that was left to do was find the path leading up to the castle.

As he searched his surroundings, the man spotted something in the distance and frowned.

A bright green shape was coming down the snow-covered incline toward him.

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Shiron glanced out the window to see that the snow had started falling again.

He put down his papers and sighed. Three days had passed since the unforeseen demon attack, and although his wounds had been healed with magic, the castle repairs still had a long way to go.

The girl who’d come from Farsas was also weighing on his mind, but luckily, it didn’t seem as though she’d been found yet. His soldiers had dumped her in a forest a short distance from the castle. Nobody from the castle would venture there, and the town was quite far, so she should stay missing.

“What an unfortunate girl…”

If she’d answered his questions honestly from the start, things might not have had to turn out this way. She could have returned to her room earlier, and her mage chaperone would have been able to protect her.

In the end, though, she’d just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shiron hadn’t really wanted her to die, but there was nothing else he could’ve done about it.

And if a girl losing her life wasn’t bad enough, he’d barely made

any progress with regard to the item. It left a bad taste in his mouth, and Shiron took a sip of tea to wash it out.

When all was said and done, the secrets surrounding the item had been unveiled while his father was still prime minister. That was when Shiron had learned that the formal inheritance system only existed so it could be passed down. When he uncovered this truth, he'd felt uneasy about his future—but now that it was lost, he had no choice but to do what he could.

Shiron rested his chin in his hands and sniggered.

"I could've known the entirety of history, huh…? Did it really have that power?"

Shiron had never come into direct contact with the item, so he couldn't be sure. Still, when he thought about the godlike insight that his father had displayed, his impatience grew. It was a treasure that couldn't be referred to by name. Shiron questioned whether he was truly fit to serve as Medial's prime minister, since he was unaware of the "true history" that had been passed down through generations.

Shiron managed to put his worries aside for the time being and decided to return to this office, but at that moment, an official came barging in.

"Your Excellency! Something terrible has happened!"

"What's wrong? Did Farsas send a complaint?"

Shiron wouldn't have blamed them for complaining, but he'd already decided to play dumb.

After all, the Farsasian investigation team had searched the castle and found nothing.

Whatever Farsas said, there was nothing more the prime minister could offer.

Shiron had assumed a carefree stance, but the next words to leave the official's mouth made him drop his pen. Refusing to let his shock show on his face, he asked the man for confirmation.

"Is that true?"

"It is! The envoy has already—"

"Excuse me."

Their conversation was interrupted by a man who'd appeared at

the entrance of the room.

There was a cynical look in the mage's eyes, and he smirked when he saw Shiron. He proceeded to convey his messages, taking the words right out of the mouth of the official he'd cut off.

"I'm here as an envoy of Queen Ortea of Kisk. We have received word that a woman in this country has gone missing."

"Wh-why is Kisk involved…?"

Kisk was Farsas's neighbor and one of the Great Nations.

Shiron knew that there'd been a small conflict between the two countries recently, but he had no idea why Kisk would bother to dispatch someone here. When he recalled the callous reputation of the newly crowned queen—a reputation that reverberated all over the continent—his face grew tense.

The mage watched Shiron's unsettled reaction with a look in his eyes that dared Shiron to react. Yet he still maintained a polite demeanor, stretching out his right arm with feigned politeness.

"Oh, weren't you aware of the situation? The woman who went missing was handed over to Farsas as per a formal contract with Kisk. It's quite inconvenient that she disappeared after only a month, so the queen has requested a thorough search."

"Well… Demons took her. The investigation team from Farsas has already searched the place fairly exhaustively…"

"Their search might not have been extensive enough. In fact," he said, lowering his voice, "I found something shortly after arriving here."

The mage held out his left hand, which had been hidden behind his back.

When Shiron saw what the man was holding, he was left speechless.

It was a green handkerchief with a few bloodstains on it. And wrapped inside it was the green bird that always sat on Shizuku's shoulder.

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The cup she'd held in both hands was so warm it almost brought tears to her eyes. Bundled up in a blanket, Shizuku took a sip of sugary milk and gave another full-body shiver.

"S-so cold…"

"Well, duh. You would've died if you'd stayed out there."

Shizuku looked up in a daze at the man who'd practically kicked the door down when he'd returned. The color still hadn't returned to her skin, and she raised a pale hand to greet him.

"Thanks, rescue team."

"Are you trying to be funny?"

Niké, who'd come here under Ortea's orders, scowled and flicked her on the forehead.

"Ouch!" yelped Shizuku. She sat up in the bed and bowed properly to the man. "Thank you for saving me."

It was no exaggeration to say she'd narrowly escaped death. After waking up in an unfamiliar forest, she'd started making her way down the snowy mountain. She must have passed out on her way down, though, because when she came to her senses, she'd been in the snow with her former colleague looking down at her, slapping her hard on the cheek.

"I knew you were stupid, but what the heck do you think you're doing?! You'll die out here!"

Niké had yelled at her, but Shizuku's consciousness was so hazy, she hadn't been able to understand. The arm he was using to support her body felt really warm. It almost felt like she'd finally be able to enjoy a proper sleep, but Niké had other ideas.

"Don't doze off, you idiot!" he said as he carried her into the lodge at the base of the mountain. Once she was inside, he left to fulfill the queen's orders.

The proprietress of the lodge had helped Shizuku get changed while he was gone. After that, she'd curled up and waited for Niké to return while her body struggled to regain its usual temperature.

"…I really thought I was dead this time. That was a close one."

"I thought you were dead, too. You were covered in blood, and you were almost frozen. Are you an amphibian or something?"

"I'm human, as far as I know."

Shizuku had exhausted her strength as she was making her way down through the trees. However, it seemed that Mea had woken up at the same time that Shizuku had passed out and gone down to the foot of the mountain with Shizuku's handkerchief as a sign. Niké had happened to spot Mea and gone to search for Shizuku. He'd eventually found her collapsed, buried in the snow, and rescued her.

Niké had used magic to heal her injuries and frostbite, but the cold that had permeated her core wasn't so easy to get rid of.

Shivering violently, Shizuku asked Niké a question.

"What did Shiron say?"

"I didn't get anywhere at first. He was just making excuses," replied Niké. "The branches in the forest where you woke up weren't damaged enough for a demonic spirit to have dumped you there. When I pointed that out, he finally came clean. He thought you'd died and got frightened, so he left you in the forest."

"Nope, I'm alive and kicking."

Perhaps the demonic spirit attacks had left Shiron shaken up, but Shizuku wished he'd checked a little more carefully.

Shizuku put down her cup and took Mea, who was still wrapped in her handkerchief, from Niké. Shizuku's assistant demon must have been completely drained. She'd fallen asleep right after Shizuku was rescued and hadn't woken since.

"I hope Mea's all right…"

"Demons don't die that easily. She'll wake up soon."

"Yeah… Thanks."

Shizuku needed to thank Ortea later, too.

After searching the castle and deeming their chances of finding Shizuku slim, Farsas had gotten Shiron to lower his guard by withdrawing their search. Then they'd asked Kisk to step in and shake things up.

"*I'm known for being lenient, while you're famous for being ruthless*," Lars had said in his request to Ortea. *"Don't you think you'd make more of an impact in a situation like this?"*

Reading this, apparently the queen had been so angry that she'd almost burst a blood vessel. Shizuku silently apologized to Ortea in her mind.

“Still, at least they didn’t bury me yet. Waking up during the cremation would be terrifying.”

“They bury people in this region. They wrap you in cloth and put you in the ground.”

“I wouldn’t like to be buried too deep… I’m not confident that I’d be strong enough to dig myself out.”

Shizuku placed her cup back on the table and flexed her fingers. They still felt a bit numb.

“What’s wrong?” Niké asked, sitting beside her. “Do your fingers feel weird?”

“A little. But I can move them.”

“Your hand was black from frostbite. I thought I’d done an okay job of healing it, but maybe I was wrong.”

Niké casually took Shizuku by the hand. She raised her eyebrows, surprised by how warm his hand was.

“You’re so warm! How are you that warm?! Are you a human-body warmer or something?”

“…You’re just freezing.”

“Oh. Well, still, you’re really warm.”

After holding Niké’s hand long enough to feel normal again, Shizuku finally let go. But at that moment, he grabbed her hand instead and pulled her toward him. The sudden closeness made Shizuku’s eyes widen in shock. She finally remembered what had happened the last time they said goodbye—something that she’d almost forgotten.

A stiff smile crossed Shizuku’s face.

“Um, did you get in touch with Farsas?” she asked.

“The more important question is, are you sure your back’s okay?” replied Niké.

“Yeah, it’s fine…”

He’d asked the same question right after picking her up off the ground. At first, Shizuku hadn’t understood why, but when she got changed, she realized the back of her clothing was soaked with blood. He must have thought that she’d been hurt.

Shizuku had no wounds on her back, though, so it must have been someone else’s blood. If someone had lost that much blood

without anyone to help them, they had probably died.

Shizuku casually waved her hand to reassure him.

"I might be cold, but I'm perfectly fine. I'm completely healthy, see?"

"I'm not sure I trust your definition of 'healthy.'"

"That hurts…"

She couldn't blame him for saying that, but they were standing so close their bodies were almost touching. Getting lectured at that distance was extremely uncomfortable. Shizuku wanted to make a break for it, but Niké was still holding her hand.

"Would you mind letting go of me, Niké…?" she asked, feeling kind of awkward, but Niké just continued staring at her in silence.

Shizuku felt so uncomfortable she almost broke out in a cold sweat. *Won't he at least say something?* she thought, averting her gaze and looking down at her lap.

Just as she was about to speak up again, however, a whooshing sound sliced through the air.

Shizuku looked up and yelped in surprise.

"Aah!"

Niké had tensed up in front of her, a bitter expression on his face. A small, golden arrow was hovering inside the room, having stopped in midair right before it pierced his temple. It was the same arrow that had come for Niké back when they were in Kisk.

"Wh-why is that here…?"

"—I'm so pleased you're safe, Shizuku."

"Oh, Princess Leuticia!"

Princess Leuticia—a woman praised by all for her exquisite beauty—had entered the room wearing a flawless smile. Shizuku hurriedly rose to her feet, amazed to see her boss had traveled so far to see her. At the same time, she glanced back at Niké, who was still too scared to move.

"Um, about this arrow…"

"Ahh, yes," said Leuticia, turning to face Niké. "You must be that mage from Kisk. Thank you for your help. But let me warn you, if you dare lay a finger on Shizuku again, I'll make you regret it. Oh, and give my regards to the queen."

"…"

Shizuku sensed there was a cruel threat mixed in there somewhere. She started to understand why Niké was afraid of Leuticia but decided not to probe further.

With a snap of Leuticia's fingers, the golden arrow vanished without a trace. Now that the danger had gone, Niké finally stood up and offered Leuticia a formal greeting.

However, before he got the chance to finish, another voice cut in.

"You've got your sights set on that girl, huh? Good, go ahead and take her."

"Lars!" cried out Leuticia. "You can't just give her away! If Shizuku stays in Farsas, Erik will, too!"

"So that's what you were thinking? As far as I'm concerned, that mage can do whatever he wants with her."

"Uh, where do my human rights come into this…?"

Why had Lars come along, too?

Having appeared behind Leuticia, Lars patted his sister on the head and pointed out a window in the hallway behind him. Through the hazy, snow-covered glass, Shizuku could see tall, white mountains.

"Has the proclamation of war not reached you here yet?"

"*What* proclamation of war?"

It was a prayer etched into history.

A trial tainted in blood and despair.

Twilight was only just descending over the castle city, but all of a sudden, the sky was cloaked in darkness. It almost felt as if it had been waiting for Lars's cue.

Shizuku was stunned by the dark sky.

"An eclipse…? But it happened so suddenly."

A thick blanket of shadows covered the ground, and a dark mist worked its way toward the sky. In an instant, the dim castle city had been cut off from the rest of the world, plunged into a darkness so deep you'd be forgiven for thinking it had descended into the

underworld. Miasma trailed through the air, evading the last remnants of sunlight.

Lars laughed fearlessly as he flung the window open.

"See? It's here."

The other citizens seemed to have noticed the sudden arrival of darkness as well. Windows had opened throughout the town, and people were looking up at the sky—the focal point of their fearful, bewildered gazes.

As the apocalyptic scene was unfolding, a woman suddenly appeared in the air.

Her face was unfamiliar, and she was wearing a tight-fitting black dress that covered her from neck to toe. The subtle shimmer of her long, silver hair made it look like moonlight was reflecting off her. It wasn't clear what color her eyes were, but she was gazing down upon the city below.

She appeared completely surreal. To Shizuku's mind, she looked like an image projected onto the dark sky. Yet when the woman parted her crimson lips, her voice seemed to echo to the ends of the earth.

"Darkness…is coming."

At the end of the hidden past, after memory has been lost, people will continue to be born.

The masses are unaware of the reality of their world.

It is because they do not know, because they have forgotten, that trials appear before them.

The threats and mistakes that the continent has overcome are resurfacing.

"Darkness is coming. Conflict is coming. To you humans who have enjoyed your peaceful slumber. The age when humanity will cower in fear of the darkness and tremble at the thought of death has come once again."

She strung her words together in a resonant voice.

What did she mean?

Lars laughed, and Leuticia closed her eyes.

"The darkness doesn't care whether or not you're sinners—it will devour you all and leave you to rot. Unjust endings will flood every corner of your land, and the things you hold dear will slip through your fingers."

There was once a time when the continent endured seven hundred long years of tyranny.

During this period, war relentlessly scorched both the people and the land, and countless nations were created and destroyed.

It was referred to as the Dark Age—an era when that which had been taken was stolen again, and that which had been lovingly cultivated was trampled upon.

Hearing what sounded like this woman announcing the return of this age, Shizuku held her breath, standing frozen to the spot.

"Death will rain down on you and pile up at your feet. Nowhere shall escape it; all will share equally in the despair. Borders will fade, and the world will become seeped in Negativity… That is, if you surrender to it."

The woman's voice, clear and unwavering, carried with it nothing but pure determination.

Her smile was beautiful, yet so sublime it made one hesitate to speak.

"Challenge it, humans, if you have the willpower. Show it how strong you are and defy its attempts to steal from you. Only the person who ascends to the summit of blood and resentment shall seize this continent and become its new king."

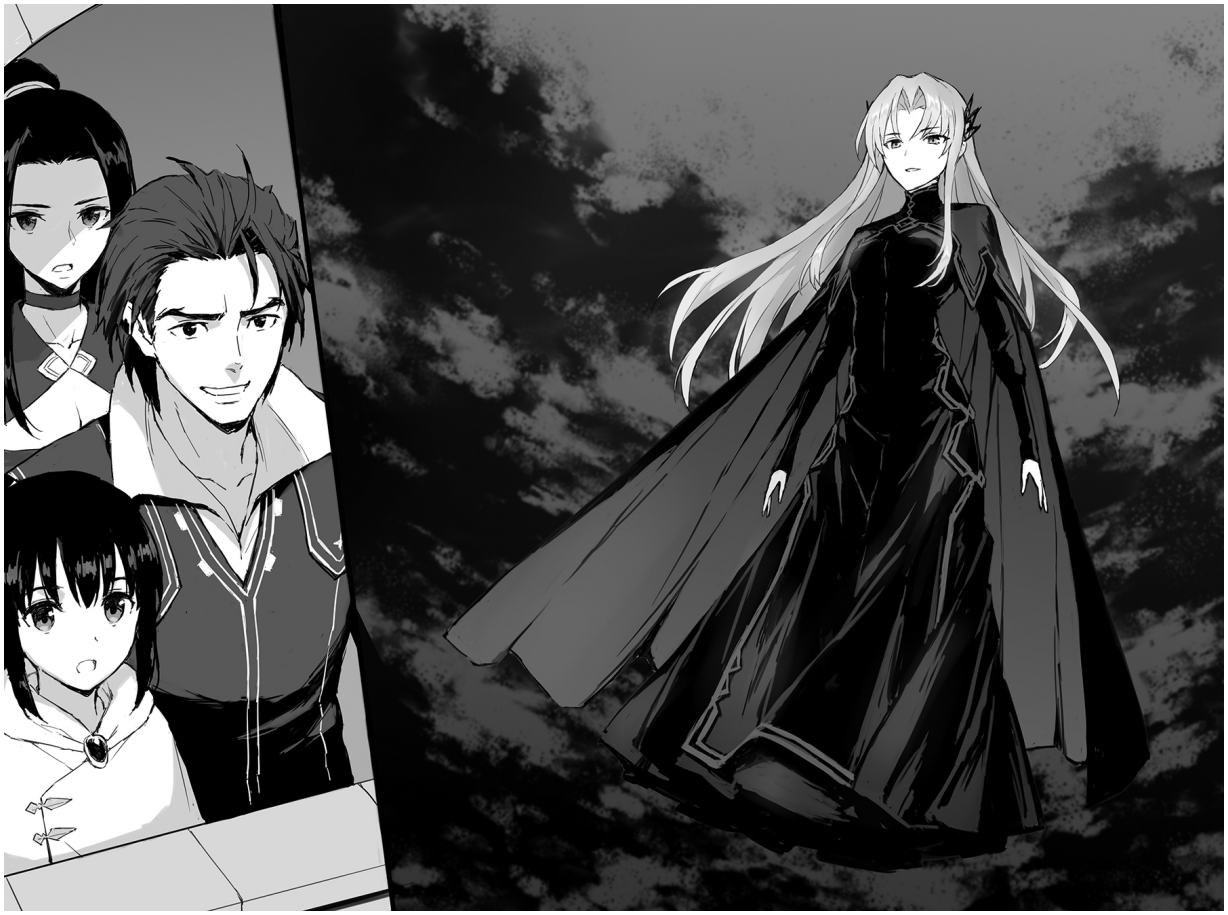
The woman took a breath and smiled softly, looking around at the

snow-covered world.

For that brief moment, the sharpness vanished from her eyes, replaced by a light as if she were praying. Her gaze almost seemed to contradict the severe proclamation she'd just made, and Shizuku found herself drawn to it.

Then the woman concluded her proclamation.

"My name is Aviella, the Seventh Witch. I will be waiting for you at the end of one era and the beginning of another."



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The woman vanished from the sky, and once twilight returned to the city previously enveloped in darkness, Shizuku glanced up at Lars.

"What was all that about…?" she asked, her voice trembling at the end of her sentence.

"A declaration of war, obviously. From a witch."

"A-a witch?"

"They're only human."

After the Dark Age came the Age of Witches—a time when five fearsome witches lurked in the shadows of history.

The king, carrying a sword that even witches feared, showed no trace of emotion. His haughty blue eyes looked over the top of Shizuku's head as he addressed the man who'd appeared at the end of the hallway.

"So? Where are we headed?"

"The ruins of Helginis. A new castle was built there."

"Erik!"

Hearing Shizuku call out his name, Erik glanced at her for a moment, a conflicted look on his face. Shizuku tried to run toward him, but he kept her away with his hand.

"I'm covered in demon blood. You shouldn't get too close."

"I'm sorry! I…"

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. I'm glad you're safe."

Erik then turned to Niké and gave him a small nod of gratitude.

"Thank you. You saved her."

"…You have no reason to thank me," Niké replied curtly.

Erik thought to himself for a moment, then stepped closer to whisper something in Niké's ear. The other man scowled deeply.

"I don't know. They've probably taken precautions to avoid being followed."

"That's true. Sorry for bothering you. I just thought it was worth asking."

Before Shizuku had the chance to wonder what they were talking

about, Erik turned back to the king and carried on issuing his report.

"I also got to have a bit of a look around inside the castle, but it's quite large. Being a magic structure, it's taller than any normal building could ever be."

"Is that where the witch is?"

"Most likely—along with all the other high-ranking demons that have appeared in the castle city."

A change was coming.

The return of darkness and the battle to overthrow it were drawing near.

Shizuku felt a silent commotion stirring inside her, prompting her to place a hand on her chest. Without realizing it, she started to hold her breath.

Why did she feel so anxious?

When her wandering gaze met Erik's, he frowned. It was unusual to see hesitation in his expression.

However, the king's commanding voice soon broke the tension.

"There's something else, isn't there? Spit it out."

With all eyes on him, Erik wiped the hesitant look off his face. His emotionless gaze met that of the king.

"That witch…is the owner of the red book."

This was the book they'd been searching for, the one that chronicled events concealed from history, thought to be one of the interlopers' cursed artifacts.

Shizuku was the only one left speechless by this revelation.

Leuticia sighed, while Niké's expression grew confused.

Lars, meanwhile, chuckled and looked up at the darkened sky above him.

The sun was setting.

The brief twilight was drawing to a close.

The long night that would follow would be unlike any this continent had ever seen.

The Seventh Witch had declared war, aiming to restore the

darkness that had once prevailed.

Shizuku felt everything sway, as if she was dizzy, and pressed a hand against her forehead. She exhaled shallowly as she closed her eyes.

It was the same darkness that had existed in the beginning—one that seemed like it was within reach, yet couldn’t be touched.

It felt as though it was enveloping the entire world.

4. The People’s Prayer



The sharp claw pierced the man’s abdomen, tearing out his entrails and sending fresh blood spurting into the air. The man dropped his sword and collapsed to the ground without a sound.

“Brother!” the girl yelled, moving to run over to her elder sibling—but she soon leaped back, sensing an attack from the side.

Acid doused the spot where she’d been standing, and a pungent smell spread through the air. She could hear a child crying in the distance, awash with the scents of burning flesh and cloying blood.

Yet as she held herself up with her sword, she could no longer see any people moving. The young girl was the only person left in her small village.

She looked up defiantly, meeting the gazes of the demonic spirits targeting her.

“I won’t let you beat me.”

She readied her sword, even though it was far too big for her. She remembered her mother once telling her to stop being so desperate to follow in her father’s footsteps.

However, right now, this sword was the only one by her side. There was nobody else around. The other villagers had all died because of the witch.

She spotted somebody’s misshapen body out of the corner of her eye. A black shadow hovered over it, and she could hear the sound of chewing.

The demonic spirits fluttered their wings above her, waiting for the right moment to strike, poised to sink their claws into the girl’s flesh and devour her.

That morning, despair had fallen on them even more gently than

the rain.

With a scream, the girl brandished the massive sword and charged right into the horde of demonic spirits all by herself.

※

The darkness was closing in. A darkness that had been discarded and forgotten eons ago.

The long night was beginning. A night that would force people to change how they thought.

The powerless who cowered in the presence of the darkness would fall victim to an unforgettable terror.

Death and glory awaited those with the will to fight, even if they lacked strength.

The truth, however, would only be revealed to those with both strength and determination.

In the fallen city of Helginis, where an age had once come to a close, a new age now began.

The castle towered over the land fallen to evil, standing shrouded in silence and exposed to the world.

※

Where did I go wrong?

Shiron signed the document, his hands shaking, and gave it to his official. The proposal, which consisted of forming an army and advancing beyond the nation's borders, would be put into action once it passed through the king's hands.

Shiron thought about what had happened the day before.

"So how would you like to deal with the liar?" the king of Farsas had asked, looking down at the prime minister.

He'd appeared from out of nowhere, carrying a woman who

should have been dead under his arm. Shiron never imagined things would end up this way. One woman had the potential to spark a clash between two of the Great Nations.

There was a tale from the distant Dark Age about three nations crumbling because of a single woman, but she had allegedly been an exceptional beauty. In contrast, the girl Shiron had discarded was as unremarkable as one could get.

As Shiron wrestled with his confusion, Lars shot him an acrimonious smile.

"Use your army to attack the castle of the Seventh Witch. If you can manage that, I'll let this incident slide."

After thorough deliberation, Shiron had accepted the king's demand. It could even be viewed as a settlement of sorts for Farsas.

Either way, the castle of the Seventh Witch was located just west of Medial's border, practically in a neighboring country. If that was where the demonic spirits were appearing and attacking from, they'd have to deal with it eventually. The "declaration of war" had come as a surprise, but witches were more than fairytale characters.

Plus, if what Shizuku said was true and the item really was in the witch's hands, then perhaps this invasion was a chance to reclaim it.

When the king of Medial saw the document Shiron had signed, he appeared to have some questions, but in the end, he issued his approval without saying a word. Three days later, the army formed under royal decree set out for the ruins of Helginis.

This army of twenty thousand, however, didn't even make it to the witch's castle.

They had deployed in absolute secrecy to evade the witch's notice, using teleportation to assemble right before the border—but the moment they were all together, the army was ambushed by demonic spirits and half destroyed. Caught off guard by the sudden onslaught, the soldiers had no chance to defend themselves, and they fled. That very day, the heads of the army's generals were delivered to Medial Castle, along with a message from the witch: "Only those who come of their own will shall be welcomed."

※

"She must be telling us to come as individuals, rather than mobilizing the army," grumbled the king, having just finished reading the report in his office in Farsas Castle. He'd pressured Medial into mobilizing an army to test how strong their opposition was, but the result was far less interesting than he'd imagined.

It had been a week since the illusion of the witch had appeared in major cities across the continent, yet there was no news of anyone having reached the top of the castle yet.

The fallen city of Helginis, where the castle stood, was located in the mountainous northwest region of the continent, a place so remote that it was hard for any ordinary person to visit. Many people who made their living by fighting had simply given up after learning of the castle's location.

That said, a considerable number of people still tried, motivated by the promise of becoming the "ruler of the continent" or intrigued by the existence of a witch, something that was only ever heard about in fairy tales. Nearly a hundred of them had spent several days to get to the witch's castle, using teleportation rings to travel to nearby towns, yet only a handful managed to escape with their lives —and even then, only barely. The vast majority never returned.

The king of Farsas skimmed through a report stating that they'd lost contact with the small nations to the north and west of the Helginis ruins, then waved his hand lethargically.

"Seems like I'll never stop receiving pleas for help, no matter how hard I try to wriggle out of them."

"You're probably right about that," replied Leuticia. "When people think of exterminating witches, it's always the wielder of Akashia who comes to mind."

"I hate our ancestors for starting that tradition."

"It's not just a tradition. It's been that way ever since the other nations discovered Akashia's powers."

His sister's cool-headed observation made the king stick out his tongue like a misbehaving child. Leaning back in his chair, Lars

gazed up at the ceiling.

"Will the wards around the northern towns of Farsas hold?"

"The number of demons is increasing by the day, so I doubt they'll last long at this rate. It's only a matter of time. In other countries, entire towns have already been wiped out."

"Guess we can't rest on our laurels, then. Besides, that witch has the red book, doesn't she? It's one of the interlopers' cursed artifacts."

Lars's gaze shifted to the man standing beside his sister. Erik nodded, carrying several books tucked under his arm.

"It seems the witch hired mercenaries to suppress the demonic spirits before the castle was built. I've gotten a witness statement from one of the mercenaries, who claims she always walked around with an untitled red book. From what he says, it sounds like she used that book to gain intel about Medial's movements that she wouldn't normally have known."

"So it's almost certain she's the culprit. But why did she summon the demons, then organize her own extermination squad to subjugate them?"

"Probably so she could build the castle. She caused a large number of deaths on both sides, then used the power from those souls and the Negativity to cast a castle-building forbidden curse. That type of magical architecture was tested out at the beginning of the Dark Age, but it was assumed the technique was lost long ago."

"Isn't the fact that she constructed the castle enough to prove that she's behind this, then?"

"Yes. Plus, the location where Helginis once stood has been transformed into the underworld using a forbidden curse. She must have restored and reversed the effects of a purification barrier that once existed in that land. There are no surviving records regarding a purification barrier in Helginis, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was mentioned in her book."

"She's exploiting lost knowledge, huh? That's not something to be taken lightly. Does she have any idea how much of a mess the continent's history already is?"

Lars's exasperated comment prompted Leuticia to expand.

“There are many parts that are still secret, even of the history that we know. If you were to add in the experiments that were erased from records, it would be too terrible to process. It’s likely the women’s souls collected from different cities were also used to turn the area into the underworld and construct her castle.”

The anger in the princess’s voice was palpable.

The number of victims was already staggering. There were the women whose souls had been extracted, the mercenaries who’d been hired to be used as raw materials, and the residents of the towns and villages that had been attacked.

The three people in the office paused for a moment, contemplating their own thoughts concerning this huge incident that was sure to leave its mark on history.

※

A map of the continent was spread out on the desk in the laboratory —a stark contrast to the picture book drafts that were normally there.

Harve pointed to a spot in the northwest and gave Shizuku an explanation.

“Helginis is the name of a country that was destroyed at the end of the Dark Age. In fact, people say the fall of Helginis marked the end of that age.”

“Huh? A country way out in the corner of the continent put an end to the Dark Age?”

Helginis lay to the northwest of Farsas and west of Medial in a relatively small mountainous region.

Harve smiled, appearing to have anticipated Shizuku’s confusion.

“At that time, the entire continent was exhausted from many years of war. People were ready to bring things to a close, but there was nothing that could prompt a conclusion. That’s when Helginis, which had managed to avoid the horrors of war thanks to its isolated position surrounded by rocky mountains, got wiped out in a single night.”

"In one night…? Was it destroyed by a forbidden curse?"

After spending a year in this world, that was the first possibility that came to Shizuku's mind. But Harve shook his head.

"No. It was destroyed by a witch."

"…A witch."

Shizuku had seen a witch in Medial just a short while earlier: the Seventh Witch, who'd just declared war on the continent.

Harve smiled at Shizuku, apparently having read her mind.

"Not the Seventh Witch. Back then, there were five witches on the continent, and none of them had tried to get involved in the chaos. But then, a witch suddenly appeared in Helginis and burned the country to the ground. This made people realize how much of a threat witches actually were…and they stopped fighting one another. Peace reigned after the Dark Age, but the people were terrified of witches. I doubt the witches themselves gave it much thought, though."

Harve sounded like he was joking. After all, Farsas had a deep connection with witches.

The Age of Witches had ended three hundred years earlier, when the king of Farsas took a witch as his queen. One of their children, the now-deceased Sixth Witch, was Queen Fystoria, hence this was why Aviella was the Seventh Witch.

Harve picked up his tea and warmed his throat.

"I strayed off topic a little, but that's a basic history of Helginis, the region that's causing us problems right now."

"Really? Is the problem the fact that it's surrounded by tall mountains?"

"No. It's an area dense with magic—or perhaps you could say that the boundaries blocking us off from other realms are less distinct there. You find places like that around the continent."

"…Oh. Now that you mention it, the folktale surrounding the lake where Mea lived said that it was originally so full of magical power that no fish could live there. But then, the water god built a castle and purified it, so people were able to fish there."

The small bird perched at the corner of the table looked up at the mention of her name. Having been weakened from using too much

of her power in Medial, Mea now seemed right as rain.

Harve nodded like a proud teacher.

"That's right. Lake Nevys is a well-known example. Helginis is another place where the density of the magical energy made it impossible to enter. But about eleven hundred years ago, a woman known as the saint came and purified the land at the cost of her own life. She'd been accompanied by her followers, and as they mourned her death, they founded the kingdom of Helginis to ensure her sacrifice wasn't in vain."

"Whoa… That's a pretty amazing story."

It was hard to understand why someone would go as far as to sacrifice their life to make an inhospitable place livable, but Shizuku figured she must have had her reasons. Harve, who specialized in history, gently raised a finger.

"It seems as though there was a massive magical device that continued to purify Helginis, even after the saint's death, but since the witch wrecked the town, no detailed information remains. The device was likely destroyed along with everything else. After Helginis was wiped out, the area became shrouded in magic once again, and for hundreds of years, nobody was able to step foot in the area. That is, until recently."

"And now it's the focus of the whole continent, and not in a good way."

Having verbalized it, Shizuku and Harve both fell silent at the severity of the situation they were faced with.

Shizuku took a sip of her tea, which had gone completely cold, and thought back on the events of the previous few days.

Since Aviella unleashed her declaration of war on the continent, people had been terrified, whispering about the "return to darkness" and the "advent of the witches." Many towns and villages had been attacked by the demons that used Helginis as their base, and the number of victims was growing by the day.

None of the nations knew how to respond, and after hearing about the defeat of Medial's army, they were all hesitant to act.

Although a sense of gloom shrouded the entire continent like a blanket of darkness, some people had set out for the witch's castle, driven by ambition or a sense of justice. Discussions on how to tackle the situation were proceeding in Farsas night and day as well.

Erik had been to the witch's castle and examined both its interior and exterior, so he'd been leading these meetings to plan countermeasures. This role left him exceedingly busy, so Shizuku hadn't had the chance to meet up with him since he came back. Instead, Harve was checking up on her for Erik, so Shizuku was using this opportunity to learn a few things from the history specialist.

Harve let out a heavy sigh as he stood in front of the map.

"According to Erik, the witch has restored and reversed the magical device in Helginis, transforming the land into the underworld… Witches are a real nuisance."

"Uh, how strong are witches, exactly? Like, how did one destroy a nation?"

When Shizuku had first met Erik, he'd explained that a witch was a term for an extremely powerful female mage, but she still couldn't quite grasp how strong that was.

Harve forced a smile and sighed as he responded to her innocent question.

"Not all witches are the same, but people say that they're usually powerful enough to go up against an army of tens of thousands, all on their own. The sheer size and power of the magic they can utilize is unrivaled. They say Helginis was simply burned to the ground by a large-scale destruction spell. That's not something a human could achieve."

"Whoa. That's some firepower…"

Could somebody that powerful *actually* exist? Shizuku cast her mind back to the side profile of the woman who'd appeared in the dark sky that day.

Aviella had spoken about the return of darkness and encouraged people to take on her challenge, yet her face looked unmistakably

human. Or, at least, she had to Shizuku.

What had been running through that woman's mind as she introduced herself as a loathsome "witch"?

"I guess you've gotta be level fifty to defeat the Demon Lord, huh…"

"What are you talking about?"

As Harve and Shizuku struggled to understand one another, they heard a knock at the door and rose to their feet.

Two soldiers had come to see them, bearing a message for Shizuku.

"The king has asked to see you."

"Me?"

Shizuku was surprised by this sudden invitation, but she had no right to refuse. Harve volunteered to accompany her, and they followed the soldiers to the king's office.

"I wonder what he wants from me. Do you think he might be craving some carrot cake?"

"Not a chance. Maybe he's in the mood for another two-hour run."

"I can't stand those; they ruin my appetite. I end up puking half the time."

The pair's lighthearted conversation continued until they stepped foot in the office. As soon as the soldier opened the door, Shizuku heard Erik shouting sharply at her.

"Shizuku! Don't come in!"

"Huh?"

As Shizuku stood there wide-eyed, the king suddenly reached out toward her. He managed to restrain her with his muscular arms in no time, and her eyes darted around in bewilderment. Before Shizuku had the chance to protest, Lars's hand was already on her neck.

The king's grip was firm beneath her chin, putting pressure on her breathing. Shizuku instinctively held her breath, and the king snickered, his voice right next to her ear.

"Tell me. If you don't, I'll snap her neck right here and now."

"You bastard!"

Shizuku heard the disgusted voice of a woman condemning the

king’s behavior. It was only then that she realized Ortea was in the room.

Lars’s gaze wasn’t directed at Shizuku, however, but at a certain young man. The man’s deep-blue eyes glared back at him, brimming with anger.

“Let go of her.”

“Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

This wasn’t the sort of situation that could be dismissed as a joke; the atmosphere was dangerously hostile.

Shizuku froze as she sensed Lars’s grip tighten. Unable to understand what was happening, she looked at Erik.

But at that moment, from the corner of her eye, she spotted a navy-blue book lying on the table—and in an instant, the suffocating sensation was replaced by an inexplicable dizziness, causing Shizuku to become unsteady on her feet.

※

Two hours before Shizuku was called to the king’s office…

“—Even so, information is getting out far too quickly,” Lars said as he leafed through his paperwork.

He was talking about the incident involving Medial.

Medial was one of the Great Nations, having dominated vast stretches of land for over two hundred years. They’d been swift to assemble and mobilize their army, yet the country’s troops had been ambushed by a horde of demonic spirits and defeated before they even managed to cross the border. Could they have had a spy in the royal court?

Once Erik heard the king express his frustration, he shook his head.

“It’s probably the book. All sorts of things are recorded in it, including the “verified actions” of nations and influential people, which are logged as part of the continent’s history. The moment Medial decided to deploy its forces, that information was likely added

to the record."

Hearing this, Leuticia frowned.

"It was 'added'? You're saying the book updates itself automatically?"

"Yes."

"That has to be against the rules. If there's a book that keeps track of current events as they happen, then nothing can be kept secret."

If the red book really did have that power, it would make it extremely difficult for nations and important figures to make any moves.

Lars, the king of the most powerful nation on the continent and a man famed for wielding Akashia, looked understandably annoyed. He glanced at Erik with his arms crossed.

"You seem to know a suspicious amount about that book. Where'd you learn all this?"

"I have a similar book myself. So far, no information from inside Farsas has been revealed to the red book's owner. That information has been getting added to my book, rather than the red one."

"What do you mean?"

"It would be quicker for you to see it for yourself."

As Erik said this, he casually offered the king a book enclosed in a black cover. The sight of it stunned the two direct descendants of the Farsasian royal family into silence for a moment.

From their perspective, this was an object that needed to be eradicated, a cursed artifact that the interlopers had presumably created, yet here it was, right in front of them. After recovering from the initial shock, Leuticia cautiously reached out for it and picked it up.

"Is it safe to look at?"

"I think so. I've read it myself, and I'm fine."

After glancing at her brother, who gave a nod, Leuticia flipped through the pages of the untitled book.

Inside, she found a history of the vast continent they lived on.

It detailed events spanning over a thousand years. The last entry in the book stated that the 30th king of Farsas, Lars, had

unexpectedly traveled to Medial. This event had occurred just a week prior. Frowning, Leuticia passed the book to her older brother, who skimmed through it with his elbow propped on the table.

"…So there's more than one of these? That was an oversight on my part," he admitted.

"As far as I know, there are two books documenting the history of the continent: this one and the red book the witch has in her possession. The nations covered in each book depend on the era that's being written about. Currently, this one's focusing on Farsas, Kisk, Gandona, and other countries in the central to southwestern regions."

"The other book must cover Medial and the other eastern and northern territories, then."

Despite his initial surprise, Lars was quick to adjust to this new revelation. Perhaps the knowledge of magical artifacts that had been passed down to him had helped with that.

Erik nodded in response to Lars's remark, then continued talking.

"When it comes to dividing events by country, the records seem to prioritize where something happened rather than where the people involved were from. For example, although the book says that you traveled to Medial the other day, it doesn't mention what you did there."

In which case, those details must have been logged in the red book instead.

Lars tutted as he flipped through the pages. After skimming through about a dozen, his eyes landed on the word "Farsas." There, he saw accounts regarding the history of his kingdom that weren't supposed to leave the nation's borders. His expression twisted into a scowl.

"I'd love to tell this book to stop logging things without permission, but it works in our favor that updates about Farsas are logged in *this* book. We can make preparations within our own borders and strike Helginis before the enemy catches on."

"Maybe, but… Do you really believe this is genuine, Lars?"

Leuticia didn't think Erik was lying to them; she just found it hard to believe that such an item actually existed. Anyone who heard

about the book would probably ask the same question.

Lars tilted his head to one side.

"If that's what you're worried about, why don't we carry out an experiment? Let's do something. Maybe we could erect a bronze statue of a duck?"

"…Is that the best you can come up with?"

Testing the book's capabilities was a good idea, but building a meaningless statue for such a purpose wasn't. It would take too long to see results.

Hearing his sister's objection, Lars tilted his head in the other direction.

"Okay, let's do something quick and easy. Let me think… I know—go and summon Ortea."

Ortea was the queen of a neighboring country, and they'd only just negotiated a truce with her. Leuticia's eyes widened at this suggestion, but she soon nodded and left the room. Once his sister was gone, Lars carried on flipping through the book.

Ten minutes later, the king was staring at the blank last page of the book when words suddenly started to appear.

The new sentence read, *"By order of the king, Farsas has invited the queen of Kisk to their nation."*

Lars's gaze turned icy for a moment after seeing the letters written by an invisible hand, and he silently closed the book.

※

As one would expect, the witch's illusion had graced the skies of Kisk's castle city as well.

Her ominous declaration of war terrified its citizens, who'd just ended their conflict with Farsas.

Kisk hadn't been subject to any demon attacks yet, though. Their distance from Helginis was most likely to thank for that.

As a result, Ortea continued with her usual admin work while simultaneously preparing for a potential assault. This involved

reviewing and signing documents ordering for the detection barriers along the border to be strengthened.

"She calls herself a witch, does she? That's quite a bold claim to make."

There had been six witches in recorded history. While all of them had been feared for their incredible power, none of them had openly confronted humanity. Every so often, a witch had shown up and instilled fear in people—with the destruction of Helginis being one such example—but they'd never played a role in belligerent, hostile actions, such as commanding hordes of demons to massacre tens of thousands of people.

What was the new so-called witch planning on doing? Still holding her pen, Ortea began to turn the phrase "declaration of war" over in her head—but her thoughts was interrupted by an unexpected message from Farsas, who'd last been in touch only a few days earlier.

"Farsas again, huh…? Those fools have no qualms about inconveniencing people."

The queen grumpily picked up the document. When she scanned through it, she was surprised to discover that Farsas's plea was a respectable one. Apparently, they wanted to consult with her about the witch incident in private.

"A consultation? They must have nerves of steel, summoning me."

Teleportation would allow her to reach Farsas in an instant, but why did she, the queen, need to show up in person?

Ortea was frustrated, but she knew it'd cause even more of a nuisance to decline the request and have them show up uninvited in Kisk instead.

She quickly signed the documents she'd been going through, summoned a mage, and set off for Farsas.

When she got there, however, she was told about a completely preposterous book.

"A secret history book that was brought here from outside our

world? Are you half asleep? Or have you finally lost your mind? Not that you ever *were* a respectable man."

After everything was explained to her, Ortea's initial reaction was to mock Lars.

"I'm being serious," Lars calmly replied, flashing her a mischievous smile. "And what's more, the book updates automatically in real time."

"…Is this a joke? There's no way such a thing could exist."

"Want to test it out? Name any event, past or present. What do you want me to find?"

Ortea didn't know how to answer. Parts of her nation's and her own personal history that she didn't want anybody to know came flooding back.

The man held out the book to the queen. Perhaps it was because it had no title, or because of what she'd just heard, but it looked weirdly repugnant. Ortea took it in both hands. The feel of its leather binding resembled the skin of a living person.

Ortea looked down at it as though it were a loathsome insect. Then she opened it to the page indicated by the bookmark.

The young queen immediately froze. A stunned murmur escaped her lips.

"How does it know about Tryphina…?"

Only direct descendants of Kisk's royal bloodline knew the truth about their nation's first queen. Ortea—the only person alive who should know what was written on that page—dropped the book in shock. Lars managed to catch the thick tome in his hand right before it hit the floor.

"Do you believe me now?"

"…This is ridiculous."

"Well, I don't care if you don't believe me. Your job here's done."

"What did you just say?"

Ortea attempted to intimidate the insolent king, but when he showed her the book's final page and she realized that she'd been summoned as part of an "experiment," her beautiful face tensed up. On that same page was another entry stating, *Kisk has decided to strengthen its magical barriers at the border.* This decision had only

just been made, so there was no possible way Farsas could have known. Ortea reread the page several times, experiencing a mixture of anger and mild revulsion.

Ortea wished she could dismiss this eerie discovery as nonsense, but the fear and curiosity that came from something so incomprehensible kept her rooted in place. Ortea was as rigid as a doll, and Lars sat her down in a nearby chair and briefly explained the oral legends that had been passed down in Farsas. Then the king shifted his gaze back to Erik.

"What do you think would happen if we burned this book?"

"My hypothesis is that all future entries would move to the red one."

"I see. So destroying it now would only play right into our enemy's hands."

Ortea gave Lars an exasperated look, shocked at how eager he seemed to throw the book into the flames. As he held that tome filled with numerous powerful forbidden curses, Lars's expression turned thoughtful. He glanced over at his sister, who was leaning against the wall.

"If entries are split up depending on the location of an event, our enemy will know what I'm doing as soon as I step foot in Helginis territory… What am I supposed to do?"

"The witch says she's happy to take on individual challengers, but I doubt you'll be treated like any ordinary swordsman. If you mobilize your army, everything will depend on how swiftly and promptly you can capture the castle."

"Yeah. Well, we can think about that later," said Lars. "Right now, the problem lies with you."

His tone was light—but only as light as a cloth wrapped around a sword.

Erik, the recipient of Lars's penetrating gaze, furrowed his brow.

"What do you need?"

"Where did you get this book?" Lars asked.

"About a month ago, from a traveling merchant," replied Erik.

"Don't lie to me."

Anyone else would have faltered under Lars's sharp glare,

whether or not it was their first time being on the receiving end of it. Yet Erik calmly met the king's gaze. There was nothing in his eyes that suggested he was lying. In fact, he gave so little away that asking further questions seemed pointless.

Despite this, Lars just smiled and refused to look away. Ortea and Leuticia appeared puzzled by the hostility brewing between the two men.

The king continued, still glaring straight at Erik.

"You revealed this information because we wouldn't be able to defeat the witch without knowing the function of these books, didn't you? But if you were trying to deceive me, you should have ensured that that girl was on the same page. Tell me the truth—this book belongs to *her*, doesn't it? I'm right, aren't I?"

Lars wasn't going to take no for an answer. Erik narrowed his eyes, meeting the king's gaze.

The tension in the air was palpable. Erik began to open his mouth to deny the king's accusation.

If their conversation had continued, he might have won the king over.

But at that moment…an oblivious Shizuku arrived.

It hurt to breathe. She was dizzy.

The pressure of the king's grip wasn't fully to blame, though. In fact, Lars's hand wasn't even obstructing her breathing. He was just lifting her chin up, his grip soft around her narrow neck.

Shizuku didn't understand why this was happening. She stumbled and bumped into the king. Lars casually waved a hand to dismiss Harve and the soldiers who'd come with Shizuku, then steadied her to stop her from collapsing.

With that, he resumed questioning Erik.

"Are you still refusing to speak? You wouldn't want this girl to die in vain, would you?

"She doesn't know anything."

"But you were there, weren't you? You were there when I

negotiated with Ortea at the fortress in Kisk. This girl knew about the royal family's hidden resources—something not even Ortea was aware of. How do you explain that?"

Erik was the only one whose expression remained unchanged. Ortea, who'd been there at the time, and even Shizuku, who'd said it, went wide-eyed.

The knowledge she wasn't supposed to possess stirred inside Shizuku, making her sick to her stomach.

Her head hurt. She felt nauseous. Her whole body was convinced the ground had disappeared beneath her feet.

The king's voice sounded distant, even though he was right beside her.

"Nothing about the crystal cave in Kisk was mentioned in this book. That means it must have been written in the witch's book. So how did this girl know about it? Is she a spy?"

Why did Shizuku know something like that?

She wanted to know more than anybody. The information had seeped into her beneath her awareness.

It was as though it had always been there, lurking deep within her.

She couldn't fight against it. After all, she was unable to recognize its presence.

Someone let out a sigh.

It was probably Leuticia or Ortea. Erik never sighed. He just gazed at Shizuku with a bitter expression.

Shizuku swallowed the breath that kept her alive. In almost the same instant, Erik responded to the king.

"Fine. I'll explain."

"Make sure it's the truth."

"Of course. Shizuku is nothing but a victim."

At long last, Lars released Shizuku's neck. He lifted her up and sat

her on a nearby desk.

As Shizuku pressed her hands against her throat, everyone's eyes turned toward the mage. The room was filled with anxiety. Erik glanced at the book on the table in the center. For a moment, Shizuku thought she saw a flicker of contempt in his gaze, but maybe she was imagining it.

"Both this book and the one the witch has came from outside this world. They indiscriminately record the continent's history. But that's not the only power they hold."

Shizuku knew what he was going to say next.

She knew it, and yet she couldn't remember what it was. She just couldn't extract the thought.

She didn't need to remember anything to understand, though. She could *feel* it.

Erik was the only person who'd noticed the truth.

He was the only person to reach it.

He must have grasped the situation long before Shizuku ever did.

"This book has the power to implant someone with the innate language of this continent. Humans didn't always possess innate language skills—the languages were unified so the interlopers' cursed artifacts could take records."

※

"I want you to tell me your name."

The girl's golden eyes widened at the sound of the man's voice, and she cocked her head to one side. She looked perplexed, then pointed at the water jug in his hand and asked him something. When he realized that she was asking whether he disliked the flavor of the water, he shook his head.

"No. I asked you for your name."

People in this isolated village didn't seem to understand the language he spoke. The girl looked even more troubled now,

continuously glancing back at her village, but the man took her small hand in his and made her look back at him.

"Your name. Do you understand me?"

First, he patted his chest and said his own name: "Aetea." Then he pointed at the girl and cocked his head to one side.

It was a natural gesture for both of them to make, despite not sharing a common language. At long last, the girl seemed to understand. With an innocent smile, she pointed at her chest.

"Ludia."

This is a tale from long, long ago, of a god and his goddess.

※

Erik's words spread throughout the office like an invisible blaze.

It was clear that the three royals were finding his revelation hard to accept. They all believed to certain extents that innate language was rooted in the depths of human nature.

Erik, however, was indicating that these skills had been implanted by an external force.

Nobody could say a word. Shizuku held her breath and stared at him.

Erik, meanwhile, continued to speak in his usual calm manner.

"I've spent a long time with Shizuku, learning about the languages of her world. I've reached the conclusion that language is something created by people. In her world, there are countless different languages across many countries and regions, and they even evolve as different eras and cultures influence human thought."

"Huh? That's the first I've heard," commented the king.

"I never mentioned it before. In Shizuku's world, language and thought are closely interconnected, and humans are capable of complex thoughts precisely because language exists. The two complement each other and evolve together."

That was the answer Erik had reached regarding the natural state of language.

And yet, things in his world were different.

"In contrast, innate language is a fixed skill that people are equipped with. When you compare it to languages that humans created, though, the presence or absence of certain words doesn't make sense. Why does innate language contain not only words for things from the natural world, but also for manmade inventions? I still haven't found a clear answer to that question."

Leuticia propped up her chin with her elegantly shaped fingers.

"Isn't it just happenstance that we were supplied with that vocabulary? We tend to use compound words to refer to things that people have created."

"We do, but there's actually a limit to the artificial objects our innate language can describe. Things that existed before the oldest written records—around a hundred years before the Dark Age—have their own names, whereas items invented afterward are named using compound words. Doesn't that suggest that our innate vocabulary was shaped around the way things were at that point in history?"

"Created…? But how could something innate be—?"

At that point, Leuticia fell silent. She must have remembered that the interlopers' cursed artifacts had the unique ability to "make the impossible possible."

Erik merely glanced at his boss, then continued making his point.

"The unnatural aspects of innate language have been overlooked due to the hypothesis that our souls are connected to a realm that controls innate language. After examining several cases involving defective souls, however, I've reached another conclusion: Innate language skills are not dependent on the soul. Which begs the question—where does innate language come from?"

Erik paused to take a breath, then looked around at everyone in the room.

"My conclusion is that innate language was abruptly introduced from outside our world during the unnamed period between the Age of Gods and the Dark Age. When you look at it that way, a lot of things start to make sense."

"But still…," Leuticia said, gently shaking her head.

As Erik's superior, she must have already been familiar with his claim that innate language wasn't dependent on the soul. Yet even if she'd accepted that, she wasn't immediately convinced that innate language skills were the product of the interlopers' cursed artifacts. If Erik's hypothesis was true, then they'd been at the mercy of the interlopers' cursed artifacts all along.

They'd been under their influence without even realizing it.

That thought was beyond disturbing.

The princess bit her tongue. Her brother cocked his head slightly and spoke up on her behalf.

"Explain the reasoning behind that claim. In what way does it 'make sense'?"

"Let me explain."

Erik pulled out a chart from the pile of documents he was carrying.

"This chart lists the countries mentioned in my navy-blue book, arranged chronologically by decade."

Leuticia received the chart from Erik, glanced at it, then frowned. The number of countries written about in the book had almost doubled at the beginning of the Dark Age, despite the fact that no significant historical events had occurred during that time. She passed the piece of paper to Ortea and asked her subordinate a question.

"That's…not because the number of countries exploded during that era, is it?"

"Nope."

"According to my rough calculations, the book started recording entries for approximately fifty percent of the nations that existed at that time, when it was originally recording only about a third of them," said Ortea, outlining her observations in her beautiful voice.

While the queen was widely known for her arrogance and sadistic reputation, she was actually quite studious.

"Exactly," said Erik, responding to the queen of the neighboring nation with a nod.

Lars—who'd taken the chart out of Ortea's hand—looked at the time periods in question and gave a half-hearted grunt. As Erik

watched the piece of paper being passed around, he resumed his explanation.

"At a certain point during the Dark Period, the number of entries changed drastically. That signifies…a change in the number of books."

His indigo blue eyes locked onto Shizuku.

They'd had this conversation before. Somewhere, at some point in the past.

Captured by that sense of déjà vu, Shizuku spoke up.

"There were three books originally, weren't there?"

"Correct. Somewhere along the line, one of the books disappeared, so the two that remained had to cover more information."

When she closed her eyes, Shizuku could sense a hazy image beginning to surface.

Three books were lined up on a white desk.

It felt like a fleeting memory seen through mist, even more elusive than déjà vu.

Just as Shizuku was about to fall into this waking dream, the king's voice brought her back to reality.

"Was one of the books disposed of?" Lars asked.

"No. There's actually a document that tells us what happened to the other book. Think about what happened on the continent about one hundred and thirty years after the Dark Age began. Wars intensified, faith in Aetea spread, advancements were made with sailing ships. In other words…"

The mage stared at Lars, silently goading an answer out of him. Erik knew the king would know to what he was alluding—and sure enough, Lars came up with the response he'd been hoping for.

"Emigration. The book was moved to the eastern continent."

"Exactly. One of Aetea's followers took it there, calling it *God's Written Prophecy*."

Erik pulled a thesis out of the documents he was holding, eliciting

a small cry of recognition from Shizuku. Before everyone's attention could turn to her, Erik began his explanation.

"This thesis, submitted by a devotee of Aetea, is about innate language deficiency. It starts with an abstract detailing the 'possible lack of a unified language during the Age of Gods,' and contains many intriguing observations. There are too many to describe in detail, but one section quotes the journal of a follower of Aetea who was one of the first emigrants. In it, he says, 'At first, we couldn't communicate properly with the people of the eastern continent, but once they came into contact with the holy book and understood, they started listening to what we said.'"

"That means…"

All four of them immediately grasped what Erik was implying.

Most people interpreted this passage to be suggesting that the god's teachings helped the people understand one another. Erik, however, was indicating that it meant something much more straightforward: that the book's powers had helped the people to understand one another.

Leuticia sighed and leaned against the wall, shaken up by this dramatic shift in the interpretation of the story.

Ortea frowned, her cheek resting on her hand.

"Was that thesis brought here from Kisk?"

"Yes. Is there an issue?"

"It doesn't matter to me. Niké must have passed it on to Shizuku. Still, I don't think we can decisively pinpoint the book's abilities from that one passage. It could have been a different book that was taken to the eastern continent, and maybe the part about language was purely coincidental."

"I thought the same," Erik replied, "so I checked every existing mention of the holy book. I couldn't find many, since the documents were from a different continent, but several of them gave specific details about the book's contents. The holy book documented the early history of the Dark Age on this continent, the history of the continent to the east, and conflicting accounts of multiple events. The third book probably began recording the history of the eastern continent after it was taken there and, since it described 'erased

experiments,' people revered it as a prophetic text. One description even stated that 'history continued to be logged by the invisible hand of god,' indicating that new entries were automatically added. There's no other book like it."

Erik paused to catch his breath. Then he looked around the room and continued.

"As for the effects of the books in question, these three books are likely cursed artifacts, intended for use on this continent. My theory is that all three were necessary to produce their full effect. That's not because they needed three books to record the continent's extensive history, though; the fact that the entries were split between two volumes instead of three after the third book went to the eastern continent makes that clear. So then, why did they need all three books? The answer is to ensure that innate language skills were sufficiently distributed. In fact, a minor issue arose on the continent after the number of books went down to two: Certain regions developed accents."

A long time ago, way back in the Dark Age, a number of people emigrated to the eastern continent.

The continent to the east was hit even harder by the turmoil of war, so hardly any records from the time remained, but in modern times, at least, innate language was commonplace there.

The only notable difference was that many of the regions had heavy accents.

Meanwhile, certain areas of the western continent also began to develop accents following wide-scale emigration to the east.

"It's unclear whether the primary function of the books was to record history or to make everyone speak the same language. That said, given that language influences the way we think, it's possible they unified our language to limit our thoughts. In fact, in her world…Shizuku's world, a language encapsulates a country's history and culture, making it difficult for foreigners to fully comprehend. For the interlopers, however, disparities between nations were

probably seen as unnecessary, so they eliminated any potential issues by making us all speak the same language."

Is it just me, or is Erik furious? Shizuku suddenly thought, staring at Erik's characteristically composed expression.

When Shizuku shared her theory regarding language in Medial, Erik had reacted somberly, appearing to be deep in thought. He must have been contemplating the limitations caused by unifying language ever since.

To a man like Erik, who considered introducing technology and knowledge from other worlds to be unnatural, the idea that language—the foundation of thought—had been tampered with by outsiders must have been hard to bear. Shizuku stared into his deep-blue eyes, sensing that his emotions were in a rare state of turmoil, regardless of how calm his explanation sounded.

"All of our continent's written records from before a certain point were lost. This cutoff point came around a hundred years before the Dark Age, which I earlier theorized was when our innate language was introduced from outside our world. The texts that existed before then were probably in multiple different languages, which is why they were destroyed. The only ancient stories that remain, in fact, are those that were passed down by word of mouth."

Erik fixed his gaze on Shizuku.

"The influence of the interlopers' cursed artifacts could only extend to innate language skills, and that's restricted to spoken language. Once the language we spoke was unified, our written language could be largely homogenized as well. All records from after that point were in this unified language. The outsiders were desperate to ensure that nobody questioned why everyone on the continent spoke the same language, which is precisely why visitors from outside the continent were such a nuisance to them."

The word "nuisance" hit Shizuku like a hammer.

What came next would be about her. She was sure of it.

Something about herself that even she didn't know.

What would happen to her as a result?

"A fishing boat once rescued a shipwrecked man from an unknown continent. After reaching the shore, the man was welcomed by the local lord, went on to become his right-hand man, and left behind a memoir about his homeland. According to the fisherman who'd saved him, 'At first, he was weak and deranged, babbling things we couldn't understand. He must have calmed down by the time we reached the town, though, because he'd started speaking normally.' That is to say, the man—unaffected by the cursed artifacts' power—had initially been speaking a language from another continent, but the artifacts changed the language he spoke when he reached the shore. The cursed artifacts had skillfully identified the visitor and removed the element that would spark concern."

And so, the man from another continent adjusted to his new life in this closed-off sandbox.

While his homeland remained in his thoughts, he lived out his days on the continent, unable to return.

Did he curse his fate? Was he resentful?

"But then, fourteen hundred years after language was unified, an unexpected visitor arrived on the continent. Not only did she speak a different language, she was from another world—a world that took language diversity as a given."

Everyone's eyes focused on Shizuku.

She felt uncomfortable, but she didn't lower her gaze. Instead, she lifted her chin and gazed at Erik.

For a brief moment, he looked at her in his usual gentle way.

Then, wearing a bittersweet smile that hinted at the mixed feelings he was harboring, he spoke in the language that had been in him since birth.

"The artifacts must have used a considerable amount of power to alter her language and prevent her from noticing anything strange about our continent—and its efforts were successful. She didn't question why people understood her language. Instead, she simply

embarked on a journey, hoping to find a way back to her old world. But then, the strong influence that the cursed artifacts had on her began to produce side effects. She began to subconsciously connect with the books, gaining the ability to read what's inside them."

"…Connect…with the books?"

"Even before, when she collapsed, she'd start describing events from history that never happened, saying she 'saw it in a dream.' The revelation she came out with during the negotiations with Kisk wasn't an isolated incident. She has possessed knowledge with no discernible source on numerous occasions. Some of the things she knew weren't even described in this navy-blue book we have here, meaning she's probably connected to all three books."

To Shizuku, it felt as though Erik was talking about someone else.

She knew that wasn't the case, though. Her legs trembled uncontrollably.

"Naturally, she can't remember her connection to the books when she's fully awake. It's different when she's asleep. In her dreams, she can get closer to the books…and absorb their knowledge."

Why and how did Erik know that?

On two occasions, Shizuku had told him she was scared of the knowledge she wasn't supposed to possess.

Yet now, she couldn't even remember doing that.

She'd been made to forget it.

She'd been trapped right from the beginning.

Locked in a cage inside a sandbox, all alone—and she hadn't even realized it.

A white room stretched endlessly around her. There lay three books.

She knew she could read them all. She knew she was connected to them.

She just struggled to remember it under normal circumstances. In other words, she was…

"I'm…!"

Her head throbbed.

Someone screamed in the depths of her memory.

Her world grew distorted. Everything was squashed and slanted—on the inside as well as the outside.

Sitting at the desk, Shizuku let out a wordless scream and fell to the ground.

Collapsed on the floor, she began to sob, clawing at her face with her short nails.

Things that had been revealed to her; things that she hadn't known; things that she'd been unable to remember—the shock of all of these revelations caused her thoughts to snap, and her mind convulsed as if nauseous.

Yet it only lasted a few seconds.

A man helped her get to her feet. He stopped her hand before she could scratch herself any more as she tried to reject the overwhelming thoughts.

"It's okay."

Erik had been standing farthest away from Shizuku, yet here he was holding her up, having basically pushed the royals aside. He opened Shizuku's dark brown eyes for her and peered deeply into them.

Erik's actions hinted at more than just concern. He was checking whether any change had gone on inside her. Sensing his intent, she reached out for him, as if she were drowning.

"I-I'm…me."

"Yes. You *are* you."

He took her hand.

Their fingers intertwined.

She held on tight. The feel of him returning her grip was the only thing keeping her tethered, though only barely.

Shizuku had nobody in Erik's world. Nobody who'd known her as a child. Nobody who shared her blood.

She had no foothold here. If someone accused her of not being a real human, her foundations weren't strong enough to prove them wrong.

I want to go back.

I want to go back to my old world. To my old life.

I want to see my older sister. I want to look at my little sister's face.

I just want to be free.

So please, don't say that.

As Shizuku writhed around in agony like a fish brought to shore, Ortea and Leuticia watched her with a mixture of pity and confusion.

Shizuku *did* use words they couldn't understand from time to time. These must have been words that were difficult to translate—ones that didn't adapt easily to the world they were in.

Everything else, meanwhile, had been altered. It had all been twisted.

The power of the cursed artifacts was lurking within every word that Shizuku uttered and every word she heard.

"N-no… I…"

Shizuku weakly shook her head, and Erik raised a hand, planning on casting a spell that'd send her into a deep sleep. But before the spell could take shape, another man grabbed his hand from behind.

Lars's frozen eyes were fixed on Shizuku.

"Stand," he demanded.

"Lars, what are you…?" Leuticia began.

"Can't you hear me? Stand on your own two feet and look at me."

There was no trace of the king's usual easygoing nature in this intense command. The sound of his voice made Shizuku shudder. Her eyes had been on the verge of losing focus, but now they wandered the room in search of Lars.

How was she going to prove it?

How could she prove that she was human, that she had free will, and that she had dignity?

If she was going to do that, and if she had any pride, she'd need to stand up for herself.

She'd prove herself not through her blood or her flesh, but through her spirit.

Lars's severe reprimand bordered on cruel, and it made the two women frown.

Ortea started to rise from her seat, while Leuticia tried to dissuade Lars as she stood up.

Erik wasn't going to stop the king, though. He undid his spell and took Shizuku by the hand. His warmth gently calmed her down, helping her pull herself together.

After taking several deep breaths, Shizuku tried to stand up with Erik's help, still unsteady on her feet.

Lars didn't rush her. He was just waiting in silence. When Shizuku was finally standing before him, he looked down his nose at the girl. The king had the uncompromising gaze of a strong leader, but Shizuku reciprocated his glare, undaunted.

At some point, somewhere, she'd looked up at eyes like his before.

She remembered how scared she'd been when Akashia's blade swung down toward her.

It made her want to run straight out of the room, so Shizuku mustered all her mental strength just to stay standing.

The king posed her a question, his voice calm.

"Back then, you jumped from the tower to fight me, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Then utilize that life of yours one more time."

She'd been unable to fight because she hadn't realized the truth.

What was she supposed to do *now*?

Was she going to flee? Curl into a ball and hide? Or…

"I'm going to go and kill the witch," declared the king. "And *you're* going to read the witch's book."

The book recorded everything, including the king's whereabouts. The witch's movements would have been logged there, too.

Shizuku was going to read that book, then take on the witch. They'd use the power in the book against her.

The continent was vast. Shizuku was far too ordinary and

insignificant for her path to be recorded in history. Her actions wouldn't be documented in any books.

It was for that precise reason that she could read the books without the witch knowing. If all three of the books were connected to one another, she should be able to extract the knowledge from the one in the witch's possession. Aviella assumed that she was the only one who could read the red book, but she'd have the rug pulled from under her feet by none other than Shizuku.

Shizuku thought about the souls that had been snatched away in Farsas's castle city and the court lady who'd died in the castle in Medial. Those incidents were just the tip of the iceberg. The number of victims continued to grow on a daily basis.

Allegedly, the attacks on surrounding towns were growing fiercer by the day. There were still people who took up the sword to combat the witch, but the bodies were piling up and small villages were getting destroyed, their terrified citizens unable to escape.

It was human nature to feel grief and anger over the situation.

Shizuku glanced at the book lying on the table—the cursed artifact that had controlled her on some level and one of the three books that had long subjugated the continent. Its power was fearsome, but it was just a tool used in somebody's experiment, and nothing more.

In which case, there was no reason why *she* couldn't use it. She could control that tool herself.

Shizuku walked over to the table, picked up the book, and held it against her chest. She turned around and looked up at the king.

"I'll do it."

Shizuku's shaky response earned her a nod from Lars.

A week after the witch declared war, a powerless girl expressed her will to fight.

And with that, the cogs of change began to turn.

※

They were set to depart two days later, once travel preparations to Helginis were complete.

Shizuku would head there with the navy-blue book and ensure a secure connection was established with Aviella's red book.

When Ortea heard the decision Shizuku had come to, she bit her lip.

"You fool. You know you could die, right?"

"I'll be fine, Princess. I'll be back."

Shizuku's life had been in danger many times before. Even so, she'd made up her mind to fight.

She smiled awkwardly at the queen, then put on a brave face and stood up straight.

"Order me to do it, Princess. Tell me to go and deal with the witch. I'll do as you command."

As long as someone was supporting her, Shizuku felt like she could stay strong, no matter where she ended up.

Upon hearing her former subject's wish, Ortea wiped the anguish off her beautiful face. She briefly lowered her amber eyes, then looked at Shizuku again.

There was no longer any trace of anxiety or fear in her expression. Instead, the queen was radiating pure, forceful determination.

In a firm voice, Ortea issued Shizuku a command.

"Go. And make sure you come back."

"As you command. You can rely on me."

The things Ortea truly wanted to say were impossible to convey in words, so instead, she simply returned to her country to fulfill her role as queen.

※

"So the book didn't contain any clues that could help us send Shizuku back to her old world," Leuticia muttered as she scanned the papers Erik had given her.

His study of the navy-blue book had concluded that no way of

traversing worlds could be deduced from the text. To this he'd added, "It's likely that innate language skills temporarily returned inside Farsas Castle because the book was brought here." While the cause of the illness remained unknown, there was a chance it was related to the other book in the witch's possession.

Hearing his sister let out a sigh, Lars prepared the paperwork to assemble the army. At the same time, he was selecting highly skilled mages and officers who could head to the castle as individuals, but in an unprecedented move, he was planning to give them the right to turn down his royal commands.

He handed the piece of paper he'd finished writing up to Leuticia.

"Okay. I'm leaving this to you. Make sure you do your job properly."

"Huh? This is…a transfer of military authority! Why are you giving me this?"

"I'll make a head start with some other people, and we'll kill the witch and destroy the book. Once that's done, you'll lead the army to capture the castle."

Once the omniscient book was destroyed, Farsas would launch a full-scale attack. The leadership of a royal was necessary for this plan to be fully executed, but Leuticia was sensing an ulterior motive.

"What are you talking about?!" she shouted. "I'm coming with you, Lars!"

"No. You're staying behind. You can make your appearance at a later stage."

"Lars!"

The king might be an outstanding swordsman and the wielder of Akashia, but he was only strong in human terms.

The witch, on the other hand, was such a powerful mage that people called her inhuman. If that wasn't bad enough, she probably had a high-ranking demon on her side. Facing such a foe on enemy territory without any royal mages protecting you was nothing short of reckless.

Just as the princess was about to speak up, determined to change the king's mind, Lars interrupted her, his voice quiet.

"Leuticia."

How many years had it been since her brother last called her by her real name?

It had been so long, this simple word had developed the power to remind them both of who they truly were.

As Leuticia sat there, frozen, Lars asked his sister a question.

"Are you refusing to follow the king's orders, Leuticia?"

The king's statement hit her hard. It was instilled with unbreachable determination.

Leuticia bit her lip and slowly lowered her small head.

"…Not at all, Your Majesty."

"Good. Oh, and make sure to prepare a spell that prevents demons from being summoned. Better safe than sorry," Lars said with a shrug.

And with that, he was back to his usual self.

Leuticia looked down, overwhelmed by the sudden urge to cry.

She heard the kindness in her brother's voice.

"If anything happens to me, you'll be the only one left. If it comes to that, become queen and have children."

She didn't respond to that. She simply left with the piece of paper in hand.

She and Lars were the last two direct descendants of the Farsasian royal line. After years of suspicion, betrayal, and deceit, they were all that remained. They'd grown up with the motto "never trust your bloodline" hammered into them, and nobody had ever encouraged them to help each other as siblings. If one of them failed to fulfill their royal duties, the other was obligated to kill their sibling and forsake them.

That was how they'd been raised—yet despite the treacherous ground they'd traversed, they'd so far managed to avoid conflict. Leuticia had even begun to consider spending her life supporting her brother.

"Me? Queen…?"

Leuticia raised her head, fighting the urge to get sentimental.

All they had to do was win. It didn't matter that their opponent was a witch. They were going to seize victory without losing a single

thing.

With that, the unrivaled mage stirred up some cold, murderous spirit inside of her.

※

Harve was among the people Lars had selected for the Helginis expedition.

As he looked down at the urgent, top-secret request, he glanced at Erik sitting across from him and forced a smile.

"I'm not sure what to do… You're going, aren't you?"

"Of course. I'll have to make up for the absence of the princess."

Besides, Shizuku was going. There was no way his friend would stay behind.

Harve reread the letter one more time, then burned it in his hand.

"To tell you the truth, I'm scared," he admitted.

"I think everyone is. This is a witch we're up against, after all."

The two men were the only people in the research lab. The books that lined its four walls seemed to bear the weight of history itself.

Harve glanced around at the ancient texts, then looked down at his teacup.

"I'm frightened of the witch, too, but that's not all that's scaring me…"

He spoke slowly and haltingly. It was impossible to deduce his thoughts from the gaps between his words.

Erik looked up from the book he was holding and glanced at his friend.

"What's the matter?"

"Forget it… It's nothing."

Silence fell once again. A vague stillness gradually began to fill the room.

Finally, once both of their cups were empty, Harve stood up. He looked as though he'd put his doubts behind him.

"I guess I'll join you, then."

※

When did meeting someone stop being a coincidence and become something different?

It would be ironic if they'd intentionally arranged to meet.

Erik pondered this as he strolled down the corridor, a bittersweet smile on his face.

Even if it were a setup, he had no regrets about meeting her. He'd never regretted it for a second.

It was meeting Shizuku and learning about her that had led him to numerous realizations. That was far more valuable than continuing to live in ignorance—even if he ended up taking on a witch as a consequence.

What had Shizuku gained from their journey, though? Had she gotten anything positive out of coming to Erik's world and meeting him?

When he noticed the direction his idle musings were taking, his smile took on a hint of self-deprecation. He couldn't answer that question. There was no way of knowing how another person felt.

That was why, at the very least, he wanted to give her a future.

"Erik."

The woman's voice caused Erik to stop and turn around.

Lera was standing behind him, holding a pile of books. She offered them to Erik.

"I found these in the research lab," she said. "I heard you're collecting them."

"Oh, thanks."

"What will you do with them, though? You'll have so many once you've gathered them all."

"I'm going to dispose of them," Erik told her. "I can't risk any more problems."

"Oh… I suppose that makes sense, but it's a real shame. The children really liked them."

Lera glanced sadly at the books, then bowed before she went on her way.

Once she was out of sight, Erik kept walking, carrying the picture books Shizuku had illustrated in his arms.

Her life or her spirit. Which would he protect, and which would she lose?

Would he betray her, or would he be able to support her?

As he disappeared down the hallway, Erik prayed the day would never come when he'd have to make that decision.

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At first, having her sleep manipulated by magic had brought an unfamiliar, sluggish feeling with it. After going through it over ten times, however, she'd started to recognize it for what it was.

Shizuku looked up through her black eyelashes at the man peering into her face.

"I'm fine, I think."

"How do you feel?"

"Relatively clear-headed."

She tried moving her fingers, and they did what she wanted them to. Shizuku stood up from the bed and stretched. She released all the air in her lungs, then took another deep breath in.

Still watching her intently, Erik opened the book he was holding.

"Year 455 of the Farsas calendar?"

"Regius Kurus Lar Farsas, the 18th king of Farsas, was on the throne. An invasion using magic biological weapons began in Druza, the neighboring country to the north."

"That's right. Good job. No problems there."

Shizuku smiled, pleased with the knowledge she'd extracted.

The fact that her consciousness was connected to something so far away felt truly bizarre.

When she first became aware of this, she'd been disturbed by the repulsive and invasive nature of the discovery, but once she'd calmed down and opened her mind, she realized that neither the connection nor the information it provided her with had a will of its

own. It was as though she were floating in a sea filled with countless records. She'd gotten much quicker at extracting the information she wanted from these records as time had gone by.

"Again, from stage one," she heard someone say, so Shizuku climbed back onto the bed.

Once she was lying down, the man touched her forehead with his fingers.

"I'll put you to sleep, then start bringing you back one minute later. Okay?"

"Okay."

They were set to depart in two days, so Erik had been training Shizuku to retrieve information from the books even while she was awake.

The manipulation that the interlopers' cursed artifacts had been performing on her was extremely subtle. While Shizuku had been able to recognize that she possessed knowledge she had no memory of learning, she was unable to think too deeply about its origin or how unnatural it was. It must have been trying to keep the "original her" as intact as possible, preventing her from suspecting anything. Any potential clues remained faint and spread out at the subconscious level.

However, the moment it had been pointed out that she was connected to the books, the seal came off like a bit of dry skin.

Her mind—which should have been a single entity—was now merging with something else. The boundaries were ambiguous, and there was no telling how far the connection went.

Shizuku, who was finally aware of this, had begun practicing following that connection and making contact with the books of her own accord.

"Okay, it's almost been one minute."

Shizuku would start by falling into a deep, magic-induced sleep and establishing a connection with the cursed artifacts through the navy-blue book. After that, Erik would tamper with the spell to gradually wake her up, gently guiding her back to full consciousness.

There were three main stages: The first was when she was mostly asleep but still able to respond; the second was when she

was half awake; and the third was when she was only slightly drowsy. They repeated these stages over and over again, making different adjustments.

At first, there were failures. Shizuku's connection to the book would weaken and her memory would become hazy. But after spending an entire day getting used to the process, she'd finally managed to retrieve the book's contents while she was awake.

"Year 559 of the Farsas calendar."

"The Sixth Witch—Fystoria, elder sister of the king of Farsas—got married. Construction of the royal villa began in the northeast of the capital."

"That's right. And when was the construction of that villa completed?"

"Five years later. It was renovated in Year 732 of the Farsas calendar and became a magic archive."

"That's right. I've been there once before," Erik replied. "You got everything right."

Shizuku let out a sigh of relief. Still sitting on the bed, she ran her fingers through her bangs.

"This is like limitless cheating, isn't it?" she said. "If I could connect to *any* book, I'd probably even be able to pass the imperial examination."

"I get the point you're trying to make, but where do you get your weird positivity from?"

"I figured finding the silver linings would make life more fun," Shizuku said, taking the tea that Mea had prepared for her.

She wasn't *physically* drained, but repeatedly falling asleep and waking up again in quick succession was still tiring. That said, although he'd used his magic dozens of times by now, Erik didn't seem especially tired. He was helping himself to a flower-shaped snack with a serious look on his face.

Erik thought to himself for a moment, then asked a question about a different book.

"Can you sense anything about the third book?"

"The one that went to the continent in the east? Yeah, I can. It's still on the other continent. I can't quite grasp what's written in it,

though. The connection is there, but the distance must be getting in the way."

The third book was too far away, making it challenging for Shizuku to extract its contents. Instead, she was able to retrieve information from the book in Aviella's possession. It had taken them several attempts to confirm that this was what was actually happening. The red book might not be there with them, but they could cross-reference the information with records from Farsas's forbidden curse archives.

Shizuku's ability to read the witch's book was key to their current strategy. The king had already been informed that she did, indeed, possess that ability.

There was just one thing left to do: They needed to take advantage of Shizuku's connection with the book to implement their decisive strategy.

This plan was based on one of Erik's hypotheses, but they'd only tested it on the smallest scale possible, not wanting Aviella to catch on.

Still, every time Shizuku dove deep into her consciousness and came into contact with the faraway book, she felt certain she'd be able to do it. Her conviction had even motivated Lars to issue requests to other nations.

Rubbing his stiff shoulders, Erik mused to himself.

"It's concerning that one of the books is still on another continent, but that's a hard issue to deal with. We don't know much about that continent."

"Yeah."

They needed to solve the problem of the rampaging witch first. Maybe the people of the faraway continent would sort things out for themselves, and maybe they wouldn't. Either way, they couldn't let themselves get distracted at the last minute and put their current mission in jeopardy.

Shizuku picked up a sweet.

"What will happen to this continent if we defeat the witch and destroy that book? Will everyone lose their ability to communicate?"

"What we consider a disease today will probably become the

norm. People who already know how to communicate won't be affected, but future generations will have to *learn* how to do so. That's normal in your world, isn't it?"

"Yeah. But still…"

Lera came to mind. She'd mentioned her sister was about to have a child.

She wasn't alone, either. There were tons of people on the continent who were genuinely distressed by the disease their children were suffering from and wanted desperately to find a cure. When Shizuku thought of their hopes and desires, what she and her allies were doing—attempting to eliminate innate language altogether—seemed almost arrogant.

Leaving the book intact wasn't an option, though. When you controlled language, you controlled the way people thought. Destroying the book would cause confusion, misunderstandings, and disagreements, but that wasn't all. It was sure to bring people freedom as well.

Shizuku had no choice but to believe in humanity's potential and keep going.

Erik must have sensed Shizuku's doubts from her expression. He put down his teacup and forced a smile.

"Well, there's always a chance my hypothesis about innate language is wrong," he said.

"Are you *really* gonna go there right now?!"

"It's obvious, though. My theory hasn't been proven yet. You don't need to get too worked up. Innate language might not disappear, even after we destroy the book."

Erik's words were meant to reassure her, but he came across a little too strong. Shizuku felt slightly dubious, but the look on his face was just the same as it always was.

Noticing her skeptical gaze, Erik turned away.

"Anyway, you should get some rest. We leave early tomorrow morning."

"Rest…? I doubt I'll be able to doze off."

Shizuku had spent the whole day rotating between sleep, wakefulness, and drowsiness. There was no way she'd be able to fall

asleep. She could already picture Lars scolding her for being groggy the next day.

Erik, however, just waved a hand dismissively.

"I'll put you to sleep. Your body won't be able to cope otherwise."

"Wait, really? Yay!"

With that, Shizuku's worries vanished. After arranging for Erik to come back two hours later, Shizuku hurriedly got ready for the coming day.

While Mea prepared a meal for them, Shizuku inspected the magic implements Leuticia had provided her with and set out the clothes she was going to wear. She usually wore skirts to help her blend in with the continent's culture, but for the journey, she was planning to wear some capri pants she'd bought in Japan, figuring they'd be easier to move around in. Since part of her legs would be exposed, she paired them with some sturdy boots. She wondered whether the outfit would look strange, but even if she was going to be riding a horse, she didn't have the strength to walk around in full armor.

Before long, Mea brought over some pancakes and vegetable soup. Shizuku poured a generous helping of golden honey over the sweet-smelling, oval-shaped pancakes, while her assistant demon sat across from her holding a warm cup of milk.

The pair of them had sat at the dining table together countless times before, but the thought that this simple, warm dinner might be the last one they enjoyed together brought back all kinds of different memories.

"Mea, are you scared?" Shizuku asked.

"No."

Mea's instantaneous reply made Shizuku smile. She lifted a spoonful of the delicately sweet soup to her mouth.

She was so blessed and content that it made her feel indebted to those around her. She'd been fortunate from the moment she was born. She wouldn't have survived on the continent if not for that.

Thanks to the blessings she'd received in this foreign world, she would be able to fight with pride.

Her reckless decision might have seemed like it was "for the good

of people" or "for the good of the world," but Shizuku didn't have any such lofty ideals in mind. It was her simple desire to stop innocent people from getting killed that drove her to take a stand.

She let out a warm breath.

"Where should we head after we get back? I'm done with snowy countries."

"I have heard that the blue ocean in the south is crystal clear."

"Wow, that sounds amazing! I haven't gone swimming since I came to this world. Just waded in moats."

"There's also a lake south of the castle city."

"I didn't know that," replied Shizuku. "Oh, I still haven't gone to buy a new diary. We'll have to go shopping when we get back."

As she talked about the future, Shizuku laughed out loud.

It was times like this when she realized just how happy she truly was. These moments always warmed her heart—and yet, for some reason, they were also tinged with a little sadness.

Erik returned to Shizuku's room right on time. When he saw her, he frowned. She'd only just gotten out of the bath.

"Why do you wear sleepwear in front of other people?"

"Huh? They're just pajamas. I'm about to go to sleep."

"True, but still…"

Unlike Ortea, who often slept in nearly sheer clothing, the tops and bottoms that Shizuku wore to bed were made from sturdy cotton. They were practically no different from sportswear.

Shizuku made no effort to hide the way she felt about the issue. Erik, meanwhile, let out a sigh.

"Fine, I get it. This is just what people do in your world."

"Why do I feel like you've given up…?"

She and Erik had been raised in different worlds. Their cultural differences were unlikely to be resolved. Shizuku tied up her hair, which she'd just dried, and lay down. Erik came and stood next to the bed.

"I'll take the book tonight, just to be on the safe side," he said.

"There's no point in you getting woken up after I've deliberately put you to sleep."

"Thanks."

"All right. I'll make sure you wake up two hours before we're supposed to meet tomorrow morning. Is that all right with you?"

"Yeah."

Erik nodded at Shizuku's response. He started to chant but then stopped to say something else, seemingly having just remembered it.

"Actually, are you able to get in touch with Lyshien?"

"Huh? No. I don't have her contact details."

Shizuku had no idea where the girl—a princess of a fallen kingdom—was, or what she was doing now. She just hoped she was living a peaceful, happy life.

Erik nodded simply.

"Oh. It doesn't seem like that guy from Kisk knows, either. She must be keeping herself well hidden."

"Did you need something from her?"

"Not in particular. I was just a little curious."

He made it sound like this was no big deal, but Erik was always thinking about the future. Maybe this conversation *was* significant in some way and he just hadn't chosen to reveal his cards yet.

Shizuku closed her eyes. Once her vision turned dark, memories from the past year came flooding back.

"Thank you so much, Erik."

"I haven't cast the spell yet."

"Not for that."

She wanted to use this quiet moment of tranquility they were sharing as an opportunity to say something important. Shizuku smiled, her eyes still shut.

"Thank you for everything you've done for me over the past year. I've been through a lot, and I wouldn't have made it this far without you."

Ever since back when she'd been crying in the dark library. When she'd come face-to-face with a forbidden spell in Candela. When Lars had almost killed her in Farsas. When she'd collapsed in Kisk.

Shizuku didn’t know what would have become of her if Erik hadn’t been there to help her through it all. After all, he was the one who’d suggested they embark on a journey in the first place. He’d always been one step ahead of her, showing her the way through the vast continent.

When she thought about everything they’d been through, she couldn’t help but want to say thank you.

Shizuku’s words were followed by a short silence. Then Erik ruffled her bangs.

“You made it this far because you refused to give up,” he said.

His voice sounded gentler than usual to Shizuku. She had to stop herself from laughing.

“The princess always got mad at me for being stubborn,” she said. “I feel like it’s my only strong point.”

Still, she was fine with the person she’d become. Her refusal to back down and her reluctance to give up had gotten her to where she was.

“Okay. Ready?”

Erik resumed his incantation. The sound of his voice alone had a calming effect on her. She’d grown used to the feel of his fingers on her forehead, too.

Shizuku breathed slowly in and out as she closed her eyes.

When she woke up the next day, the fight would begin. She had no idea what would happen to her.

As she was drifting out of consciousness, Shizuku got the urge to look into his eyes one more time and tried to open her own.

Her eyelids refused to cooperate, though. They grew heavier, and she fell into a dreamless sleep before she had the chance to fight back.

Hearing Shizuku’s restful breathing, Erik gently tugged on a lock of her black hair to check how deeply she was asleep. After making sure the magic had worked properly, he left her bedside and walked over to the bookshelf, where he took out a paper bag containing the

rough drafts of Shizuku's picture books.

He took out a few of the manuscripts, then placed the envelope back on the shelf.

Shizuku's picture books were the main reason she'd been summoned to Medial. Under Erik's instruction, most of them had already been collected. Naturally, he'd left the ones that weren't problematic where they were, public and visible, but he couldn't risk leaving any of the other drafts behind.

Erik tucked them under his arm, alongside the navy-blue book. After ordering Mea to lock the door, he left the room without a sound.

They all went to sleep early that night.

The next day, everything would change.

A new era was about to begin.

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Corpses didn't rot in the frozen castle of the witch.

They were devoured by demonic spirits before they even had the chance to decay, and whatever remained turned to dust and disappeared.

The towering stone castle was hollow. Snowy gusts of wind blew straight through it, the walls so cold it seemed like they could freeze someone's skin upon contact. Nobody was walking down its corridors. All that lingered in the air was the marked presence of death.

Elzard sat upon his throne in the highest tower of the lifeless castle, his eyes closed.

This castle was his own creation. As a result, he could perceive everything that happened inside it.

Sensing someone taking their last breath on the lower floors, he sniffed disinterestedly.

"How weak."

Aviella was fond of humans, but to Elzard, they were no different from flowers—fragile and easy to destroy. As living creatures,

individuals, and a species that lived in groups, human beings had many different desires to juggle during their chaotically short lives. They were the most complex organisms that inhabited their realm, and yet there was nothing remarkable about them.

Elzard, being a high-ranking demon, had only spent a few decades in their world. Despite this, he felt he already knew everything there was to know about humans.

"Aviella," he called out, conveying his boredom through his voice. But there was no reply.

She was probably wandering around inside the castle somewhere. The woman who'd announced herself as a witch to the world often went down to the lower floors to hunt for trinkets. She collected things like human bones, swords, and worn-out accessories and hoarded them in her room.

Elzard had never asked *why* she collected such junk. He didn't understand her. Still, he got the vague impression that she wanted to "leave something behind."

When she ordered attacks on villages, she never killed all the humans. For some reason, she'd always leave one or two survivors. Elzard suspected this was like thinning a crop to ensure a larger harvest further down the line, but maybe there was a meaning behind her actions that he couldn't comprehend.

High-ranking demons had no blood ties. They couldn't relate to the instinct to protect others. They existed exclusively as individuals and felt little kinship toward other members of their own kind.

For this reason, Elzard occasionally found himself pondering a certain question.

What was it that Aviella wanted to leave behind?

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The birds began to chirp, signaling the arrival of morning.

It was dawn, the air crisp and silence all around. About thirty military officers and mages had gathered in the courtyard of Farsas Castle—a pitifully small squad, considering they were going up

against the witch. They wouldn’t be fighting as a part of an army either, but as individuals.

There were still so many unknowns, which made many members of the squad noticeably anxious. Yet none of them voiced their worries. Instead, they each checked their equipment as they waited to depart.

Standing near the center of the group, Shizuku adjusted the two belts around her waist.

One of the leather belts had a magical dagger in it, while the other was lined with small vials of potions. She’d woven her hair into a single braid to keep it from getting tangled, and she wore a cape with defensive and insulating magic woven into it over the top of her thick blouse and capri pants. The cape went down to her waist and had slits in it to allow her arms to move freely, but her hands remained hidden when she was standing normally. This meant the navy-blue book she was carrying wasn’t visible at first glance.

Shizuku—the key to their tactic of information warfare in the coming battle—checked that her belt was securely fastened, then looked up.

“This is way more nerve-racking than the university entrance exam.”

“That strikes me as a rather odd comparison to make,” replied Leuticia, who was standing by Shizuku’s side in white mage’s clothing.

It was the first time Shizuku had seen the renowned mage in combat attire. She gazed up at the princess admiringly.

Leuticia wouldn’t be entering the witch’s castle on this occasion. She was going to open a teleportation gate, send the combat troops through it, and provide support until they’d infiltrated the castle. After that, she would go back to the fort in the north and issue commands to the military, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Their strategy of having one royal sibling to support the combat troops and the other to support the military demonstrated how seriously the magic kingdom of Farsas was taking this. Here, being a royal meant dominating others on the battlefield.

Shizuku shifted her gaze toward the armor-clad king standing

opposite her.

"You actually look pretty cool when you make an effort," she quipped.

"Committing treason this early in the morning?" Lars replied. "You've got some guts."

"I'd love to be able to respect you, but it seems to be beyond my capabilities. Sorry about that."

Lars had Akashia hanging from his waist, yet he wasn't wearing full-body armor like he had in Kisk. Instead, he wore armor that covered only the vital areas, such as his chest. This was probably because of the cold climate, and the fact that he wouldn't be fighting on horseback.

As simple as his attire was, the wielder of the royal sword Akashia exuded an aura of authority. Thanks to the king's presence, everyone was able to remain calm, even though their squad of just a few dozen people was going against a "witch"—a kind of being that had once instilled terror in the continent.

The very definition of arrogance, Lars tapped Shizuku on the head and glanced at the man behind her.

"If she and I stick together, the witch will read about us in her book. Once we get inside, we'll have to go our separate ways. Make sure you look after her."

"Understood," the man replied. As nerve-racking as the situation was, he sounded unruffled. Shizuku was secretly comforted by this.

Her role wasn't to fight the demons. Instead, she had to read about what their enemy was doing and avoid dying.

Erik, who was serving as both her bodyguard and the head of communications, wore a black mage's robe with a slender longsword at his waist. As usual, he didn't seem particularly well armored. Apart from the sword, he looked the same as always.

Their departure was imminent. Shizuku smiled at her assistant demon perched on her shoulder.

"Ready to go?" she said, trying to keep the tension out of her voice as much as possible.

Leuticia raised a hand, seemingly having picked up on Shizuku's tone. This silent signal prompted everyone in the courtyard to look

toward the king's sister, and a space naturally opened up in the middle of the group.

How many of them would make it to the witch alive? Would they manage to defeat her?

The books didn't contain those answers yet. They only had records of what had already happened.

Shizuku clutched the navy-blue book in her arms as she watched the teleportation gate open.

It was beautiful and felt far more intentional than the one she'd fallen into when she was first sucked into this new world.

Helginis was cold, but Shizuku had expected that.

She pressed her hands over her ears to shield them from the biting wind.

"I should've looked for some earmuffs…"

The thought had only crossed her mind after she'd been dumped in the snowy forest, and she shivered. Unlike last time, however, she was wearing a cape with defensive and insulation magic woven into it.

Letting out a puff of white breath, she looked up at the towering rock faces that flanked her on both sides.

"What a view," she said.

"It's just a short distance up the mountain."

Their view was impeded by the rugged mountains, so the witch's castle wasn't visible from the narrow path they'd teleported onto. That said, even Shizuku could sense that the air felt murkier up ahead.

According to Erik, the area around the castle was teeming with miasma generated by a magical device. This practically transformed it into a different world, making it impossible to teleport there using coordinates.

The group began to quickly move along the snow-covered mountain path. The fact that there were already many footprints beneath their feet suggested that other people had gone to try to

take down the witch of their own accord. Had those people made it out alive…? Shizuku was distracted by that thought for a moment—and the next thing she knew, she'd tripped on the snowy track below, causing her to lose her train of thought.

Before her face could plunge into the snow, a man reached out to break her fall, an exasperated look on his face.

"Make sure you watch your step."

"S-sorry."

She almost felt like a kid. Shizuku braced herself and carefully continued onward, paying attention to every step she took. After they'd ascended the gently curving mountain path for a short while, their view suddenly opened up, just as Erik had said.

They stood at the end of the path that wound through the rugged mountains, staring ahead. It was where the gate to Helginis had stood six hundred years earlier.

"This is…"

The bizarre sight left everyone speechless.

The air was heavy over the barren land stretching out before them.

It was a dark, desolate area. In stark contrast to the mountain path that had led them there, there was no snow on the ground. The dry, black earth was frozen and as hard as stone, with neither grass nor trees. Only rocks lay scattered across the ground. The place felt as dingy and oppressive as nightfall, and it seemed eternally overcast.

An icy wind swept up nearby snowflakes, blustering violently. A haze murkier than a dark cloud obscured the entire area, twisting and turning.

The king looked up, scrutinizing the towering black castle at the center of it all.

It was completely different from the castle that had once stood in Helginis.

The witch's castle rose into the sky, much like a tower. It was impossible to gauge how tall it was, as the top of the castle was masked by the miasma up above.

Lars looked up at the black haze, his gaze as cold as the blowing

wind.

"Can you set up a demon-summoning prevention spell, Lettie?"

"Not with all this miasma around," Leuticia replied. "It would contaminate ordinary living beings if they stayed here too long. But then again, destroying the magical device that's generating the miasma would throw off the power balance. This is a challenging set of circumstances."

The magical device that had transformed Helginis into the underworld consisted of five parts: four positioned at the corners of the region's outer periphery and the core located inside the castle.

Shizuku knew this from the knowledge she'd obtained from the books, but the conclusion was already apparent. The way things stood, destroying such an enormous device was practically impossible.

If they managed to destroy the core at the center, the flow of power would weaken, allowing them to destroy the spell configurations in the north, south, east, and west. However, if they attempted to disrupt those spell configurations while the core was still active, the balance would crumble and blow away the entire surroundings.

It wouldn't just stop at Helginis, either; it would wipe out the entire northwestern part of the continent.

Needless to say, nobody was suggesting they destroy the spell configurations from the outside.

Leuticia looked at the miasma surrounding her with disgust. It drained humans both physically and mentally, but strengthened demonic spirits. Humans who were forced to fight inside the miasma were disadvantaged from the outset.

Her brother, on the other hand, didn't seem disappointed by his sister's bitter response.

"That's a shame."

Lars took a confident step forward, moving from the snowy ground to the desolate field.

The others followed his lead—when suddenly, a woman's voice

called out to the king from behind.

"They've spotted us, Your Majesty."

"Oh yeah?"

This news prompted the king to pull out his sword. It would probably take around five minutes to run toward the castle at full speed, but this was hard to gauge without anything to compare it to.

Shizuku, hugging the book to her body beneath her cape, kept one eye closed to help her focus on what wasn't there in front of her. Doing this allowed her to read the red book in Aviella's possession.

"They're releasing demons to intercept us. Fifty or sixty of them, coming from the sky."

"Perfect—that's two for each of us, then," said the king. "Anyone who doesn't take care of their share gets no dinner tonight."

"Wait, does that include me? That's so unfair!" Shizuku protested.

"Now go, give it your all!" said the king, blanking Shizuku out as efficiently as he always did.

Shizuku kicked a stone in frustration, and just then, several black dots appeared in the sky. They were coming from the castle.

The falling figures were getting closer by the second. One by one, the military officers drew their swords in response and chants began to overlap.

The sight of the bizarre figures, each about twice the size of a person, made Shizuku freeze with nerves. Carrying the book under her left arm, she searched for the dagger at her waist—but she had no need to draw it.

A fierce white light shot out from right beside the king. The caster hadn't even recited an incantation.

"…!"

The powerful flash engulfed the approaching dark horde before any of them had the chance to dodge it. It was so bright that Shizuku automatically shut her eyes.

A moment later, a heavy silence spread across the area. As Shizuku was cowering away in fear, unsure of what had happened, Erik tapped her on the shoulder.

"You're all right."

Shizuku cautiously opened her eyes, only to discover that all the demonic spirits had vanished from the sky.

Instead, she heard Lars speaking in a tone that sounded far too laid-back.

"Ah… Ease off a little, Lettie. None of us are getting any dinner now."

"Please stop spouting nonsense and get moving," came the cold response of the only mage directly descended from the royal family.

Leuticia was the most powerful woman in the magic kingdom, which already attracted swarms of mages. Having shown off her tremendous strength, she swept her long black hair aside and started striding ahead of her brother.

"I won't let anything so much as graze you until we reach the castle, Lars," she stated, making no effort to conceal her strong emotions.

Shizuku admiringly watched the princess walking ahead of her. She hugged the book beneath her cloak a little tighter.

The book couldn't help Shizuku track the witch's thoughts. It didn't reveal her every move in detail. The book simply recorded the witch's decisions and actions after they'd had an impact on the battlefield. Usually, making a preemptive move would prove advantageous, but Shizuku could never get ahead of the witch. Instead, she mitigated the damage by taking advantage of the time between the witch's making a decision and acting upon it. It was a dangerous tightrope to walk.

And yet, it would also be a lifeline for the people fighting alongside her.

"They've given up on intercepting us for now. The witch is activating several magical devices inside the castle."

"Oh."

Shizuku's report came as the group arrived at the castle entrance, having just repelled the third wave of attacks.

Stepping over the body of a demonic spirit he'd slain, Lars gazed up at the castle.

"Can you tell what kind of devices they're using?"

"They seem like teleportation devices and traps of some kind. I

don’t know any further details. They’ve unleashed demons inside the castle, too.”

“Traps, huh?”

The specifics of the plans were too elaborate for the book to detail every single one. All Shizuku could grasp was an outline of the actions the witch had taken to attack the king of Farsas. They’d just need to proceed carefully.

The huge stone double doors that marked the entrance to the witch’s castle stood before them.

The king came to a halt in front of the doorway and swept Akashia through the empty air—though it only looked empty to people who had no magical powers. There was actually some sort of spell configuration there. When Lars placed his hand on the thick stone door, it automatically began to open inward, making an unpleasant scraping noise.

“Okay, Lettie, I’m heading in. You gonna be able to make it back alone?”

“Of course. I should be able to teleport from outside,” his sister replied succinctly, stopping where she was. She watched her brother and his comrades step into the castle.

How must she feel, sending her one and only brother into such a dangerous place?

Shizuku only had sisters, so she found this simultaneously both easy and hard to imagine.

When their eyes met, Leuticia smiled at her.

“Good luck.”

There was a flood of emotion behind those two simple words.

Shizuku nodded, then started to walk forward, allowing the doors to close slowly behind her.

※

A new sentence appeared on the last page of the book.

It was short, only indicating that the sister of the king of Farsas had left.

Aviella had the red book open, and she gave a slight smile.

"Did the king order his sister to fall back? I was hoping they'd bring their best."

"Having her around would just complicate things," commented Elzard. "That woman has a spirit under her command. It's a nuisance when high-ranking demons have to fight each other."

Both the spirit that Leuticia commanded and Elzard were high-ranking demons. Aviella wasn't sure if Elzard was stronger than the royal family's mystical spirit, and Elzard didn't seem to want to clear up her doubts on the matter, either. That said, she could sense a hint of competitiveness in his calm tone—something that caused the corners of her mouth to turn upward.

"You sound rather intimidated. Are you sure you can beat Akashia?" she asked mockingly.

"That will be no trouble. I'll just target its wielder."

After making this declaration, the man on the throne closed his eyes. Perhaps he'd been planning on sleeping until she'd shown up. He'd lend Aviella a hand if she requested it, but otherwise he only stirred when the mood struck him.

The witch closed the book and turned around, looking behind the throne.

Her gaze settled on the large glassless window. Nothing but miasma could be seen through it. Six hundred years ago, when Helginis was still standing, the window would have overlooked breathtaking mountains beneath clear skies. Aviella felt a little disappointed that she couldn't see that panorama.

Despite this, she refused to show the weary disappointment on her face. She just smiled faintly.

"It would be too dull an ending for me to be killed by the wielder of Akashia. I'm afraid I'll have to ask the king of Farsas to leave."

※

Beyond the doorway, there was no corridor on the first floor of the castle.

In fact, there was nothing there at all. A large open space took up the entire floor, with no furnishings in sight. The ground was covered with icy-cold stone, and the ceiling stretched high above them. The large hall could only be described as empty.

Shizuku looked up at the ceiling, and Erik casually moved from walking beside Shizuku to behind her. He was probably worried she would forget to take her eyes off it and trip.

While the group began to cautiously inspect the hall, Shizuku's eyes remained fixed on the ceiling high at the top of the room, where the atrium ended. It was a dizzying sight. She almost lost her balance, but Erik had foreseen this situation and caught her just in time.

As he steadied her, Shizuku noticed that the king, Lars, and Harve had come over. She gave them a nod. Lars also looked up at the incredibly high ceiling.

"I presume the barrier's core is above us," he said.

"Yes. It's about halfway up. The witch and a high-ranking demon are on the top floor. The witch has the book with her."

"A witch and a high-ranking demon, huh? Well, I guess we'll figure something out."

The king's murmured remark put the people surrounding him on edge. Just a few days earlier, they'd seen Truce, the chief mage, get seriously injured by a high-ranking demon. He *had* been caught off guard, but he'd still almost been killed in the blink of an eye.

Truce wasn't with them this time but was instead helping to command the army.

Lars glanced at his silent subjects.

"Don't fight battles you can't win. Leave the witch and the high-ranking demon to me. Your task is to clear out the demonic spirits blocking our path. Oh, and we want to get rid of that red book, too. If it doesn't look like you can destroy it, bring it to me, and I'll take care of it with Akashia."

Apparently, the interlopers' cursed artifacts were difficult to destroy.

That was why Akashia, a weapon that could resist magic, was so important. Still, the fact that all the responsibility was falling on

Lars's shoulders worried Shizuku in more ways than one.

The king was fiddling with a ring on his left hand. He usually never wore jewelry, so Shizuku suspected it was a magic implement of some sort.

He took out his watch and shifted his gaze toward Shizuku.

"It's almost time. Can you do this?"

"I'll try."

Shizuku focused her consciousness and moved around the hall searching for a specific spot. She wasn't entirely sure that she needed to line the coordinates up, but for some reason, it felt like the right approach.

She didn't have much time. After finally positioning herself at a point near the center of the hall, she closed her eyes.

She tuned her consciousness to the book under her cape and the one far above her head, then reached out toward the distant book and waited for the right moment.

She was about to implement another strategy that would help them fight Aviella.

※

At the same time, elsewhere on the continent, eleven monarchs had gathered in a room inside Medial Castle, waiting for their time to come.

The leaders of all the powerful nations on the continent had assembled under one roof. This included Queen Ortea of Kisk and King Dalas of Gandona—the leaders of two of the Great Nations—and of course King Vicas, who owned of the castle. It was rare for all of these leaders to be together in one place, but they'd done so for a specific purpose.

The monarchs had been summoned at the request of Farsas, although they weren't entirely convinced that they'd be able to drive away the witch. Only Ortea understood the true nature of the request.

"It's almost time…"

Vicas's words drew everyone's eyes toward him.

The sudden appearance of the witch's castle in the unclaimed region neighboring Medial had driven the country into an unprecedented crisis. Despite this, Vicas sat calmly in the center of the room, embodying the composure of a king who'd been on the throne for many years.

He glanced at the clock on the table. Its curved hand, powered by magic, followed a slow arc until it pointed toward the center.

The designated time had arrived.

The elderly king calmly began to speak.

"The nation of Medial…declares war on the witch Aviella."

It had begun.

The impact of this declaration flooded Shizuku's mind like a muddy stream.

Medial wasn't the only country to suddenly declare war.

King Dalas of Gandona casually raised his hand, a smile on his face.

"As does Gandona. We will use our combined strength to eliminate the witch. Relics of the past should remain silent."

"I, Ortea Stiss Lyn Kisk, Queen of Kisk, hereby declare war on the witch."

"On this day, under my authority as king, Bestol declares that it shall wage war against the witch."

"Nadolas refuses to surrender to the witch. From this point forth, our nation shall wage war against her."

They were predetermined declarations issued at a predetermined time.

And it didn't just stop at these proclamations. The eleven monarchs issued one detailed instruction after another, deciding the formation and deployment of their armies.

Although they were all in the same room, the kings and queens didn't debate with one another. They paid no attention to the words of those around them, instead focusing on conveying their military

strategies to their officials. These unusual commands filled the previously silent room with noise and commotion.

Lars, who'd orchestrated the whole thing, laughed fearlessly inside the cold hall of the castle.

"It goes without saying, but Farsas is declaring war as well. Just you wait—I'll hang your head as a trophy."

Lars gazed up toward the highest floor, the royal sword that had once killed a witch in his hand.

Beside him, Erik was keeping an eye on his surroundings as he held Shizuku up.

Two books remained on the continent, each recording half of its history.

These records were divided based on geography, with the events occurring in the territories covered by one of the books recorded in it.

Even if both books were brought to the same place, the account of a region would still defer to the book originally responsible for it.

Erik had discovered this rule of precedence when, during Shizuku's disappearance, he'd checked the navy-blue book and noticed that no new records concerning Medial were appearing.

However, while he'd been helping Shizuku practice connecting to the books, Erik had come to a realization.

Two hundred and sixty-five years earlier, a war had taken place. It was a major historic event during which more than five nations started fighting one another on the same battlefield. And yet, the navy-blue book only mentioned *four* nations. It should have recorded everything up until that point for *all* of the countries that ended up on the battlefield, but a section of the most exciting part of the story was missing.

Despite this, Shizuku had been able to extract the events of that time from the books without leaving anything out. At some point, part of the record must have strayed into the red book, discounting any rules regarding precedence.

"Maybe…it overflowed. Like when you pour a lot of water into a tiny drain."

That was Shizuku's comment on the missing entry, based on her connection with the books.

It seemed that this turning point in history led to too much information being concentrated in one place, surpassing the book's capacity to record it.

Erik found this phenomenon fascinating, and he took her reasoning a step further.

If you could make multiple turning points in the continent's history occur simultaneously in the same place, there was a chance that you could override the prioritization rules and move the historical recordings to another book. Wondering whether they could cause this to happen on purpose, Erik had asked Shizuku a question: "If a disruption did occur in the recording process, would you be able to intervene and control where events are logged?"

After contemplating this question for a moment, Shizuku confidently replied, "Yes."

Having heard her self-assured response, Erik had proposed a strategy to the king.

The deluge of entries began.

Shizuku, whose mind was linked to the book, was at the center of that storm.

She waded through the information that was being swept past her by an intangible force and pulled it toward herself. She tried to stay conscious while she gathered as many entries as possible.

The success of this experiment—to breach the information volume limit after bringing the two books closer together—depended on the extent to which she could reverse the book's recording priorities. She'd extract the information that was overflowing into Aviella's red book, and use that to gradually sequester the authority to record events from the entire area. To do this, Shizuku had to let her consciousness flow out of her and actively influence the books. Regardless of her connection to them, this challenge placed a huge

burden on Shizuku's psyche, and as her initial splitting headache subsided, she became increasingly detached from her sense of self.

"…Ah! Ah…"

"Shizuku."

Someone called out her name and placed their hand on her shoulder.

Their voice and their touch reminded Shizuku that she had a physical form. It reminded her of who she was.

She opened her eyes, shook her head—which had a sense of weightlessness to it—and exhaled. Erik was standing in front of Shizuku, and he looked intently at her.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Sorry. I'm fine."

Why did breathing make Shizuku remember her physical form?

Maybe my breath is the embodiment of my soul, mused Shizuku. This fanciful idea brought a slight smile to her face.

Then she closed her eyes and began sailing out into that invisible sea again. Her aim was to seize as much information as she could and wrest it away from the witch's grasp. She wasn't just fighting the witch, either—she was also fighting against the book.

"…"

They'd decided on five minutes.

It had been determined beforehand that Shizuku's spirit wouldn't endure any more than that.

Those five minutes felt painfully long, and when they were finally over, Shizuku collapsed into Erik's arms.

She looked up at the king, panting heavily.

"How much did you get?" he asked, unsmiling.

"Sixty percent. Sorry."

"That's good enough."

In truth, Lars had hoped they'd be able to record every event in the area they were in, but Shizuku had reached her limit after only stealing sixty percent. She gave a frustrated smile, her forehead drenched in sweat.

Even so, things were going reasonably well. From that point on, Aviella would only have access to forty percent of the information

she'd previously been privy to. The division of the entries would occur at random, but the witch's book would still record less than half of the information it had before. That was a huge difference from having everything laid bare. Plus, with Shizuku on their side, Farsas would also be able to know what was written in the red book.

Lars nodded, satisfied, and glanced at the staircase against the wall that led to the upper floor. He beckoned Harve, his personal liaison, over to him, then addressed Shizuku and Erik.

"Thanks for your hard work. You two should stay here. We're heading up."

"Be careful, Your Majesty," Shizuku said. "Don't let all those stairs make your legs go wobbly."

"I'm actually a little worried about that," replied the king.

How many stairs would they have to climb before they reached the top floor? Shizuku secretly felt sorry for the people who were heading up there, but there was no changing the situation.

After Shizuku had finally recovered from her dizziness, Erik helped her up. She straightened out her clothes and adjusted her grip on the book in her arms.

At that moment, Shizuku thought she heard a woman laughing.

"Watch out!"

This sudden shout made Shizuku stumble.

Erik immediately grabbed her hand and pulled her away from where she was standing.

She had no idea what had happened. All Shizuku could do was run—and even then, she almost tripped on her own feet. She couldn't even synchronize with the book.

A heavy crashing sound echoed from behind her.

The vibrations shaking the floor reminded her of an earthquake.

Several people let out cries of astonishment, and everyone's eyes were drawn toward the center of the room. When Erik let go of her, Shizuku also turned around to take a look.

"Is that…a giant rock?"

"Looks like it."

A massive boulder was lodged in the middle of the hall. Reminiscent of the tall mountains that could be found nearby, the sharp, pointed rock was at least as high as two or three grown adults. It seemed to have fallen from up high and pierced the floor. Fortunately, nobody had been crushed by it, but if any of them had failed to get away in time, they would have died.

The people who'd fled to different corners of the hall glanced at the boulder, their faces pale.

Lars frowned and looked up at the open space above them.

"Is this the trap?"

"No. This is just the beginning," a woman's voice cut in.

Everyone immediately poised themselves for battle—but before they could do anything, the giant rock in the center shattered.

"—!"

Countless pieces of stone went flying in all directions.

Shizuku instinctively covered her face with her hand, expecting the impact to hit her entire body. Erik stood in front of her to shield her.

The next thing Shizuku knew, Erik had vanished without a trace.

"Erik?!" she cried out.

But an instant later, she was struck in the chest by a piece of stone…and disappeared.

When Shizuku came to her senses, she was doubled over, coughing violently. Half-conscious, she rubbed the spot where the stone had hit her. She wasn't injured, exactly, but it *had* hit her right on her windpipe. She choked back her coughing and scanned her surroundings with her watery eyes.

She froze.

"What…?"

She wasn't in the hall anymore.

The walls and floor of the small room were cold and gray. She was in a room with no windows or furniture of any sort.

She didn't recognize it, but based on the chill in the air and the

look of the walls, it was probably somewhere inside Helginis Castle. Still, there was no one else in the room. Erik, who'd been right by her side only seconds earlier, was nowhere to be seen.

Once Shizuku recovered her senses, she lifted up her cloak and whispered into its inner pocket.

"M-Mea. Are you there?"

"I am."

Hearing the young girl's voice, Shizuku let out a sigh of relief. Her decision to keep Mea in her pocket to shelter her from the cold had worked in her favor. The little bird jumped back on Shizuku's shoulder and looked around the small room, analyzing the situation.

"Each of those pieces of rock must have contained a teleportation spell. Anybody who was hit by one must have been teleported to a different location. The goal was to scatter us."

"It came totally out of the blue! We got duped!"

Farsas's fighting force was already small, and now, it had been divided even further. Plus, everyone seemed to be alone now. Shizuku was worried about the safety of the others, but she figured they were likely more concerned about her. After all, she was the weakest of them.

Shizuku looked at the room's only door and closed one eye, synchronizing her consciousness with the two books.

"The king…is by himself. The book states that everyone else has been separated, but there are no more details. Can you sense anyone nearby, Mea?"

"The miasma is too thick. These conditions make it impossible. I might be able to detect someone if we get a bit closer."

"I guess that means there isn't anyone nearby…"

Shizuku's shoulders stooped dejectedly, but she knew she couldn't afford to stay that way. The basic rule when you got lost was to wait in the spot where you'd last been with your companions, so Shizuku cautiously reached for the door, hoping to find the stairs that led back to the hall.

She could see a wide hallway through the crack in the door. The long corridor curved gently, with gusts of cold wind blowing in through the windows that dotted it. Judging by the snowflakes

carried on the breeze, it seemed likely that the hallway was part of the castle's outer perimeter, or at the very least, above the atrium she'd gazed up at earlier.

Once Shizuku had more or less gotten her bearings, she silently cracked open the door. She held her breath, listening out for any signs of life.

The darkness of the corridor was undeniable.

For better or for worse, there wasn't any movement. Shizuku steeled herself and stepped out into the hallway. She deliberated over whether to turn right or left, but eventually decided to go right. Since both directions looked the same, it was essentially a gamble.

She proceeded cautiously, constantly looking back over her shoulder. Once she lost sight of the door she'd emerged from, Shizuku whispered to the small bird on her shoulder.

"It's so dark, even though it's morning."

"That's because of the miasma," Mea replied. "It doesn't seem to affect you, though, Master."

"At times like this, being from another world comes in handy."

So far, the miasma wasn't causing Shizuku any discomfort or making it hard to breathe. It had been the same in Candela. People suffered adverse psychological effects when they got too close, so she was grateful not to have that problem.

That said, if anybody's mind *was* vulnerable to external influences, it was Shizuku's. She was connected to cursed artifacts that defied the conventional laws of magic, and she was using their power to her advantage. It was easier said than done, though. The role she'd been given brought with it the constant risk of losing herself.

"Erik told me not to use the book when he's not around…but where is he?"

"He doesn't seem to be nearby."

"Ugh."

Shizuku continued trudging down the hallway—but she came to an abrupt stop.

In front of her was a dark mass, and she stared at it, frozen to the spot.

"…What is *that*?"

"Please be careful, master."

The darkness was in the center of the hallway, about the size of a horse lying down. Shizuku thought it must be reacting to their conversation, because it slowly began to stir. The mass deliberately unraveled itself, like a mountain collapsing bit by bit, until it had transformed into twenty separate *things*.

These slippery, four-legged creatures looked like earless cats. The sight of their squashed eyes and fangs physically repulsed Shizuku, making her turn white. The creatures began to stagger toward her.

"…Demonic spirits?"

"It appears so," Mea replied.

"As someone from modern Japan, I'd really rather not be killed by creatures like that…"

"—They're coming."

If Shizuku wanted to avoid getting killed, she needed to take appropriate action.

Taking Mea's words as a cue, Shizuku spun around and sprinted back down the hallway.

※

A powerful strike swung down at him from above.

Erik leaped back to avoid the blow, which cut through the air and shattered the stone floor beneath him. Refusing to waste the opportunity created by the heavy swing, he used a short incantation to create two arrows. The flaming arrowheads arced through the air, piercing the grotesque figure in both eyes.

The creature let out a shrill shriek of pain. Only the top half of it looked vaguely human, and the six limbs protruding from its soft abdomen thrashed around.

"Now, now."

Erik quickly attempted to catch his breath, but the demon didn't seem to hear him. No longer able to see, it let out an enraged roar and swung a thick arm in the wrong direction. Its fist slammed into

the wall with a heavy thud, making a hole.

Smashed pieces of stone scattered across the floor. When the demonic spirit realized that its enemy was elsewhere, it turned back around.

"I can't just leave it like this, can I?"

Erik wanted to avoid using any excess magic, but leaving the demon where it was could endanger other passersby, so he recited another incantation, creating a spear out of air.

His target was the center of its chest—where monsters like this often had their hearts.

Erik didn't need to pick up the spear. He locked onto the target using a magic spell alone.

"—Strike."

The spear shot forward, digging deep into the demon's swollen abdomen and skewering its oversized heart, just as Erik had predicted. The creature let out a shriek even shriller than the first, but Erik simply continued making incantations, his expression unchanged.

"Burst."

The spear exploded inside the demonic spirit's body. All six of its limbs blew off, and it collapsed in silence.

Erik examined the strange creature, which had been reduced to just its upper torso. He'd only ever seen demonic spirits in books, so he was fascinated, but this wasn't the time to let his curiosity get the better of him. He needed to find Shizuku, who'd gotten separated from him, and return to the first floor of the tower as soon as possible.

"I just hope she isn't using that book…"

The book wasn't something that should be used haphazardly—especially not by Shizuku. It might be necessary in an emergency, but once they'd defeated the witch, Erik would have to take it away from her and make her forget it ever existed.

Some people would criticize him, calling it deceitful. Shizuku herself would probably be against it as well.

Regardless, Erik had already made up his mind.

"Okay, should I go up or down?"

Annoyed, he brushed the hair out of his eyes, then began strolling down the castle corridor. His lone footsteps echoed faintly against the cold, dry stone and disappeared without a trace.

※

The king looked down through the open space of the atrium, which cut through numerous floors, but there was no sign of anyone below him. All he could see was the remains of the giant boulder that had impaled the stone floor.

Lars had also ended up alone, and he looked up at the ceiling above him. It was much closer than it had been just moments before.

"It might've been nice if they'd sent me a little further up."

After the boulder shattered, he'd neutralized most of the debris flying toward him using Akashia. But seeing his underlings vanish one by one, struck by the pieces of rock, he'd lowered his sword and chosen to take the blow head-on.

As a result, Lars had been teleported to a level of the atrium he'd been gazing up at. He was pleased he hadn't had to walk to get here, but if they were going to teleport him anyway, he wished they'd sent him higher.

"Oh well. I'll just have to climb up myself," the king muttered to himself. The only concern weighing on his mind seemed to be how high he still had to go.

He went to walk over to the staircase—but something brought him to an abrupt halt.

His mind keenly aware of where Akashia was, Lars turned directly toward the open space in the center of the atrium.

A woman had suddenly appeared floating in the air.

The king narrowed his eyes, and Aviella flashed him a bewitching smile.

"Hello, wielder of Akashia," she said. "Perhaps I should congratulate you on making it all the way here."

"It's cold," said Lars. "Invite me somewhere warmer next time."

"Oh yes, for someone from Farsas, it must be unbearable. It just so happens that this land was the easiest to transform into the underworld."

Floating out of the sword's reach, the witch shrugged. It seemed like this was her real form, rather than an illusion, but Lars couldn't attack her directly from the position he was in. He could've thrown Akashia at her if he was feeling reckless, but if she dodged it, he'd pay for the mistake with his life.

The king glanced at the witch as he discreetly felt around for a throwing knife.

"Pretty bold of you to call yourself a witch, don't you think?" he said. "A proclamation like that gives the continent no choice but to take a strong stance. I hope you realize that."

As a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal family, Lars could sense the magnitude of magical power the witch had within her. As the wielder of the royal sword, he left all magic-related responsibilities to his sister, but he could still see spell configurations and magical energy.

The king's factual remark brought a smile to the woman's face. She showed no sign of hesitation.

"You can tell how much magical power I have, can't you? I'd expect nothing less of a member of the Farsasian royal family. True, in terms of magical power, I'm nowhere near the level of other witches from history. But…I do have *this*."

Lars stared icily at the red book the witch had taken out. He knew it originated from outside their world, a fact the witch herself was still unaware of.

"King. Don't you want to know the secret history of the past? You can learn everything—what happened, what didn't, what was forgotten, and what was covered up. Don't make light of the past. This book is a treasure trove of countries' dark secrets, geniuses' plans, and forbidden spells."

To many, the witch's words would have sounded tempting.

This was a book that granted people power through knowledge. The witch boasted that she could conquer the continent using that book alone, dazzling those who heard her claims.

And yet Lars, who knew the truth about the book, brushed her offer aside. He narrowed his blue eyes cynically.

"Not interested. I know enough history."

"You only know a fraction of the history recounted in this book," argued the witch. "There are so many facts you're yet to uncover. Take this book and look down at the world around you, and only then will you see the weight of forgotten events of the past."

Over a thousand years had passed since the history of the continent began. How much had happened in that period? The witch whispered to the king, imploring him to look back on the parts of history that had been covered up or lost.

She wasn't just trying to deceive people. Lars could sense the passion in her words. He sneered derisively.

"If we believe something never happened, then it didn't. If you wish to get hung up on those irrelevant events, do it by yourself. Don't drag other people into it. It's just depressing."

His words were more cutting than mocking. They were sharp enough to silence Aviella and shut her off from her emotions.

The king stared at the now expressionless woman.

"You're a failure of a witch. Were you just hoping to make a public show of the past?"

Aviella had been manipulated by the observers' tool. Was that the reason she'd announced the return of darkness and piled up a mountain of corpses?

Did she use her book to rile people up, attempting to project her wishes onto them?

Lars's question was icier than their surroundings, and the witch smiled a little in response. Her reddish eyes wandered.

"My wish is to make my mark on the history of the continent," she said. "Don't you want to go down in history, King?"

"No thanks. The thought of being a king people talk about after his death makes my skin crawl."

"I'll have to ask someone else, then," responded Aviella.

The witch vanished, leaving nothing more than a lighthearted laugh in her wake. Lars stared at the empty space.

The king spent a short time trying to detect her presence in front

of him, but once he'd realized she wasn't coming back, he turned back around and headed for the stairs.

※

Sharp fangs sank into the military officer's right arm. This searing pain made him grit his teeth, and he kicked the demonic spirit that had bitten him in the chest.

"Eeek!"

The small, winged monkey rolled across the floor, shrieking. Despite the pain he was in, the man drew closer and swung his sword down toward the monkey's head. Brain fluid spurted into the air. Its head split open, the monkey convulsed violently a few times before it stopped moving completely.

"Is it down…?"

Around the man lay dozens of similar-looking monkey corpses. After confirming that the last one was dead, he tore off a piece of fabric to stop the bleeding from his arm.

Even after binding the wound, however, the dull pain only grew stronger. And if that wasn't bad enough, it seemed the monkey had injected something into his bloodstream with its fangs, as a hot, numb feeling gradually spread through his arm.

"Crap."

If he lost control of his dominant hand here, he'd end up dead. The man tried repeatedly to grip his sword, but his fingers wouldn't cooperate. He looked around the empty hallway.

He had no intention of dying here. That didn't mean he wasn't prepared for death, though.

He'd take on the witch. The chances of him coming back alive were slim. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't scared. Still, he was one of Farsas's military officers, who fought for his country and acted as the king's shield.

That was why he hadn't hesitated to take on this extremely dangerous mission. While he knew the king would be leading the charge, he didn't see the point in being an officer if he didn't

accompany him. Only skilled, unmarried individuals had been selected, so the king must have exercised *some* degree of consideration.

The sound of his sword falling to the ground resonated throughout the hallway. He looked down at his right hand, which had gone completely numb.

The man heard a low growl coming from around the corner, likely another demon drawn by the stench of blood. Heavy footsteps came plodding toward him.

"…Just my luck."

The man smiled bitterly as he picked up his sword with his left hand. He turned in the direction of the footsteps and readied his sword.

There was no despair welling up inside him—only frustration.

The last thing he saw in his final moments was a large set of jaws sinking its teeth into him.

Even as he was being devoured, the man pierced the demon's skull with the sword in his left hand. The face of his mother, who was awaiting his return, unaware of his fate, came rushing back to him…and he shut his eyes.

※

Shizuku could sense multiple beings pursuing them from behind.

The sound of licking lips was horrifyingly clear, intensified by the fact that these creatures made almost no sound as they moved.

As Shizuku sped down the hallway, she issued a command to the small bird perched on her shoulder.

"Mea! Take them out one at a time, starting with the closest!"

"Understood."

The small bird did as her master said and released a burst of power. It struck the demon at the front, shattering its small head to pieces. Next, Mea took aim at the second demon.

Shizuku refused to stop, even as all of this was going on. She kept her eyes fixed on the hallway in front of her, propelling herself

forward with every step.

She had multiple demons coming after her.

If she stopped to attack them, they'd quickly surround her and take her down. With that in mind, Shizuku had opted to flee in the opposite direction.

Her goal wasn't merely to escape, though. She was doing this so Mea could defeat her enemies as she ran. And, as Shizuku had hoped, the number of demons chasing her gradually started to decrease.

It seemed like they were moving at the same speed as her. They weren't all going to catch up with her at the same time. As long as she kept running, there was a chance she'd get away unscathed. Just as Shizuku came to this conclusion, she spotted the door to the room she'd originally been in.

"Ngh…"

She made sure there were no creatures lurking on the stretch up to the door, but she couldn't be sure what lay behind it. After quickly weighing things up in her head, Shizuku stopped running, considering the possibility of new foes emerging.

"I'll meet them head-on!"

"Okay."

Shizuku drew her dagger and turned around. At that same moment, Mea blew away three of the demons at once, and Shizuku swung her dagger at another that had lunged unhesitatingly toward her.

Having never wielded a sword before, all she could do was slash haphazardly in the air—but the magic-imbued blade cut into the creature's face, effortlessly slicing its head in two. Shizuku made a face of disgust. It felt as if she'd sliced through tofu.

Meanwhile, Mea had continued to decimate her foes. Shizuku stabbed the last remaining demon with her dagger and its small body vanished like mist.

Silence returned to the hallway. Shizuku and Mea exchanged glances.

"I guess…we won?" said Shizuku. "They were weirdly soft, weren't they?"

“It seems those demonic spirits were made to dispose of dead flesh.”

“Ugh.”

This idea made Shizuku’s skin crawl, but it helped her understand why they’d vanished so easily. They hadn’t been designed to fight living humans.

Once she’d pulled herself together, Shizuku began making her way down the hallway again—but only moments later, she heard a beastly growl behind her.

“…”

The low growl shook her to her core. The presence she was sensing was undeniable.

It felt more intimidating than the demons they’d just taken care of. Shizuku readjusted her grip on the dagger, her fingers stiff.

She didn’t want to look behind her, but she needed to check what was there. She braced herself, then glanced over her shoulder.

Her blood froze.

“…No way.”

White fangs. Red eyes. A massive body easily three times her size.

There, standing behind her, was a demonic spirit that resembled a flesh-colored tiger.

Its slimy skin glistened. Its eyes glowed crimson. Its fangs and claws, clear indicators of the beast’s carnivorous nature, made the blood drain from Shizuku’s face.

“That’s a creature I wouldn’t want to deal with even if it were behind bars…,” she said, half trying to mask her fear.

When the beast took a step forward, Shizuku automatically took a step back.

“Can we beat this thing, Mea?”

“This type of demon has a strong lifeforce,” Mea replied. “It’ll take a long time to kill.”

“…Okay. Well, it’s worth a shot.”

The beast was bigger than the monstrous black bird she’d encountered in Medial, but smaller than the serpent created by the forbidden curse. It wasn’t impossible to defeat.

Shizuku placed her dagger in her belt for a moment, then took out a small bottle filled with magic potion. After a few whispered instructions to Mea positioned on top of her shoulder, Shizuku gave herself some advice.

"Calm down…and move."

That was the most important thing. No matter how terrified she was, she couldn't let her fear dull her instincts. That would be the death of her.

As long as she moved calmly, she'd still stand a chance at surviving.

Shizuku fixed her gaze on the demonic beast's glowing red eyes. She refused to let any fear show on her face. If she did, it would see her as weak. She knew that. So she cautiously waited for the right moment. Waited for her enemy to make its move.

There was no noise, neither from Shizuku nor the demon. Not even the sound of breathing.

Shizuku gritted her teeth as she looked up at her foe.

"Come at me."

The tiger demon sprang into the air.

It leaped deliberately toward Shizuku, ready to tear the unarmed woman apart. To any onlooker, it simply would have looked like a predator capturing its prey.

But just as its huge, slimy, flesh-colored body was about to reach Shizuku, Mea used her powers to restrain it in the air.

Shizuku threw the small bottle at the tiger caught in her assistant demon's barrier, and a pungent smell filled the air. The moment the magic disinfectant potion splashed on the beast's face, it released a stench that would make anybody grimace—and it seemed to have an even stronger effect on the demon. A wail-like roar echoed around the hallway.

"Mea! Aim for its eyes!" Shizuku shouted, taking out her dagger.

At that moment, invisible rocks hit the demon in both eyes.

The beast let out a roar of anger. Having lost its senses both of sight and of smell, the tiger waved its massive claws around chaotically, trying to bring down its enemy.

By that time, however, Shizuku had already slipped past the

demon and hidden behind it. Maintaining her distance, she kept her eyes glued to the giant body of the rampaging tiger.

"Can you stop it, Mea?"

"I'll pin it down."

The small bird on Shizuku's shoulder gathered her strength. Then she transformed that power into magical stakes that pierced the demon's limbs one after another.

Shizuku glanced at the beast, which was gradually losing its ability to move, then finally let out a sigh of relief.

"I guess we managed after all, huh?"

Mea continued her assault even as Shizuku was speaking, and a pool of thick blood began to spread across the floor.

The flesh-colored tiger was being reduced to a mere lump of flesh. This grotesque sight was extremely hard to watch, but Shizuku bit her lip and maintained her firm glare.

If she looked away now, it would show that her resolve wasn't strong enough.

Shizuku *knew* that wasn't the case. She'd accepted the witch's challenge and come to the castle of her own volition.

She gripped the hilt of her dagger tightly.

"Gra…aah…"

The beast, which had initially been thrashing about in a frenzy to escape its restraints, grew weaker and weaker as more stakes pierced its body. At long last, its legs gave out, and the tiger collapsed to the ground. The stench of blood and flesh filled the air as Shizuku cautiously inspected the motionless creature.

"Is it dead?"

"Master!"

At almost the exact moment that Mea issued her warning, the demonic beast launched its upper body into the air.

The dying creature turned around and lunged at Shizuku.

She jumped back, anticipating the impact, and resisted the urge to close her eyes.

The next thing she knew, however, the tiger had been engulfed in flames in midair.

Shizuku watched in astonishment as the fire spread across the

beast's entire body, turning it into a charred lump that fell to the ground. A man called out from behind her, sounding slightly short of breath, prompting her to turn around.

"Are you okay, Shizuku?"

"Harve!"

The mage was wearing a friendly smile. At long last, Shizuku had been reunited with a familiar face after being separated from her comrades in enemy territory. Feeling a profound sense of relief, a smile finally crept across her face.

"What a mess. We've all been split up. I only ended up on the floor below, but still…"

"I wonder how many floors this castle has. If there's one person on each floor, that'd be a nightmare…"

According to Harve, there didn't seem to be anyone else on this floor. The corridor that followed the outer perimeter of the castle formed a large circle, but it didn't loop back around. It was shaped like a ring with a chunk cut out of it, with both ends leading to a staircase—one going up and one going down. This meant that if they wanted to go up or down the castle, they'd have to traverse the entirety of the circular corridor.

"It's like a badly designed department store," Shizuku grumbled.

As she and Harve were heading toward the stairs leading down, she glanced through the window.

It should have been around noon, but the miasma-covered wasteland outside remained gloomy.

I wonder how everyone else is doing, Shizuku thought.

Then she brought up the only person whose location she could determine, thanks to her special abilities.

"The king's on his own, by the way. Should we check whether he's safe?"

"The king's alone?! No, you shouldn't be reading that book, Shizuku! Didn't Erik warn you not to use its powers when you're by yourself?"

"Well, yeah…"

Harve had been the first person to find intel concerning the red book. He was unaware that Shizuku was from another world, but he *did* know of the existence of the two strange books and that she was connected to them. On top of that, his friend had probably told him how dangerous they were.

He gazed down at Shizuku with a look of admonition.

"If you know the king is by himself, you must have used it already. That's bad, Shizuku. You need to be careful."

"I-I'm sorry. I just wanted to know what was going on…"

"I can understand that. Just don't do it again."

"Okay…"

It felt like a waste not to use her ability, especially since she couldn't be useful in any other way.

In this case, though, Harve was right. Shizuku lowered her head, regretting how reckless she'd been. At that moment, however, another idea came to her.

"I know! What if you read the book instead?"

"Huh…?"

"That's right! When I read it, I can't help but connect with the book, but you can just read it like any normal person would. About sixty percent of the information is being recorded in there, so if we're lucky, it might even say what's happening to the king!"

Proud of her good idea, Shizuku offered Harve the book she'd been hiding beneath her cloak. Harve gazed down at the navy-blue cursed artifact, looking shocked.

This book documented events that had been hidden from history. It might even contain information relevant to their current predicament.

And yet, the man standing in front of the book made no effort to take it. He simply turned a little pale.

Shizuku peered into his face, confused.

"Harve? I don't think it's dangerous. Both Erik and Leuticia have read it before."

"O-oh…"

Although it was a mysterious book, it was unlikely that reading it would negatively impact anyone but Shizuku. Harve reached out for

the book, albeit hesitantly.

However, as soon as his fingers brushed against the front cover… the space in front of him suddenly warped.

It was the kind of distortion that occurred when a mage was teleporting somewhere. As soon as the pair spotted it, they assumed a defensive stance.

They were prepared for whatever came their way.

They wouldn't have visited the castle otherwise.

They were there for no other reason than to overpower the witch and take control of the books.

But was that resolve *really* enough in their current situation?

"Welcome, challengers, to my castle."

Shizuku stood frozen to the spot, not saying a word.

She could hear her teeth chattering with fear. They didn't even sound like her own.

After the fall of Helginis brought the seven-hundred-year-long Dark Age to a close, an era known as the Age of Witches descended upon the continent.

During this period, five women with tremendous power lurked in the shadows of history. Yet that too had come to an end around three hundred years prior, and it had long since become a distant fairy tale.

In today's day and age, "witches" only showed up in once-upon-a-time stories that children were told. Many even believed that their powers had been exaggerated.

However, one day, a new witch appeared to sweep away the peace and declare war on the entire continent.

The world was once again reminded of their fear.

A period of change descended on the continent.

This is the story of that transformation.

“Oh, I haven’t introduced myself, have I? I’m Aviella, the Seventh Witch.”

The tall woman smiled serenely, cloaked in a deep red robe.

She looked more enchanting than beautiful. It was as though her charm radiated from within. When you looked into her eyes, it felt like you were peering into an abyss, and her gaze seemed like it could drain the thoughts of those who met it.

Long silver hair framed her face, and her reddish-brown eyes were dark and inscrutable. She peered at the two of them in turn.

It looked as if she was sizing up the challengers, and Shizuku couldn’t help but shudder. But somehow, this actually helped her to calm down. She cautiously glanced up at the witch, holding the navy-blue book with the blank cover close to her chest.

“…Did you call us *challengers*?” Shizuku asked.

“I did indeed. Challengers—humans who challenge a witch in the hopes of becoming ruler of the continent. In other words, you two.”

Going by Aviella’s definition, neither of them were “challengers.” They were taking part in the mission to take down the witch because they were affiliated with Farsas, not because of any personal ambition.

Still, neither Shizuku nor Harve were sure if it was wise to voice that truth so readily.

Harve took a step forward, sheltering Shizuku with his body.

“Becoming ruler of the continent, huh? That’s rather unrealistic. No human has ever achieved such a feat.”

“Not yet,” replied Aviella. “It’s by no means impossible, though.”

“Why don’t you assume that role yourself, then? Why do you want *us* to take over?” Harve asked the witch, cautiously trying to gather information. But Aviella simply smiled enigmatically in response.

Her smile attracted Shizuku’s attention once again. The emotion displayed on her face seemed strangely familiar, but Shizuku couldn’t quite find the words to describe it, which frustrated her.

The witch glanced at her perplexed visitors, her expression revealing a hint of mischief.

“Do you think I’m deluded? That uniting the continent is

impossible? Well, what if I told you there was something that could make it possible?”

Her provocative tone made Shizuku’s eyes widen. It was clear she understood what Aviella was referring to. After all, Shizuku had a similar item in her possession.

Shizuku had been using one of the omniscient books to find out about the recent past, but the true value of the book lay elsewhere. It also included detailed information about different countries, innumerable powerful spell diagrams, and records of political and military strategies devised by the geniuses of the Dark Age.

Although this information was split between two books, the power they held was indisputable. With the help of those books, someone could uncover a nation’s weaknesses and blind spots, or exploit the forbidden curse spell diagrams they contained to cause havoc. The person in possession of the book could even plot a nation’s downfall from within without too much difficulty, as had once happened to Candela.

Shizuku anxiously held her breath as these thoughts went through her mind.

This could be my chance.

If she could steal the red book right here and now, the witch’s advantage would weaken. By stopping any information from leaking to Aviella, Shizuku might even be able to put a stop to this assault and let the combined military might of the twelve nations take over instead.

So, pretending to be both naïve and ambitious, Shizuku began to speak.

“…Something like that *really* exists?”

“Yes. Would you like to know more?”

The red book appeared in the witch’s hand. Shizuku and Harve stared intently at its plain, unmarked cover. Still holding her own book against her chest with one arm, Shizuku cautiously extended her right hand.

“I…would.”

What if Shizuku managed to eliminate the red book right then and there?

She didn’t waste any time thinking about what the witch would do to her afterward, but just focused on taking the book in front of her.

Aviella noticed that Shizuku’s extended hand was trembling, and she smiled.

“Your resolve is impressive… But it appears you’re not the only one interested in this book.”

The witch looked over her shoulder as she spoke. Three roughly dressed men had appeared out of nowhere and were scrutinizing Shizuku and Harve with a mixture of curiosity and fear in their eyes.

They weren’t from Farsas, which must mean they’d come to the castle individually after hearing the witch’s declaration of war —“challengers” in the sense that the witch defined it. Thinking back, Shizuku remembered that there *had* been footprints on that snowy path. She wasn’t sure whether these men had arrived before or after the squad from Farsas, but it was hardly surprising that there were other people in the tower.

Shizuku looked up at Harve, uncertain how to deal with these strangers with swords hanging at their waists. The men were staring openly at Harve and Shizuku, their glares steady.

Everybody but Aviella froze, unable to come to a decision.

The witch, however, crushed their hesitancy with a dazzling smile.

“Here you are—the book that can turn you into a ruler.”

She casually tossed the red book into the air.

It was like scattering sugar among a swarm of insects. One of the men started running as soon as the book left Aviella’s hand, causing Shizuku to start running, too.

In an instant, several people’s motives collided. As the book was falling to the ground in front of Aviella—who was watching the chaos with a smile on her face—a young man with a sword at his side caught it. A split second later, however, he was knocked down by a spell from Harve, and Shizuku picked up the book that had fallen out of the man’s hand.

“The girl’s got it!”

“Mea!”

A second man swung his sword down toward Shizuku, but before

it hit her, the small bird used an invisible force to twist his arm backward. Shizuku heard the unpleasant sound of bones snapping, and the man let out a strange scream and collapsed in a heap on the floor. Paying no attention to the man's suffering, Shizuku tossed the book behind her.

At the same time that Harve caught the book, Shizuku grabbed a small bottle containing a magical potion. She hurled the bottle, filled with a green liquid, at the third man, who was charging toward her with an angry look on his face.

The sound of shattering glass pierced the air, and the man began coughing violently.

"Harve…!" Shizuku yelled, her voice trembling with anxiety.

Burn it, she urged him.

If he managed to do that, victory would be within their reach. They could put an end to the witch's tyranny.

This unexpected opportunity made Shizuku's heart race. Her palms were soaked with sweat.

But the man she'd called out to stood stock-still, staring blankly at the book in his hands.

Harve was only dumbstruck for a few seconds, but it was still long enough for the witch to gracefully snatch the book out of his hands. Shizuku didn't even get the chance to say anything.

Holding the book under her arm again as if nothing had happened, Aviella flashed them a satisfied smile.

"That's it. Struggle. Push others aside. Aim for the top. Only those who have what it takes can reshape this continent."

Her voice sounded relaxed, but she was clearly trying to egg them on. With a lilting, high-pitched laugh, Aviella vanished from the scene, and the frenzied tension that had briefly filled the corridor was replaced by a chilling sense of desolation.

Shizuku heaved a sigh, her sweat turning colder by the second.

Their golden opportunity had come and gone in the blink of an eye. Harve looked down at his empty hands and muttered an apology.

"I'm sorry, Shizuku…"

"Harve."

“I’m so sorry…”

The man let out a heavy sigh and held his head in his hands.

The look on his face was more than just remorseful—it was filled with a deep sense of regret. Shizuku couldn’t bring herself to say a word.

Shizuku and Harve worked together to restrain the men, then dragged them to a gap in the pillars.

Shizuku didn’t want to be too rough, but they *had* swung their swords at her. She didn’t want to let them go and risk them fighting other people from Farsas.

Harve sighed repeatedly as he helped Shizuku, seemingly weighed down by his earlier failure.

When they started walking down the corridor again, Shizuku lowered her head apologetically.

“I’m sorry for putting you on the spot… It must have been tricky, getting told to burn that book all of a sudden.”

“No…”

Harve shook his head. A hint of self-derision flickered in his gloomy eyes.

“To be honest, I considered not coming here at all. I had a feeling I might mess up like that.”

“You…thought you might mess up?”

“Yeah,” replied Harve. “To tell you the truth, ever since my mentor first told me about it…I’ve really wanted to read that book.”

Shizuku’s wide-eyed expression brought a bittersweet smile to Harve’s face. For the first time, she’d caught a glimpse of the researcher’s lust for learning—something he usually kept hidden.

Shizuku didn’t know how to respond. Harve turned his anguished gaze away.

“His Majesty told me the book was dangerous… If it weren’t for that book, neither you nor His Majesty would have come to this dreaded castle. Yet when the time came to burn the book, I froze. I couldn’t help feeling like it was a waste. There are countless invaluable facts inside it.”

As a history specialist, he must have been drawn to the tome from the first moment he heard about it, despite knowing it was forbidden. That also explained his hesitancy to take the navy-blue book when Shizuku had offered it to him. He hadn't turned pale because he was frightened of the book itself, but because he knew he could become absorbed by it.

Feeling like a lost cause, Harve let out another sigh of remorse.

"The past is just the past—but when I heard there were hidden records in that book, I was struck by the desire to read them. What happened back then? What were people thinking and doing? How did people shape the times they lived in? …Sorry. I know this isn't the time."

"No… I get it," replied Shizuku.

She knew this was no time to let academic curiosity take over, but Shizuku understood how he felt. That desire to know also overwhelmed her at times. It was a temptation that followed people around like a devil on their shoulder, sometimes aiding their growth and sometimes leading to their demise. It was hard to reprimand someone for experiencing such a characteristically human phenomenon. Or at least, Shizuku couldn't bring herself to do so.

She stretched wide to clear her head, then smiled at Harve.

"I think it was for the best. If we burned the book, both of us would have been killed. I'm sorry for being so reckless."

"Don't apologize…"

Harve shook his head, his expression too bitter to write off as bittersweet.

At that moment, an unexpected scream came from behind them.

"Huh?"

Shizuku turned around in a panic. The man they'd just tied up was now dead with a stab wound in his chest. Next to him, another restrained man was lying face down.

Shizuku watched in disbelief as these living people were turned into corpses. Before she could intervene, the last man's throat was slit with a dagger.

The attack was executed with magnificent skill. The series of actions that had just played out proved that the culprit had no

qualms about killing people who were unable to move. Realization hit Shizuku even before the fear did. She'd known the murderer's face for a long time now.

"…What are you doing here?"

"You again?"

Their first encounter had happened in a sea of blood.

In their second encounter, he'd pointed a sword at her.

And now, for their third encounter, she'd met the boy in a witch's castle.

Being able to communicate with someone didn't necessarily mean that you would understand each other.

The person who'd taught her this lesson better than anyone else, Kaito Dicis, lightly swung his bloodstained sword and glared at Shizuku, a glint of discomfort in his eyes.

No two people had left worse impressions on each other than Shizuku and Kaito. Even calling it a "bad impression" was an understatement.

Shizuku glanced at the boy standing further down the corridor, feeling a cold sweat run down her back. Kaito resheathed his longsword and slowly made his way toward her, holding only a dagger.

As Shizuku was wondering whether to fight or flee, Harve asked her a question.

"Do you know him?"

"I guess you could say we're acquaintances… He's a mercenary. A pretty dangerous character."

"I thought as much."

After all, he'd appeared out of nowhere and killed every one of the restrained men in the blink of an eye. After that, even if Shizuku claimed he was an even-tempered guy, nobody would believe her.

Shizuku hesitated, then raised her hands to bring Kaito to a halt.

"Wait a minute. I want to talk."

"What about? I don't think we have anything to discuss."

“I have something I want to ask you,” Shizuku countered. “Why are you here?”

Despite all his faults, Kaito wasn’t the type of person who’d claim he wanted to become the ruler of the continent. He must have come to the castle for a job.

If that was the case, the timing couldn’t have been worse. Shizuku wished he could have waited just one more day.

The boy frowned at the question.

“What do you mean? Haven’t you heard? About an hour ago, the witch visited several different towns and invited people here. She told them that if they defeated their rivals and the demonic spirits and reached the top of the castle, they could become the ruler of the continent. Almost two hundred people with way too much confidence in their abilities entered the witch’s teleportation gates and came here, but most of them died on the first floor. They ended up cutting each other down as soon as they arrived. The rest of them got scattered around the castle after stepping on teleportation traps or something.”

“Ugh…”

That must have happened right after Shizuku and her comrades were split up.

Why would the witch invite challengers to the castle when it had already been infiltrated by a squad from Farsas?

She must have wanted to incite a conflict among humans—both those who had lofty ambitions and those who didn’t. Aviella was adding more pieces to the board and reveling in the ensuing conflict, in the same way that she’d incited a fight between Shizuku, Harve, and the men she’d invited over.

Aviella was probably hoping that the people of Farsas would get confused and loosen their grip, but Lars, for one, wouldn’t even bat an eyelid. It didn’t matter whether he had a human or a demonic spirit obstructing his path—he’d nonchalantly cut them down if they got in his way.

Imagining such a scene made Shizuku’s head hurt. At that moment, Kaito hurled a cold comment her way.

“So what brings *you* here? You weren’t driven by your

incomprehensible sense of justice again, were you?”

“I’m here for work,” said Shizuku. “Are you hoping to rule the continent, too?”

“Not really,” Kaito replied. “I just heard there’d be a massive bloodbath.”

This response was so predictable that it left Shizuku speechless. It was the third time their paths had crossed, so Shizuku already knew they struggled to understand each other and she didn’t want to get into a fight with him straight away.

When he saw the troubled look on her face, the boy’s scowl deepened.

“What’s your problem? Are you going to criticize me again? You’re such a pain in the ass. You pretend not to see the things that you should be able to understand if you just thought about it, then lecture other people. It’s painful to watch.”

“What…?”

“Judging by your reaction, it was you and your buddy who injured those three men. You broke their sword arms, restrained them, and left them there. You basically fed them to the demons. Wouldn’t it have been kinder just to kill them? You only refuse to get your hands dirty when it bothers you, so I don’t want to hear you complaining about me.”

The boy’s rapid-fire criticism wasn’t entirely off the mark. Shizuku stood there staring at Kaito, speechless.

The castle was overrun by demons. Restraining people who were unable to defend themselves *was* cruel. She should have realized that. After all, she had no powers of her own. She knew full well what would happen if she was unable to escape from a perilous situation.

And yet, Kaito was right. She hadn’t fully considered the consequences.

Shizuku hadn’t hesitated to order Mea to attack other humans, either. Having come to this realization, she hung her head in shame.

“I…”

Shizuku had refused when Erik suggested she arm herself at the start of her journey. She hadn’t wanted to hurt other people just to

get where she wanted.

Somewhere along the way, however, she'd started to view that as an inevitability. She could find any number of ways to justify her actions—that her opponent attacked first, or that she and her companions were fighting for a nobler cause—but when Kaito pointed out this subconscious change that had gone on inside her, it left her tongue-tied.

Had she become desensitized to death, or grown too accustomed to conflict? Either way, Shizuku had changed without even realizing it.

As she stood there in a daze, Harve placed his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't listen to him. If we hadn't done that, they would've attacked us again."

"That's true," commented Kaito. "If I were in your shoes, I would've killed them right away. The problem with you is you're always so preachy. You're fine with the idea of being killed, but you never consider what it means to kill someone else. But what sort of resolve do you need to *be* killed? If someone's gonna kill you, then that's that. Anyone can be killed; it doesn't matter if they're mentally prepared."

People die when they die, whether they're ready for it or not.

Death comes for everyone. It doesn't pick and choose.

So then what sort of "resolve" created such inequality?

"I've had enough of your romanticism. It doesn't get you anywhere and you know it. So if you still want to keep living in ignorance…then just get out of here."

Kaito's arguments flowed effortlessly from his lips, as if they'd been simmering inside him for a long time. Perhaps he'd been preparing for the opportunity to say this to her since their last meeting.

Shizuku watched the boy in wide-eyed amazement as he came out with one irritating remark after the other.

During their second encounter, in Kisk, he'd touched a nerve by pointing out how little Shizuku valued her own life. Once again, his words had targeted parts of her character that hadn't fully formed, and a cold, water-like sensation had permeated her to her core.

Shizuku took a hard look at herself.

She *was* mentally prepared. She'd resolved herself to fight and to die.

Still, had she really accepted the idea of dirtying her own hands?

What did defeating the witch and eliminating those who stood in her way actually entail? She'd never wielded power of her own. Did she truly understand what it meant to attack someone?

She didn't want to become desensitized. These were human lives she was dealing with.

Shizuku closed her eyes.

She only kept them shut for a moment, but it was long enough. Shizuku let out a long sigh and looked ahead. Staring straight at the boy who'd been facing her all that time, she lowered her head.

"I'm sorry. I know I've been naïve."

"Shizuku?!" Harve gasped.

Kaito appeared similarly surprised. He hadn't expected her to respond like that. He looked at Shizuku, his mouth hanging open. Then Shizuku looked up and continued to speak.

"You're right—I was being ignorant. Thank you for pointing that out to me."

If Kaito hadn't said that to her, she would have continued to remain oblivious. One day, she might have unknowingly found herself wielding power and gradually losing control.

If this encounter had saved her from that fate, then it was a stroke of good luck.

Yet there was one point she wasn't prepared to concede.

"Still, I don't want to kill people if I can avoid it. I'll take up a weapon to fight, but not to kill. And as for you…"

Shizuku glanced at the dead bodies lying on the ground behind Kaito. For a moment, a heavy wave of regret tightened her throat.

It was her fault they were dead. Kaito had only killed them because she'd been so obtuse.

No matter what anyone said, that was the truth. She'd probably never be able to forget it—just like the time she'd failed to save the woman whose soul had been extracted from her body, and all the other deaths she'd witnessed during her journey.

Shizuku would bear the weight of her failures for the rest of her life. Everyone she'd encountered was living their lives with that same sense of acceptance.

"I can't approve of your actions, either. If you can avoid killing someone, then you should."

"Oh yeah? Now what?"

"I want you…to work with me."

Shizuku's words made both men fall silent. It was as though she'd dropped water into boiling oil, and both Kaito's and Harve's jaws dropped in astonishment at the sudden about-face.

Shizuku could sense the shock in the air, but she didn't flinch. She refused to look away.

She had no intention of retracting her statement. From this point forward, there would be no turning back.

"…Huh?"

After a couple of seconds, Kaito came out of his trance and curled his lip in annoyance. He tilted his head to the side, looking at Shizuku.

"Work with you? Are you stupid? I've had my suspicions for a while, but this confirms how dumb you actually are."

"People call me stupid all the time, but you're getting on my nerves," Shizuku snapped back. "Anyway, you're a mercenary, right? I'll hire you."

"Huh? Do you even have the money to pay me? I don't come cheap, you know."

"Just give me a price."

Shizuku didn't want to boast, but she did have a decent amount of money saved up. During her four months working in Kisk, Ortea had paid her a reasonably high wage, and her earnings had been transferred over to Farsas at the queen's request. Since she lived in the castle, her food and board were guaranteed, and she wasn't the type of person to waste money, so she'd hardly spent any of it.

She'd only really used it to buy ingredients to make sweets for Erik, and even then, it was only a tiny amount.

Shizuku's proposal seemed to have come as a total surprise to Kaito because, while his expression was sour, he still told her how much he charged per day. Shizuku didn't know the market rates, so it was hard to tell if it was cheap or expensive, but she could easily afford it. A sense of relief washed over her.

"Oh, that's doable. In that case, I'd like to hire you for the day."

"You're serious?" Kaito asked. "You'll have to pay me up front."

"Huh? I don't have any money on me right now… I'd have to go back to the castle."

The boy silently reached for his longsword, and Shizuku quickly waved her hands in protest.

"Aaah, wait! I swear I'll pay you later! I'll even give you a fifty percent bonus!"

"…Why are you so desperate?"

Shizuku countered Kaito's contemptuous gaze with a bittersweet smile. It was obvious that he didn't understand.

"I don't want to get killed, and I don't want to kill anyone—but I have things I need to do. That's why I need your help."

Her ideals were probably nothing more than ideals. She couldn't turn them into a reality, just like how she couldn't change someone who didn't understand her.

Still, just for the time being, she wanted to ask for a little compromise. She needed to lay out her conditions and reach an agreement with Kaito. She could wait until then to pick up a sword. They could each follow what the other was saying, even if they couldn't fully understand each other's perspectives.

Kaito glared at Shizuku, his face the very picture of dissatisfaction. As Harve began to silently assemble a spell, Kaito barked a curt demand.

"Double. If you're paying after the job, you'll have to pay me double. If not, you can forget it."

"Okay then. I'll pay double."

Shizuku nodded, then turned to Harve.

"If I die, please make sure to pay him with my money."

“I’ll make sure of it,” the mage replied. Although he looked perplexed, he made his intention to pay Kaito clear verbally.

The sulky-looking boy tutted loudly, then moved to stand in front of Shizuku. She looked up at him with a wry smile on her face. He was a little taller than her. “Thanks for helping us out today. Uhh… Can I get your name?”

Though she’d met him some time ago, Shizuku realized she didn’t know his name. They’d run into each other twice before now, and although they’d clashed fiercely, they’d never introduced themselves. If they hadn’t run into each other again, she might have gone her whole life without knowing his name.

The boy reluctantly introduced himself.

“Kaito. Kaito Dicis.”

“Okay, Kaito. Oh, this guy’s name is Harve. And I’m—”

“Shizuku. Tarkis already told me your name.”

Shizuku was slightly taken aback that he already knew, but she quickly gave him a wry smile and murmured, “I see.”

She didn’t want to kill anyone. She didn’t want to make anyone else kill people, either.

At that point in time, however, a huge number of people were being killed throughout the continent. That’s why Shizuku decided to fight.

Would she be able to do what needed to be done when the crucial moment arrived? Would she falter in the moment, just as Harve had hesitated to burn the book?

Once again, Shizuku began to contemplate the possibilities that lay ahead.

If she found herself in a position where she could kill the witch… what would she do?

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The mountains were covered in miasma.

As the mage examined the castle towering in the distance, he couldn’t help shuddering. He could sense that the number of

demonic spirits was gradually increasing. Leuticia had erected detection barriers in the Helginis region, which the mage was using to gather intelligence on the movements of their enemy.

Touching the detection barrier, the mage glanced at his colleague next to him.

"This…doesn't look good. They're summoning a huge horde of demonic spirits."

"A 'huge horde'? How many, exactly?"

"Tens of thousands, at least? Maybe they're planning on setting them against the army."

Under Leuticia's command, Farsas was planning to mobilize its forces to attack the castle. Perhaps the witch had figured that out and was planning to unleash this horde of demons against them. The men recalled how Medial's army had been routed in a similar manner.

"Contact Her Highness."

As the men hurriedly established communication with Leuticia, the number of entities around the castle continued to rise. As far away as they were, they could see numerous dark figures soaring through the sky, their harsh cries carried by the wind.

It was a gloomy, apocalyptic sight.

There was no mercy, only despair in the air.

The sun didn't shine on this dark corner of the continent. The otherworldly stagnation rejected purification of any form.

In the center of it all was the castle—its silence unbroken, as if it stood there alone belonging to no one.

※

Shizuku stuck her head out of the window. The ground below looked incredibly far away.

If I jumped from here, I'd definitely end up in pieces, Shizuku thought flippantly.

The area was shrouded in darkness as far as the eye could see, and the air was stale. As she gazed at the mountains in the distance,

she heard a loud flapping sound directly above her and instinctively cowered away.

When Shizuku cautiously looked up, she spotted bizarre-looking monsters flying through the skies above. There were hundreds of them, at least. The peculiar cries emitted by the swarm of demonic spirits made her hurriedly pull her head back inside.

If she'd spotted that many with just a quick glance, how many had been summoned altogether?

If all of these demonic spirits attacked the castle at once, the whole place would probably crumble. Just envisioning it made Shizuku feel completely discouraged.

She let out a sigh and shifted her gaze back to the hallway, where Harve appeared puzzled.

"Did you see something?"

"Uh…yeah. The sky looks crazy right now. The whole thing's pitch black."

"Ah. Because of the miasma?"

"No—because it's full of demonic spirits. A huge swarm of them has appeared."

Shizuku laughed dryly as she began walking down the corridor. Kaito, who'd gone mostly silent, followed after her.

Harve, the last to walk away, glanced back at the window as he stepped over the corpse of a demonic spirit on the floor. The lizard-like demon, roughly the size of a large dog, had been decapitated and lay completely motionless. The trio kept out of its way, trying not to step in the pool of green blood spreading across the stone floor.

While more people had been summoned to the castle by the witch, the goal of Shizuku and her allies remained the same. There were several tasks they had to complete: defeat Aviella, kill the high-ranking demon, and get rid of the book.

There was no way the three of them could accomplish all of this alone, however. The trio's immediate goal was to meet up with others who shared their goals and rework the plan.

As they headed toward the stairs, Shizuku turned back to Kaito.

"Do you think the first floor is dangerous right now? I was

considering heading there."

"I dunno whether it's dangerous, but there are loads of dead bodies there," the mercenary replied. "Oh, and demonic spirits have gathered there to feed on the corpses."

"Okay. That's out of the question, then."

Corpses were one thing, but if demonic spirits were gathering there, it was practically a deathtrap. They needed to find another place to regroup. Teleportation traps aside, the castle's design forced everyone to use the same stairways and corridors to get around, so the chances of them and their allies missing one another were practically nonexistent.

For the time being, the trio had decided to head for the nearest staircase and check on the situation, so they continued to trudge down the hallway in silence.

From time to time, they could hear ground-shaking explosions in the distance, which made Shizuku cower in fear.

"What's that noise? It's been going on for a while now. Are they firing cannons or something?"

"Hmm. I think someone's casting some pretty powerful magic."

"What if the castle collapses? This place was built so quickly, I feel like they must've cut corners with the construction."

"I doubt it'll collapse… There's a spell that can build a place like this. There aren't many mages left who can use it, though, so it's a technique that's been lost."

"Spells can get lost, even though they're magic? Don't people pass them down to their successors?"

"Not every technique can be learned. And besides, construction magic was mostly used during the Dark Age. The culture of teaching magic to others didn't really exist back then. People didn't want their techniques to fall into the wrong hands."

"Sounds like a harsh world…"

Shizuku and Harve enjoyed their absent-minded conversation as they walked down the corridor. Eventually, they reached the staircase.

It was there that they discovered the reason behind the explosions they'd heard.

“Whoa…”

There was a massive hole in the wall, large enough for two or three grown adults to pass through. The hole had been made through the end of the staircase, providing a shortcut between the stairs going up and going down, which weren’t meant to be connected.

“That’s a pretty aggressive way of making a shortcut…”

No upstanding individual would destroy a wall just to create a convenient passageway—but both Shizuku and Harve knew who might have come up with such an idea.

They exchanged weary looks.

“The king did this, didn’t he?”

“It definitely seems that way. His Majesty can’t use magic, though.”

“Then he must’ve had a mage do it for him.”

“That’s quite likely.”

It should have been an ordinary upward staircase, but now, behind it, they could also see the stairs going down. Shizuku wondered whether there was also a hole connecting to the floor above them, but it was impossible to tell from where she was standing.

Shizuku placed her foot on the first step, but Kaito stopped her.

“I’ll go first. I can hear somebody.”

“Huh? Really? I can’t hear a thing.”

“You probably just have terrible hearing.”

Shizuku responded to Kaito’s barbed reply with a calm reminder. “If it’s a person, don’t kill them.”

Kaito tutted back at her. It didn’t sound like he had a counterargument.

The three of them cautiously ascended the stairs.

When Kaito was just two steps from the top, he turned around and nimbly jumped into the air, vanishing from sight. There must have been another hole there.

After a moment, a voice echoed from above.

“It’s fine. Come on up.”

If Shizuku had been alone, she never would have managed to

jump diagonally from the middle of the staircase to the hole. Luckily, though, Mea was there to assist her.

The trio climbed three floors, moving between the holes. Gradually, Shizuku started to hear voices arguing.

"If you…then…!"

"That's just…!"

"You guys are…!"

There weren't just two or three people involved: Shizuku could hear at least a dozen voices. They sounded angry, which made Shizuku and Harve turn pale. A confrontation was almost certainly imminent, so they hurried up the stairs.

The argument in question was taking place at the foot of the stairs two floors above.

When Shizuku peeked through the hole, she spotted two groups of men with their swords drawn, engaged in a fierce argument. The tense atmosphere suggested that a swordfight could break out at any moment. The two groups were hurling insults at one another, criticizing each other's attitudes. As far as Shizuku could tell, one was made up of people from Farsas, while the other consisted of people from elsewhere.

They must have been drawn over by the shouting voices, which could be heard from other floors. Shizuku was just relieved to see more than a dozen military officers and mages from Farsas together. She'd assumed they'd been separated.

One of the sword-wielding military officers spotted the three of them and smiled.

"You're safe."

"Luckily," replied Shizuku. "What happened here?"

Shizuku had heard snippets of the argument, but she still had no idea what was going on. The officer explained the situation in broad terms.

It had started when somebody broke the staircase, creating a passageway straight through. Some challengers came up through the hole and ran into the officers from Farsas, which nearly devolved into a scuffle.

The people from Farsas had tried to push them back, saying,

“What are you doing here? It’s dangerous. You need to leave,” while the guests invited by the witch had criticized the Farsasian officers, accusing Farsas of trying to steal the book that could make them king.

The argument escalated to the point where swords had been drawn on both sides, but a mage from Farsas had cast a barrier to keep the challengers at bay. One of the witch’s more cool-headed guests had managed to keep the others in check, and they’d sheathed their swords and gone back to merely arguing. Even so, it didn’t seem like the conflict was going to die down any time soon.

“Ugh…,” groaned Shizuku. “This really isn’t the time for silly arguments.”

“Should I kill them?” asked Kaito. “It won’t take long.”

“Wait, okay? Just wait!” Shizuku said, holding Kaito back.

If he killed the challengers, it would defeat the point of Shizuku hiring him. As she worried about how to resolve the situation, a man who looked like a mercenary turned his glare on Shizuku. It seemed he’d overheard their unsettling conversation.

“What was that? What’d you just say?”

“I was suggesting that I kill you. There’s no better way to deal with irritating small fry like you.”

“Aghhh, this is getting worse by the second!” Shizuku cried out.

They weren’t simply on the verge of conflict any longer—Kaito’s remark had the potential to plunge them straight into the thick of it.

If his words ignited a battle, Shizuku would be the one to blame. There was no fighting that—after all, she *was* the person responsible. She’d played right into the hands of the witch, who was trying to make people fight one another.

To Shizuku’s surprise, however, the mercenary turned pale. “You’re…Kaito Dicis.”

“That’s right. What of it? Which of you wants to be killed first?”

“H-hang on.”

“I said wait!”

The other mercenary and Shizuku yelled at Kaito in unison, making him click his tongue in annoyance. Their voices attracted the attention of the people around them. Shizuku bit her lip, frustrated.

The situation couldn't have been any more infuriating.

Now was not the time. Outside, demonic spirits were being summoned in huge numbers. Humans shouldn't be fighting among themselves.

If the witch's trick was to shake people up and manipulate them, then they needed to do the opposite.

Shizuku would use her words to change the situation.

She put on a serious expression and looked around at the other people. "Excuse me, but it seems as though there's been a misunderstanding. That book can't make you a ruler. It's just a magic implement."

"What are you on about? The witch said it contained spell diagrams for forbidden curses!"

The same man who'd been frightened by Kaito seemed to believe that Shizuku—a woman who looked younger than her years—was easy to intimidate. He scowled at her threateningly, but Shizuku just shook her head.

"It doesn't. That book is a cursed artifact that eats away at people's minds. We're planning to destroy it as part of our mission here to take down the witch. Remember the incident at Candela Castle, where people who worked at the castle ended up fighting each other and causing widespread destruction? The witch's book played a role in that chaos. She was one of the people behind the Candela incident, and Farsas has been looking for her ever since."

Not all of that was true, exactly, but the core of it was fact.

It was crucial that Shizuku made the zealous challengers question whether they'd been deceived. Weaving some real-life events into her narrative raised the likelihood of them realizing the witch's lies.

As it turned out, many of them seemed to know about the incident in Candela. It *had* caused a considerable uproar. Several of them frowned and began whispering among themselves. Shizuku continued, her expression somewhat troubled.

"First of all, if the book could *really* make someone a ruler, why wouldn't the witch keep it for herself instead of telling everyone about it?"

Why would she reveal that such a book existed? She was clearly

just trying to give people a reason to fight.

"You were all invited here *after* our squad from Farsas entered the castle. She's probably trying to manipulate you into killing us. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but what she said about that book turning you into a ruler is a lie. If you get your hands on it, it'll drive you insane and turn you into a source of power for the witch. For example, do you all know how this castle was built?"

The hallway instantly fell silent.

After a moment, one swordsman who was yet to speak answered Shizuku's question. He spoke in a quiet voice that matched the stillness of the surroundings.

"It was built using human lives. They hired hundreds of mercenaries to fight the demonic spirits."

"Yes, that's correct."

Shizuku had posed the question to draw their interest, but she hadn't expected anyone to know the answer. While she reacted with surprise, the man turned to her with bitterness in his eyes.

"I'm one of the survivors… It was horrific. Many of my old friends died. I wanted to use this as an opportunity to strike back against the witch. Honestly, ruling the continent means nothing to me."

The mage beside him gave a small nod, indicating that he felt the same way. The determination they both exuded was undeniable, and its intensity silenced the men who'd been getting worked up. Once their inflamed ambitions had cooled off, the group started to react with fear, perhaps finally remembering that they were inside the witch's castle.

The man standing in front of Shizuku was speechless, too. His face had turned somewhat pale, but it seemed he wasn't ready to back down just yet.

"But…if what you say is true, why wouldn't the witch just kill you herself?" he asked, his voice much feebler than before. "She could use those demonic spirits or something."

"She can't afford to do that," a cool voice responded.

It had come from the hole that led to the floor above. As the majority of people's gazes turned in that direction, a man dressed in mage attire appeared in the opening.

Shizuku leaped up, calling out his name.

"Erik!"

"Listen. The witch doesn't have time to deal with us right now. Twelve nations have declared war on her, so she's busy summoning a massive army of demonic spirits to fight them. Things are looking really bad out there. We're on the brink of all-out war."

"Huh…?"

At Erik's words, the color drained from everyone's faces. A few people glanced out of the window.

The sky was dark, and the miasma was unbelievably dense. This was a reality they couldn't turn their eyes away from any longer.

The frenzied tension of conflict had been totally wiped away. The man who'd been lashing out at Shizuku moments earlier looked as if all the blood had drained from his body.

"…No way. Is that really true?"

"Deceiving people is second nature to the witch," Erik said, adding insult to injury. And that brought their short argument to a close.

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According to the reports, one hundred thousand demonic spirits had already been summoned.

They weren't that strong individually, but when the commanders of each nation's army heard that such a large swarm had gathered around the witch's castle, they couldn't hide their anxiety.

Only a few of the countries taking part in the operation had royalty personally spearheading their troops. Rozsark was one such nation. After transporting its thirty thousand–strong army to a fortress in northern Farsas, it united with the allied forces.

As the armies of the different nations were gathering on the vast plain, the young king of Rozsark—King Oltovine—spotted Leuticia from atop his horse and shared a few words with her.

"Will there be an endless stream of demonic spirits? If so, there's no way we'll be able to keep going. Has anyone devised a

counterplan?”

“Once the core inside Helginis Castle is destroyed, it will break the four-pointed spell configuration generating the miasma. That’ll stop them from being able to summon demons so quickly.”

“How long will that take?”

“An hour. I’m sure they’ll try to defend against that, though.”

“That’s not soon enough. What if the people inside the castle are already dead?”

“…Be quiet.”

This wasn’t the first time that the two royals from different countries had met. They’d previously crossed paths following the Candela incident, after Farsas had asked Rozsark to govern the smaller nation via proxy. It wasn’t public knowledge, but the pair were actually blood relatives. Oltovine was technically a direct descendant of the Farsasian royal family, but he kept this a secret due to the problems it would cause.

“As for that woman who calls herself a witch,” Oltovine added, as if it were an afterthought, “we’ve found some information about her past. Someone with her name submitted several research papers to the Continental Institute for Historical and Cultural Studies.”

“That research institute with a branch in every major nation?”

“The same. It collects papers from independent scholars. There’s no age limit, either. Apparently, Aviella submitted twelve papers in total—her first when she was fourteen—each to a different branch in a different country. She must have been traveling throughout the continent.”

“What were her papers about?” Leuticia asked, immediately pressing the king for more details.

Oltovine smirked, having expected this question.

“I skimmed through them. They were all pretty mundane, warning about the evils of using forbidden magic. They didn’t attract much attention at the time.”

“The *evils* of forbidden magic…?”

If that was true, it seemed that Aviella used to have a sensible view regarding forbidden spells. She must have undergone a drastic transformation at some point after that—after all, this was the

woman who'd sided with a heretical cult in Candela.

As Leuticia was mulling over this, Oltovine expanded on the topic.

"The journal that her final paper was published in, however, was withdrawn and destroyed after its publication, after somebody pointed out that the forbidden spell she described in it was actually executable. Rumor has it that several small nations tried to reach out to her about it."

"How stupid…"

Was *that* how mages had shown up who knew forbidden spells? It was beyond idiotic.

"A historian turned witch. What a vexing tale. To think she'd wage war against the entire continent."

"And to make it worse, we're the ones at a disadvantage. This is no laughing matter."

The pair exchanged bitter smiles, but no amount of speculation was going to move the situation forward. Leuticia let out a deep breath and casually waved a hand.

"If everyone inside the castle dies, I'll go in and destroy the core myself. You can take over as supreme commander. Look after Farsas for me, too."

Even if both official members of the Farsasian royal family died in battle, there would still be Oltovine. Leuticia's words brought a frown to his striking face.

"You and your brother are such slave drivers. Who would want to rule Farsas?"

"Just take Akashia, then."

"I don't want it."

"It wouldn't be for you. You'd give it to your son," said Leuticia. "The girl who protected Vied is inside that castle."

"…Even *she's* in there?"

Oltovine's eyes widened, but he soon wiped the surprised look off his face, tugged on his reins, and returned to his army. Leuticia's blue eyes wandered in the direction of Helginis.

The darkness was yet to arrive, but it still cast a gloomy shadow of fear over people's hearts.

They could fight that fear as much as they liked. However, if they

succumbed to it and sank into despair, darkness would fall over the continent for the first time in six hundred years.

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Once they realized the witch was just using them, most of the invited guests decided they wanted to return to their hometowns.

This was easier said than done, though. The first floor was already swarming with demons, and they were also starting to throng together outside.

Erik responded by casting a barrier in a nearby room, creating a "zone of relative safety." About a dozen people chose to wait there, although they still seemed apprehensive, and everyone else left them behind and began ascending the castle.

As Erik was helping Shizuku through a hole in the staircase, she whispered something into his ear.

"Did you make these holes, Erik?"

"No. I thought it was the king."

"Huh? The king already made it this far up?"

After being reunited with Erik, Shizuku had linked with the book to find out where Lars was, but nothing had been written about him. That probably meant he was still safe—in which case, he was definitely heading upward.

Plus, the holes had begun underneath the floor Shizuku had been on. The fact that so many holes had already been created suggested that the person making them was moving up the castle at a considerable speed.

If they were Lars's doing, the mage accompanying him must be having a rough time. Shizuku spared a sympathetic thought for this unknown mage's struggle.

As she climbed the stairs, Shizuku glanced at the people following behind her, a sad expression on her face.

"Do you think the others are safe? The group has gotten a lot smaller."

"I can't say anything for sure, but it *has* been a long time,"

replied Erik. “I think most of the people who aren’t here are probably a lost cause. If they *are* alive, though, they’ll notice the holes in the stairs and join us eventually.”

Erik never offered false reassurance. Shizuku had had a vague feeling he’d say that, but it made her frown nonetheless.

Everyone must have known this would happen, but she still couldn’t help but lament the loss of her fellow fighters. They weren’t mindless pawns; they were challengers in every sense. When she thought about how tenacious they’d been, it left her choked up.

“Is it true that all-out war is about to start …?”

“Yeah. Outside, more and more demonic spirits are being summoned using the miasma. We need to hurry up and destroy that magical device.”

“Oh, then we’ll have to break the core…”

“That’s the plan. We’re heading there right now.”

If they could destroy the core of the magical device and break the spell configurations in the north, south, east, and west, it would weaken the miasma covering Helginis a little. That would reverse the transformation that had turned the region into the underworld, and Helginis would return to being the “land shut away by magic.”

Once Shizuku thought through all that, she cocked her head to one side.

Would that *really* be enough? Could they really defeat the witch just by destroying the magical device?

Despite these doubts, she allowed Erik to lead her by the hand as they passed through another hole in the stairs.

They said very little to one another as they continued their ascent, and soon they reached the floor where the core was.

While the previous floors all had small rooms along the inner side of a circular corridor, this floor had none. Instead, the corridor opened out into a large, circular hall with the core of the magical device positioned at its center.

There was a large magic circle drawn on the floor, with clear

crystal balls embedded into different parts of the complex pattern. In the center of the circle was a perfectly round indentation about six feet in diameter, filled with a shallow pool of water.

Shizuku started walking over to the magic ring, intrigued by the water's mirror-like quality.

The next thing she knew, her toes and forehead hit an invisible barrier. She silently crouched down in pain.

The people around her looked at her in confusion—particularly Kaito, who gave his employer an icy look.

"You're so dumb. Didn't you wonder why everyone else stopped?"

"Ugh… I didn't expect there to be a barrier here…"

Shizuku stood up, rubbing her forehead. She had no way of justifying her carelessness. Erik and the rest of the nine mages were already standing around the magic circle, peering inside.

"Seems like it'll be tough to destroy without letting it get out of control."

"How about we dispel part of it before we destroy it? That'll take some time, though."

"We'll probably need Akashia. Let's look for His Majesty."

"Wait. His Majesty has other matters to attend to. It can't be *that* complicated—we should be able to handle it ourselves…"

While the men were deliberating how to break the invisible barrier, Shizuku looked around the windowless room. She glanced in turn at each of the four cardinal directions—east, west, south, then north—all of which were blocked by walls.

The castle had been constructed in a desolate land, with the underworld centered around it.

The powerful magic that filled the air had originally rendered the region uninhabitable. The only thing that had purified it for several hundred years during the Dark Age was this giant magical device.

Yet the witch had reversed that same device to produce the miasma. Her red book must have made this possible, as there were no remaining records regarding the purification device in Helginis. They'd all been lost when the nation was destroyed by a witch centuries earlier.

The red book, however, documented all of history. Aviella had

used its records to create this current device.

"Does that mean…?"

Shizuku had an idea.

She just didn't know whether it was possible. She beckoned Erik over and quietly asked him a question.

"Didn't you overwrite that spell that banned the use of magic during the battle in Kisk?"

"Oh yeah, I did. I remember that."

"Can't you do the same thing here?"

Erik tilted his head to one side, unsure what Shizuku was trying to say, so she reworded her question.

"This device's original purpose was to purify Helginis, right? Could you revert it to its original state? …Could you turn it back into a purification device?"

Breaking the spell that had transformed the region into the underworld wouldn't give them the upper hand. Helginis would still be dominated by magical energy.

So what if they could use the device to their advantage instead? If they could turn it back into the purification device that had once cleansed the land, they might be able to gain the upper hand.

Shizuku's idea made Erik's eyes widen in surprise.

"It might be doable…but it'd be tough, since I don't know the original spell configuration. I can't just overwrite it at random… Wait, are you saying—?"

"I can read the original spell configuration."

The spell was written in the witch's book. Since Shizuku was able to connect with it, it was possible for her to access that information.

This tactic could turn their disadvantage into an advantage. Having grasped Shizuku's plan, Erik was rendered speechless.

After an uncharacteristically long silence, he finally spoke.

"…I don't think it'd be impossible."

There was an undercurrent of ineffaceable pain in his calm voice.

"But to tell you the truth, I don't want you using that book any more than you already have. You've already done more than enough stealing the red book's ability to record history. Anything beyond that is going too far."

"But you could do it, couldn't you? Please, let me try. If we just stand here, something could happen that we won't be able to come back from."

If human armies ended up clashing with demonic spirits, the ensuing devastation would be like nothing ever seen before. They needed to do everything they could before things reached that stage. It was Shizuku's desire to help that had brought her to the castle in the first place.

Shizuku's earnest plea brought a scowl to Erik's handsome face. He stared at her for a while, then eventually let out a small sigh and turned toward the magic circle.

"…Fine."

"Erik!"

Shizuku smiled with relief. Erik patted her on the shoulder, then gathered the mages together and initiated some kind of discussion.

The parts of the conversation that Shizuku overheard didn't make much sense to her, but it sounded like they'd confirmed that the core *was* the thing controlling the effects of the giant device. All of the other mages gazed down at the magic circle, puzzling things over. When it appeared they'd all reached an agreement, Erik raised a finger and pointed east.

"I suspect the spell's four-directional configuration resembles the one that used to exist in Helginis. I've seen it in action—it was designed to draw power from the core and distribute it throughout the area. So if we overwrite this part right here, we can use the existing four-directional configuration as a purification device."

"I see… If that works, more than half of the demons outside will get sent back, won't they? They won't be able to withstand the purification barrier."

"That's just theory, though. The scale is enormous, and we don't even know what the original spell configuration was."

"I'll figure something out. I'll also be the one to overwrite it."

Once their discussion had concluded, they dispelled the barrier surrounding the core. Erik stood at the top of the magic circle, on the other side of the pool of water, and beckoned Shizuku over. She responded by hesitantly stepping inside the ring.

Erik looked around. Everyone was watching him. The mage, who'd received praise from the princess of Farsas herself for his outstanding spell configuration skills, made a calm announcement.

"I will now convert the magical device that turned Helginis into the underworld into a purification device. I don't know how long it will take, but if it works, most of the demonic spirits should either disappear or lose their strength. However, if someone notices that I'm overwriting the spell, there's a good chance that the witch or demonic spirits will try to stop me. I want you all to keep those attacks at bay, but it will likely be a very perilous battle. If any of you don't wish to stay, flee now while you have the chance. I can't be responsible for what happens to you."

His tone was cold. Although some were taken aback by what they were hearing, no one tried to leave. Each of the twenty-three individuals there responded with wordless gazes.

Erik nodded, making no effort to force a smile. Then he looked down at the twenty-fourth person—Shizuku.

"I taught you how to read spell diagrams, didn't I? Do you remember how to do it?"

"Yes. I'll be fine."

She'd gotten plenty of practice when she was drawing the diagrams on his behalf. Shizuku was confident that she and Erik could communicate effectively about spell diagrams, if nothing else. He smiled at her, then glanced down at the magic circle at his feet.

"Look at this and point out the differences you observe… Wait, you can't see magical power, can you? Oh well."

"Wait, what? Is that a problem?"

Shizuku panicked, wondering if there was more to the spell than what was etched on the floor. Erik prodded his forehead with his finger.

"It's fine. I'll share the surface of my consciousness with you. You'll be able to see the magical power through my eyes."

As Erik said this, he got down on one knee at the top of the magic array. Pulled by the hand, Shizuku knelt directly in front of him. The pair looked at each other.

Erik wrapped a hand around her waist, pulling her closer. At their

sudden proximity, Shizuku wondered if she was turning red. A thought flickered through her mind: *This might have been the first time I've seen his face so close*. But she got the strange feeling she'd had the same thought before.

She wasn't sure if Erik had picked up on her confusion or not, but he cautioned her, his expression cool as ever.

"Try not to think about anything unnecessary. It'll cloud your mind."

"Ugh… You need to respect my privacy."

The idea of Erik seeing any of her awkward thoughts was unbearable.

As Shizuku was trying to calm herself down, Erik looked at the intricate lines of the spell configuration and then placed his hand on one of the thicker lines. He drew magical power from the device in his ear and concentrated it into his fingertips.

"If we had Akashia, it'd be easier to break through. I guess I'll have to force our way in."

Erik compressed the magic he'd gathered and aimed it at one edge of the formation. Everybody apart from Shizuku looked at his hand, and a moment later, a sound resembling bursting sparks rang through the air.

The incursion had begun.

Erik looked up and stared intently at Shizuku.

The moment she met his deep-blue eyes, she immediately grasped what she needed to do. Shizuku closed her eyes and pressed her forehead against his.

Their minds synchronized, allowing them to share thoughts.

The scene Shizuku saw would normally be impossible to witness for someone like her, who possessed no magical powers.

Intricate, elegant intertwining lines appeared on top of the magic circle. They were so beautiful that they took her breath away. For a moment, Shizuku found herself overwhelmed by what she was seeing.

She and Erik saw the world differently.

This was the difference between a mage and a person with no magical powers. She'd been aware of that for some time, but she'd

never truly understood it until that moment. How could two humans see the same world yet perceive it so differently?

Erik had always been able to see this world.

This world, cloaked in a layer of magical energy.

There was a depth to it that conveyed endless possibilities.

The sight of this different realm made Shizuku shudder. She almost wanted to cry.

She clutched the untitled book against her chest, which burned with emotion.

Then she linked her consciousness to it. She extracted from the vast wealth of information available to her the blueprint for the magical device that had once existed here.

The man spoke in a calm voice.

"Go on. Tell me."

"…Okay."

The only concrete sensations Shizuku could feel were his forehead touching hers and his arm supporting her body.

Everything else was spread out in the fertile expanse of her mind. Both the spell formation she could see through Erik's eyes and the blueprint she'd extracted from the book were strikingly clear to her. Shizuku searched for differences between them, beginning with their most basic components.

"First…swap around the start and end points of the 3rd sequence."

"Okay."

"Rotate the 4th one ninety degrees clockwise. Do the same with every sequence until the 9th."

"Hold on… Okay."

"Stop the 11th and the 33rd sequences from intersecting, and link them to the 47th sequence instead."

Shizuku delivered her instructions calmly, and Erik responded with his magic.

Everybody watched with bated breath as the pair rewrote the spell's structure, praying that this one action would turn the conflict around.

※

Having returned from the top floor, Aviella clutched a battered longsword, its blade chipped and nicked. She must have picked up somebody's weapon again.

As the woman gazed fondly down at the sword, Elzard looked at her with a hint of exasperation in his eyes.

"Are you done summoning demonic spirits?"

"Yes. I've made it so they'll spawn automatically from now on. The miasma is thick enough, so that should be adequate, don't you think? We'll go on the offensive once their numbers exceed five hundred thousand."

"Most of the humans you brought here have deserted."

"Oh?" The witch didn't seem concerned by this statement. On the other hand, she wasn't exactly relaxed. It felt as if she'd adopted a detached, accepting stance on everything, which irritated Elzard.

"About half of the people from Farsas, who arrived first, are dead. The survivors are on the middle levels… One of them is ascending at an incredible speed. They're already close."

"That must be Akashia's wielder."

Aviella laughed, delighted by the thought of her nemesis approaching, but then her eyes suddenly widened in surprise. She began to scan her surroundings, looking as though she was searching for something invisible. Noticing the sudden change, the demon raise his eyebrows slightly.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Somebody has made contact with the device's core. Are they… rewriting the spell configuration? I didn't think that was possible. I guess some humans have interesting skill sets."

"Don't act all impressed. I'll go and kill them."

If the spell transforming the area around the castle into the underworld was overwritten, it would not only hinder the summoning process but also impact the demonic spirits that had already been summoned.

Just as Elzard was about to get up from the throne, Aviella raised

a hand to stop him.

"It's fine. I'll go. I want to see who's behind it."

"It doesn't matter who it is. We're just going to kill them anyway."

"It *does* matter. A person's death isn't devoid of all meaning."

A scene unrelated to their surroundings reflected in Aviella's eyes.

For a moment, she looked like a girl who hadn't lost hope in her world. Like a woman who'd refused to give up, despite the betrayal she'd suffered.

As the woman-turned-witch spoke, her eyes were filled with countless different emotions.

"History is built by the innumerable paths that humans choose to go down. Humans are beautiful, Elzard."

"…Not this again," the demon spat, unable to understand her perspective.

The witch laughed gleefully. She propped the longsword against the side of the throne, then turned around.

"If the wielder of Akashia turns up while I'm away, make sure to give him a warm welcome."

"I'll turn him into a lump of flesh."

The woman snickered in response, then vanished.

Even after she was gone, Elzard felt as though he could still see her and her elegantly straight back, and he closed his eyes.

He didn't understand what she hoped to achieve by inciting so much chaos. He yawned with boredom, then shut his eyes once more.

※

Twenty minutes had passed since Erik and Shizuku started overwriting the spell. During that time, the pair had remained completely still. Very few words were spoken—Shizuku only opened her mouth to tell Erik what to rewrite, while Erik simply responded to her directions in a soft tone of voice.

The shift of magical energy around the massive spell formation was subtle and gradual, but it seemed to place a considerable

burden on Erik nonetheless. As sweat ran down his cheeks, he let out a sigh and urged the woman in his arms to continue.

"Done. Tell me the next step."

"…You need to replicate the 120th sequence. Use it to overwrite the 115th."

With her eyes closed, Shizuku took a moment to pause before telling him the necessary corrections—a pattern she'd followed from the start. Occasionally, the half-dreaming expression on her face would fade away, as if she'd lost sight of reality, at which point Erik's voice would gently pull her back to consciousness.

It was a strange sight. Although the onlookers originally paid close attention, they had begun considering their next steps and making the requisite preparations. The mages cast layers of barriers around Shizuku and Erik, while the swordsmen and military officers quickly sharpened their beloved swords, their senses keen.

It felt like the calm before a storm. Kaito, meanwhile, simply glanced back at Shizuku every now and then as he checked the blade of his dagger. He wasn't feeling particularly tense.

He'd come to the castle hoping for a chaotic battle, but things had gone in a somewhat strange direction. That didn't bother him much, though. In fact, if the opportunity to kill the witch *did* come his way, it would be a dream come true. He tried to smile, but just ended up looking annoyed.

He hadn't felt like himself for a while, and he was sure the woman who'd hired him was to blame. She was constantly making annoying demands.

Perhaps the change had begun long ago.

At some point, killing people had stopped being as fun as it had been before.

"I can't smile anymore."

When Kaito had told this to an old acquaintance of his, the response he'd got was, *"That's probably because you've gotten older."*

Hearing this, he felt a mix of acceptance and denial. Still, the

reasons behind his transformation weren't really relevant. The reality of his situation remained the same.

He was no longer able to smile. There was nothing more to it.

He wasn't opposed to the idea of killing people, but he no longer got any enjoyment out of it.

Swinging his blade to eliminate enemies had turned into a routine task—just another part of the job. He found it neither interesting nor enjoyable. He even felt uncomfortable when his opponents pitifully begged for their lives.

Kaito wasn't ready to accept that fact, though. He had taken on one dangerous job after another, and even ventured into the witch's castle.

It was there that he'd once again found himself face-to-face with *her*—that infuriating, stubborn, nagging, foolish little girl.

He'd met plenty of other people whose weapons of choice were righteousness and justice. They all had a narrow-minded view of the world, living their lives in blissful ignorance. Shizuku was no different.

She was the only one who'd appeared before him more than once. On both occasions, she'd denied him the bloodshed he sought.

The first time, he'd chosen not to kill her because she was a client of someone he knew. His decision to spare her had led them to meet a second time. There was nothing particularly special about that encounter—he simply hadn't been impressed by her childish opinions.

She'd leveled the same criticisms at him when they met the second time. She wasn't deterred by the fact that he'd pointed his weapon at her and even threatened her during their previous encounter.

Her arguments were as trite and foolish as ever. Despite this, her attitude provoked irritation within him…as well as some other nonsensical ideas.

"If I hadn't killed that person…"

"If I'd met that person again…"

Would his other victims have repeated their initial arguments if they'd met a second time? Or would they have changed their tune

out of fear of Kaito? If they had survived, the experience would definitely have changed them in some way.

He was speculating about situations that were never going to happen. They were meaningless hypotheses that were pointless to consider.

And yet for some reason, Kaito hadn't been able to smile since they first crossed his mind.

"…I'm so bored. It's getting on my nerves."

Kaito flipped his dagger over in his hand a few times. Shizuku's small back was reflected in its well-polished blade. She wasn't wearing any kind of armor. If he were to throw his dagger in her direction, it would probably kill her.

She was technically his employer, though. He wasn't interested in killing her, and doing so would only complicate matters. When it came to people like her, it was best to part ways quickly and avoid running into them again.

He pushed these thoughts to the back of his mind and simply waited until he was needed.

Eventually, that moment arrived.

A sound sent a slight ripple through the air.

The mages all turned to look. A distortion had appeared near the entrance of the hall—a sign that teleportation magic was being used. Setting eyes on it, everybody in the room readied themselves to fight.

In the blink of an eye, a woman materialized in the spot where the distortion had been.

The mage was clothed in a deep shade of red, and the teleportation spell had left her lustrous silver hair swaying.

She surveyed the hall with her reddish-brown eyes.

"Oh… That's interesting. It's a mage from Farsas who's rewriting the spell?"

The witch's gaze landed on the pair sitting inside the magic circle. A few people noticed where she was looking and instinctively moved

in front of Erik and Shizuku, attempting to shield them from sight. The hostility in the air thickened.

A military officer from Farsas turned toward the woman.

"Are you the witch?"

His unreserved question brought a smile to Aviella's face.

"Yes, that's right. That's the title I'm going by. I'm the owner of this castle."

"…Then I want you to stop summoning those demonic spirits outside."

"Do you really believe I'd listen to such a request? You know why I'm here."

The witch laughed out loud. She was a powerful individual, and this was a proclamation of war. The atmosphere in the hall became suffocatingly tense.

One by one, Aviella looked at the people who'd overcome their fear to challenge her. She twisted her red lips into a smile.

"If you think you can stop me, give me everything you've got."

Once upon a time, six hundred years ago, a country existed in this spot.

That land, built in a region that was purified by a saint, was known as Helginis.

The country managed to uphold its peace for a long time, even during the war-torn Dark Age. However, one night, this small border nation unexpectedly crumbled.

The woman who burned the town to the ground and destroyed its castle was called a witch—an inhuman yet human being who filled citizens across the continent with fear.

"…A witch, huh? Fine by me," Kaito muttered, adjusting the grip on his dagger in his left hand.

He hadn't found any of his jobs interesting in some time, regardless of the nature of his task. At this moment, however, he was experiencing an unmistakable thrill.

The boy drew his longsword with his right hand.

There was no fear. That was an emotion he'd never felt.

With bated breath, he fixed his gaze on his prey.

Aviella smiled, extending her slender left arm.

Her fingers were long, and her thoughts refined.

"Okay. Let's begin."

The witch casually snapped her fingers—and as if on cue, a fierce battle erupted in the hall inside Helginis Castle.

※

On the top floor of the castle, a strong, turbid wind blew in through a large window. A demon man sat on the sole throne in the hall, his eyes closed.

Everything was monotonous, but from his perspective, an eternity and an instant were pretty much the same. To him, the cycle of human life seemed like a mere flash in the pan.

Why, then, had he chosen to stay in their world?

The contract that bound him and Aviella was poorly made and could have been broken at any time. She'd used the knowledge documented in her red book to summon him when she was an inexperienced mage, still in her mid-teens.

If he'd grown tired of everything in this world, he could just decide to leave. He could do so whenever he wanted.

Despite this, Elzard remained seated, waiting for her to return with his eyes closed. He was unable to sense the passing of time, so he never attempted to envision the future.

"—Huh? You're the only one here?"

A man's careless voice echoed through the hall.

No footsteps could be heard, but Elzard had sensed the intruder's approach nonetheless. He opened one eye, then turned to face the trespasser.

The king had shown up by himself, wielding a sword unlike any other—one immune to all magic, even that from higher realms.

The king stood at the entrance to the hall, fixing his defiant gaze on the throne.

“I’m seriously annoyed you made me climb all those stairs for nothing. Where’s the witch?”

“She’s not here.”

“In that case, I’ll kill you first and go look for her after that. It’s a nuisance, but oh well.”





"Bold words."

Lars was a mere human, yet he'd addressed the high-ranking demon—beings that were often labelled as gods—with astonishing bravado. The absurdity of the situation made Elzard laugh. He rose to his feet in a single fluid motion.

"You won't need to go searching for her. Just wait there—though you'll be a lump of flesh by the time she arrives."

The king simply responded to Elzard's death threat with an arrogant look. He showed no hesitation as he drew closer to the demon, his sword still lowered. His attitude made Elzard want to click his tongue disapprovingly.

"I should at least warn you… I'm stronger than Aviella," Elzard said.

"So what?"

Lars readied his sword, his expression unchanged. His blue eyes, a distinguishing trait of the Farsasian royal family, shimmered with defiance.

"If you're the strongest, then it makes sense for me to be your opponent. Come. I'll show you what it means to die."

The cold breeze was laden with an oppressive heaviness.

Countless wings could be heard beating outside the window.

Nonetheless, that loathsome noise failed to infiltrate the throne room. Only a razor-sharp tension hung in the air.

"…You lowly human."

Elzard formulated a spell without an incantation and it lit up at his fingertips. He gazed at the human king through the pale-blue light he'd created.

He was unable to envision any kind of future.

He couldn't grasp the concept of time changing.

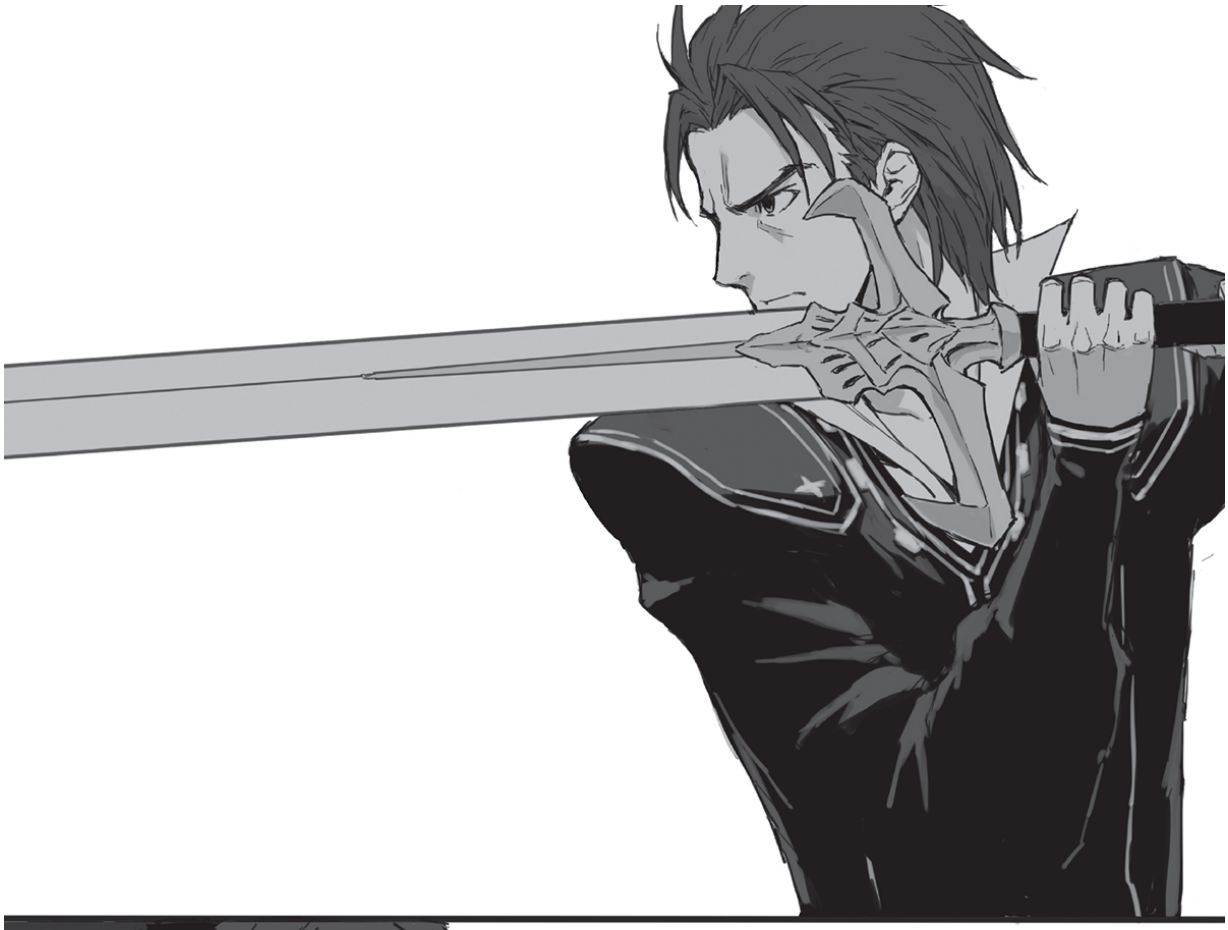
Which was why he couldn't even entertain the thought of his own defeat as he unleashed that bolt of lightning, hoping to strike down that fragile life.

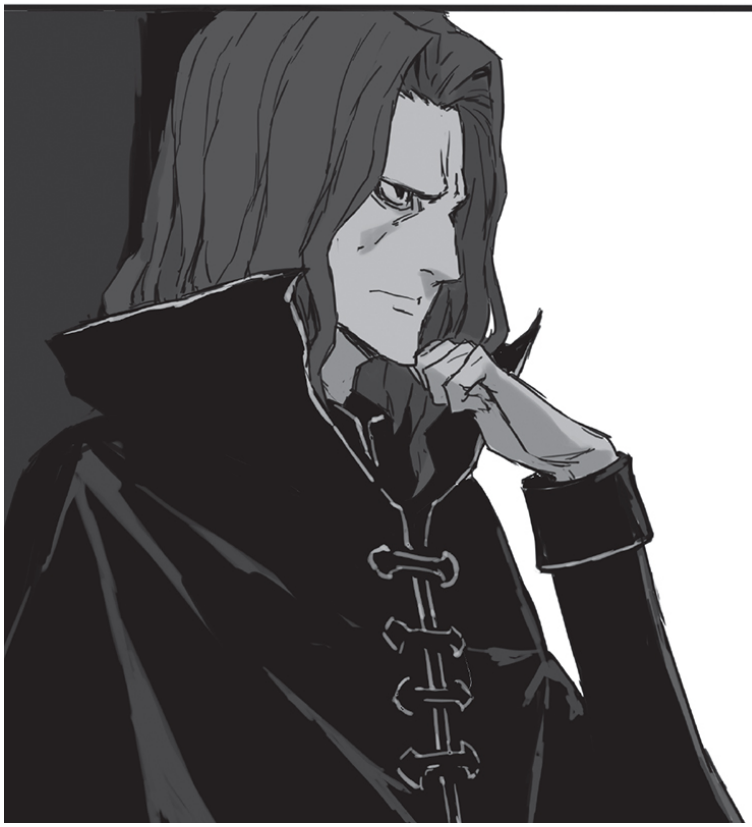
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It had happened over ten years earlier.

She’d loved reading books. They contained such vast worlds.

Stories of distant lands and bygone times were encapsulated in books with various bindings, squeezed into the lines of text that adorned their pages.







According to magic theory, the mind and body were inextricable—but Aviella could have sworn that her mind left her body to traverse freely throughout the world whenever she read.

She had read about an era of ancient myth, the Dark Age, the Age of Witches, and the revival period that followed.

These accounts of history, retold by countless different people, occasionally highlighted how noble humans were. And sometimes revealed their foolishness.

"Why do people keep making the same mistakes over and over again? So many lives have already been lost. Don't they realize what a waste that is?" the young girl asked one day as she was reading a history book.

Her grandfather, who'd been collecting books from different places, smiled awkwardly.

"It's because they believe they're the exception to the rule. Or maybe they've simply forgotten the past."

"They've forgotten?"

How was that possible? All you had to do was pick up a book to get a vivid depiction of the past. How could they forget it? The young girl looked incredibly confused, only able to see things from her own perspective.

The elderly man across the table from her let out a sigh even deeper than the wrinkles etched in his face.

"Memories fade, and records are oft forgotten. The long Dark Age came to an end because people had grown tired of conflict, and there was no war on the continent for almost two hundred years. But even that didn't last forever. When a nation is destroyed by a forbidden curse, people distance themselves from such magic, but once those memories fade, they rise to the surface of history once again. Maybe next time it happens, some good can come from it."

"I don't understand. It's just so strange," replied his granddaughter, clearly perplexed.

The old man shrugged. He'd been around for so much longer than the young girl, but it was impossible to convey everything he'd learned to her. This was how people's memories and emotions gradually faded away. Every time somebody died, their unique

perspectives were lost as well.

For a moment, countless memories flickered in the old man's eyes. However, he kept them at bay with a gentle smile and spoke instead.

"It's similar to experiencing something sad or painful. It would be hard to bear it if those memories always remained vivid, wouldn't it? That's why people's memories fade, even though they don't forget what happened."

The girl's brown eyes widened. Even she could identify with what he was saying.

The old man smiled, then continued making his point.

"That applies on a larger scale as well. No matter how horrific certain events or wars may have been, they tend to be forgotten over time, even if some recollection of them remains. As the generations go by, the number of people unfamiliar with such events rises, and history is relegated to written records. That's when people find themselves repeating the mistakes of the past. They're oblivious to the pain that people endured, and even if they hear about past events, it doesn't sink in properly. That's just human nature."

Humans make the same mistakes over and over again as they inch their way forward. When you looked at it from a broader perspective, this state of affairs was as infuriating as a child's game. But from an individual standpoint, it was simply the way of the world.

The old man knew this, yet it seemed the girl was still too young to come to terms with the idea. When he saw her dissatisfied expression, he stood up, fetched a book from the corner of the room, and offered it to his granddaughter.

"If you feel this aspect of human nature is past salvation, you should read books. You should write books, too. That way, you can keep yourself in check *and* keep things in people's memories, even the sad aspects of the past that everyone tends to forget…"

She accepted the book with both hands. Strangely, it had no title.

This puzzled her, but the feel of its red leather that fit so comfortably in her hands made her stop caring.

The girl traced the decorations embedded into the book's cover

with her fingers as she looked up at her grandfather.

"If I do that, will people stop repeating the same mistakes?"

Aviella never received an answer to that question—a fact she remembered to this day.

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White light flashed beyond Shizuku's obscured field of vision.

It didn't reach where Shizuku was sitting, but it wasn't hard to tell that something had changed. She felt anxious, shaken by the desire to know what was happening around her.

At that moment, however, the spell configuration that was supposed to be in front of her faded, and a man's voice reprimanded her.

"Stop. Stay calm. Our shared consciousness is coming apart."

He was urging her to do what had to be done. Shizuku stifled her agitation and told him what to do with the next section.

"Flip the 824th sequence around. It needs to intersect with the 1,044th sequence three times."

"Got it."

This was what she needed to be doing right now. She needed to focus on the task at hand. If her concentration wavered, she'd lose sight of the things she was able to see.

Shizuku released the breath she'd been holding, then inhaled deeply.

"Okay. Next."

"The 832nd sequence. Use the north-south boundary line as its axis of symmetry."

"Okay."

She bit her lip tightly, putting her whole mind to the task at hand.

Her consciousness drifted through a space where nothing else was visible, then once more descended into the darkness where the spell was lit up.

A man wielding a sword suddenly stepped right in front of Aviella.

She turned her left hand toward the sharp tip of his sword, creating a barrier to parry the blow. The barrier was thin, and the witch hadn't recited an incantation, but it was still powerful enough to deflect the point of the man's sword. As he stumbled backward, the witch hit him with her right hand.

"Gah…!"

Her palm rammed a burst of compressed air into his chest. For a moment, he coughed up some blood and lost his balance. She immediately went to deliver the finishing blow, but an onslaught of fire arrows came flying toward her from a different angle.

A team of mages had unleashed dozens of fire arrows. Aviella narrowed her eyes as the barrage rained down on her, offering no means of escape, then snapped her fingers. In the blink of an eye, the flames vanished into thin air.

"That's some impressive firepower. It's just a shame cooperation isn't your forte."

The individuals who'd gathered in the hall were all skilled in their own right. One by one, they executed their attacks with sharp movements.

Unsurprisingly, though, it seemed like they'd never teamed up against a single opponent before. Aviella utilized her powerful barriers to block the majority of their attacks, targeting them the moment they hesitated, gradually defeating the front line.

She smiled at her opponent, who was attempting to brandish his sword despite the damage to his lungs.

"Not backing down, huh? That's the spirit."

She dodged the man's lackluster strike. In situations like this, she didn't even need to use a barrier. Instead, she plunged her right hand into the unsteady man's side, twisting it through an opening in his light armor and into his flesh. Once her hand was wrist-deep, she lit up a spell from her fingertips. With a muffled boom, the man was destroyed from the inside out.

When Aviella pulled her pale hand out again, fresh blood spurted from the open wound.

"…Agh."

The man let out a small groan, then fell face down into a pool of his own blood. Aviella stared at his motionless body, then cautiously proceeded ahead, trying not to step on his corpse.

The witch took on multiple opponents single-handedly, but her movements weren't particularly swift. In fact, it was as though she was performing a slow and graceful dance. She neutralized their attacks with minimal effort, using the brief openings that came her way to deal powerful blows.

She wasn't actively attacking anyone. She seemed to get her enjoyment from fighting back. Eleven people were already incapacitated, some of them dead, and it had only been ten minutes since the witch appeared.

Harve held his breath as he reinforced the barrier protecting Erik and Shizuku.

"We're in trouble… She's too strong."

Harve had been trying to create an opening by distracting her with magic, but the witch hadn't sustained a single injury. As far as Harve could tell from the outside, the spell overwriting process was only seventy percent complete. Noticing his heart pounding with anxiety, Harve told himself to calm down.

He began to recite another incantation, attempting to create more fire arrows. At that moment, Kaito, who'd been observing the witch from a distance, came over to him. Without taking his eyes off Aviella, he whispered something in Harve's ear.

"Can you neutralize the protective barrier the witch is using? I could kill her if not for that."

"Kill her…? Are you serious?"

"Obviously. She's just a mage, at the end of the day. Without that barrier in the way, I could bring her down before she casts any spells."

There was a smile on the boy's face. It didn't sound like he was bluffing. Harve took another look at Aviella, who was in there fighting someone.

“Neutralizing her protective barrier, huh…? Honestly, that’d be a challenge. She created it without reciting an incantation, so it’s pretty much impenetrable, not to mention powerful. It’s an oval, taller than it is wide, centered around her hands and shielding her entire body.”

In essence, Aviella had a large magical shield. So far, no attack had been able to break through it. Harve thought things over for a moment, then made one additional comment.

“…But from what I just saw, she can’t formulate an attack spell and maintain the barrier with the same hand. When she attacks, the barrier disappears. You could aim for that moment, but it’s hard to judge—”

“Got it.”

Kaito turned his back to Harve, who’d apparently exhausted his usefulness, and began walking toward Aviella. The mage hurriedly tried to stop him.

“W-wait. It’s pointless if you can’t defend yourself against her attacks!”

“I’ll dodge them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. What if she casts an area-wide spell?”

The young mage placed a hand on Kaito’s shoulder, trying to warn him. The boy tutted aggressively and turned around, looking up at Harve with his face tilted to one side.

“So what? Weaklings like you should keep their opinions to themselves.”

“Weak? I’m a royal court mage… Oh, never mind. I’ll cast a barrier for you. Just give me a moment.”

The area that the witch’s protective barrier didn’t cover also happened to be the spot that lit up with the power from her spells. If Kaito was unable to completely avoid her attacks, Harve could still use a barrier to lessen their impact, allowing the boy to keep fighting.

Kaito glanced suspiciously at Harve, who’d begun chanting facing him. Viewed as a heretic by his fellow mercenaries, the boy rarely worked with other people. No one had ever cast support magic on him before.

When Harve finished his incantation, he lowered his voice and asked Kaito a question.

"By the way—can you see magical energy?"

"No," replied Kaito. "But I can roughly tell where it is. I pay attention to where people are looking and stuff."

"I see…"

Harve had been concerned that Kaito wouldn't be able to sense magic on any level, but he relaxed his furrowed brow a little.

The ability to see magical energy was a matter of life and death when you were fighting a mage.

Erik was showing the magic formation to Shizuku, but it wasn't as if he'd granted her the ability to see magical energy. He was only sharing what he could see with her. Physical touch and intense focus were required for this to succeed, though, making it impossible to reveal magical power to somebody during close combat.

As a result, the swordsmen who couldn't see magical energy had ended up attacking areas that were actually covered by the witch's barrier. You needed considerable experience fighting mages to compensate for this disadvantage.

Harve glanced at Aviella. At that moment, she sent another swordsman flying, causing him to crash into a wall. This sight made Harve hold his breath.

Standing by his side, Kaito spoke up, his tone brusque.

"Ready? I'm gonna go in."

"Oh yes. I'll provide you with as much support as I can. Be careful."

"Don't bother—you'll just be in the way."

With that curt response, the boy began pacing ahead.

Kaito's treacherous level of confidence made Harve frown. Then he began reciting another chant, directing his spell at the witch.

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Lars leaped dramatically to the side to avoid the magic attack.

The spell Elzard unleashed sent sparks flying riotously through

the air as it made contact with the stone floor. With a dull crashing sound, a large hole opened up below where Lars had just been standing. The blast had even penetrated the floor below, and through the flying stone fragments, the king glanced at the damage out of the corner of his eye.

"Try not to create too many holes. You wouldn't want to destroy the castle. What will you do if it collapses in the middle of our battle?"

"I could build as many of these castles as I wanted," Elzard replied.

"So you'll put up an extension, huh? If you go too high, it'll topple over."

The king's response was so easygoing, it was hard to believe he was talking to a high-ranking demon.

Lars's sword was the natural enemy of both mages and demons, and he simply shrugged in the face of Elzard's power. In fact, he'd nullified most of Elzard's attacks with the royal sword and skillfully dodged the rest.

"…That sword is more bothersome than I anticipated."

Elzard had known of Akashia's powers in theory, but facing it firsthand was truly infuriating. He scowled in frustration, then began constructing a new spell that would spread out like a net, preventing Lars from dodging it. He aimed it toward Lars, then unleashed his attack.

When the king realized what his opponent was trying to do, he didn't retreat—in fact, he stepped straight into the configuration.

"Whoops."

With this casual remark, Lars used Akashia to sever the key points of the spell before it could fully expand. Elzard felt a ripple of irritation at how effortlessly the human had nullified his attack.

When Lars saw the look on Elzard's face, he laughed with amusement.

"What's the matter? Did I make you angry?"

"…Why do you think a lowly human like you could anger me?"

"You having fun, then?" the king asked casually, then glanced at his left arm.

He hadn’t fully neutralized the spell configuration, and it had left a cut in his skin that was beginning to bead with blood. The sight of the injury brought a twisted smile to Lars’s face.

The king’s perplexing behavior filled Elzard with grating discomfort, but it wasn’t enough to shake him.

“I feel nothing. Just boredom,” he spat as he constructed a new spell.

“Is that right? That’s a shame.”

Lars contemptuously narrowed his blue eyes, fixing his gaze on a spot behind Elzard.

For a short while, there was silence. Wondering what he was looking at, the demon glanced over his shoulder, his caution of the king never wavering.

It was the empty throne with the sword leaning against it.

Elzard had only shifted his attention toward it for less than a second—but the next thing he knew, he was jumping back, trying to evade the sword that had been thrust his way.

“—!”

He hadn’t let his mind wander, yet if he’d taken just a moment longer, he would have been fatally wounded.

In a flash, the king had closed the few paces between himself and Elzard. Lars laughed as he advanced even further, his low voice skimming over the throne.

“That sword belonged to one of my subordinates. You wouldn’t have killed him for no reason, right? So come on, demon. Tell me how much fun you’re having.”

As the king swung his sword down toward him, Elzard instinctively attempted to protect himself with a barrier—but Akashia negated his power, allowing the sword to come dangerously close.

This was the sword that annulled and dispersed all power. The blade, once bestowed on Farsas by a nonhuman entity, flashed straight toward him.

Seeing this…Elzard shuddered for the first time in his entire life.

“…!”

As the tip of the blade threatened to pierce his skin, he channeled his power into a simple spell. He didn’t bother waiting to see how it

turned out, however, but instead flew up into the air to escape the sword's reach. The sound of the stone floor shattering reverberated through the air.

His shoulders heaving as he breathed, Elzard looked down at the dust below. Anger began to surge within him.

He'd fled from a lowly human.

When this realization finally sank in, it filled him with an inescapable feeling of humiliation.

As Elzard glared at the space beneath him, the king emerged from the swirling dust.

Lars looked at his blood-soaked left shoulder and sighed. Then he looked up at Elzard with a mocking smile that didn't contain the slightest trace of fear.

"What's the matter? You're not gonna float up there forever, are you?"

"…Shut your mouth, cretin."

What value did humans have? There was nothing interesting about them. They'd never live up to expectations.

"You'll all die soon enough."

They were ephemeral beings that disappeared almost as quickly as they appeared.

"You won't leave anything behind."

Still floating in the air, Elzard constructed a magic array. It was a large-scale spell composed of layers of attack magic that would destroy anything it came into contact with.

There was no need to rise to any provocation. He'd simply eliminate everything in his path, as if he were cutting down grass.

And so, without any warning, Elzard unleashed his spell.

There was a brief flash of light, accompanied by a thunderous roar that shook the castle itself.

The explosive power triggered a blast so powerful that its effects were felt even outside the windows of the castle—and by the time it was over, nothing but empty silence hung in the air.

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"—The preliminary configurations for the teleportation gate are complete. We can begin transporting the entire army whenever necessary."

Leuticia was on her horse when she received this report from Truce, the chief royal mage. She looked up at the dark clouds looming over Helginis.

Apparently, the army of demonic spirits had already swelled to two hundred thousand strong. For the time being, they were staying within the borders of what had been Helginis, but once they were unleashed, they had the potential to burn the entire continent to the ground. The allied nations needed to strike while they still had a chance, no matter what it took.

Yet there had never been a war against demons before. Did they really stand a chance of winning?

"…They say this is unprecedented," Leuticia muttered, her beautiful face twisting into a bitter grimace, "but I wonder if any similar events were erased from history."

A similar battle might have occurred as part of a scrapped test, but even if it had, such knowledge no longer existed and was irrelevant. Maybe Aviella had become a witch precisely because she'd acquired that knowledge.

Possessing secret knowledge had its pros and cons. Being familiar with Farsas's many sealed records, Leuticia knew that better than anyone.

She glanced around from atop her horse. The armies of four of the twelve countries that had declared war—a total of one hundred and fifty thousand troops—had assembled at a fort in the north of Farsas, but it was up to Leuticia to decide when to teleport these armies to the mountains of Helginis.

The Farsasian princess placed her delicate fingers on her chin and thought things over.

"Truce."

"Yes!"

"Can I entrust you with the task of opening the teleportation gate?"

"Of course… Is there a problem?"

The competence of a nation's mages had a significant effect on how quickly their large army could be moved to a place near its destination.

Firstly, obtaining the relevant coordinates for large-scale teleportation across national borders was a challenge in and of itself. Secondly, the farther away the destination was, the harder it became to create a large gate and keep it open for an extended period of time.

Not even a royal court mage could keep a large gate open in a faraway location for long without any help. As such, most countries would get several mages to work on these spells together. Farsas, however, was the exception to this rule. It had become customary for Leuticia to open teleportation gates when she was around.

Yet she was implying that she wasn't going to do it this time. When her concerned subordinate asked whether there was a problem, Leuticia shook her head.

"Erik has been drawing on a considerable amount of magical energy for some time now. Knowing him, he's probably up to something. If I were to cast a large spell right now, it might interfere with whatever he's doing."

"Really? Could he be trying to destroy the core of the barrier?"

"Who knows… In any case, I'm going to leave my power in his hands for as long as I can."

Truce expressed his acknowledgement to the princess and left. Once he'd gone, Leuticia calculated how much time had passed in her head. It had been more than forty minutes since Erik had begun to draw out a constant stream of magical energy. No spell would take that long to assemble. What in the world was Erik doing, and when would he be done? Leuticia furrowed her beautifully shaped eyebrows as she mulled things over.

It didn't take long for her cool, composed expression to return, however. Without delay, she summoned a military officer and had him tell the generals of each nation to begin their advance.

※

Strength was simple—at least, that was what Kaito had always believed.

Strength was very straightforward, allowing no room for unnecessary thoughts.

On the battlefield, strength was the only thing that determined the outcome. Those who didn't match up would die.

That was all there was to it. Concepts like good and evil didn't exist, so there was no way for inexplicable worry to interfere.

The boy gazed attentively at the witch's elegant hands. Having originally been white, they were now stained with blood, intensifying her ominous aura. To those fighting against her, she had become the embodiment of death itself.

More than half of the people who'd been there at the start of the battle were now lying on the floor, and the large hall was thick with the stench of blood and guts.

As despair slowly began to rear its head, Aviella glanced around at her opponents, who were all keeping a fixed distance away from her, then cocked her head to one side like a little girl.

"What's wrong? Have you given up already?"

Of course they hadn't, but after witnessing her overwhelming advantage in raw power, they couldn't keep attacking her at random. As the survivors searched for a way to win—that they were never going to find—Kaito weaved his way through them, carefully closing in on the witch.

His eyes were focused solely on her hands.

He loved that moment when people took their final breath.

He wasn't a product of his surroundings. He remembered his mother and father being ordinary people, although they'd died when he was very young.

After their deaths, Kaito had been left with very little—just a small inheritance and a sword said to have been granted to his great-grandfather as a reward for his military exploits. At the age of eleven, he'd left home with that sword in hand.

Looking back, he must have already known that he was different

from other children.

He liked killing.

He just didn't know why.

It was merely a preference of his—something that fell short of being an emotion he could put into words. The moment he tried to, it became as elusive as mist. Even when he managed to respond to people's questions, his replies never aligned with his feelings.

He'd answer when somebody asked him *why* he was the way he was, but as soon as the words left his lips, they took on a different form.

It left him with a slight sense of discomfort.

But Kaito himself was oblivious to the unease he was experiencing…and that was how he'd ended up changing a little.

※

The corners of the witch's red lips turned upward into a smile.

Although the humans standing up to her displayed a willingness to fight, they couldn't find a reason to bet everything on such a hopeless battle. They readied their weapons and recited their incantations, but they couldn't bring themselves to go any further.

Watching them, Aviella derisively raised her eyebrows.

"If you're not going to come at me, I may as well just kill those two."

"Wh…?!"

The witch was pointing at Erik and Shizuku, who were sitting inside the magic circle. When her opponents realized that she was singling out the two people they couldn't afford to lose, their faces fell. A spell began to light up at the tip of the witch's bloodstained finger, and at that moment, three men rushed at her with their blades.

"Raaaah!"

"Yes, that's the spirit. Come at me."

As Aviella spoke, she directed the spell at the forehead of the first man who'd swung his sword at her. One of the mages created a

barrier in front of the swordsman as soon as he saw it, but the bullet-like cluster of magical power easily penetrated the barrier, piercing a hole between the man's eyebrows. The tall swordsman bent backward and fell onto the ground with a soft thud.

Meanwhile, the man who'd swung at Aviella from the left had found his sword blocked by a barrier, preventing him from attacking the witch. In the time it took him to withdraw his sword, a ferocious shockwave sent him flying. The mages behind him were also caught up in the impact, and the three grown men slammed into the ground like lifeless puppets.

The witch looked at the third man, who was no longer able to move, and smiled.

She was holding him by the throat, her slender left arm shrouded in magical power. The sword slipped out of the unconscious man's hand and clattered to the floor, and a moment later, his body collapsed on top of it.

Five men had been rendered powerless in the blink of an eye.

The survivors were speechless, yet they couldn't stop attacking. If they backed down now, the two people overwriting the spell would be killed. And even if that *wasn't* an issue, there were so few of them left that there was no way out.

"Fire!" the mages yelled in unison.

Twenty-two balls of light conjured by incantations closed in on Aviella from all directions.

It was an all-out attack that left no opportunity for escape—but with a snap of Aviella's fingers, the orbs were dragged toward a certain point, causing them to collide with one another. All of the balls of light burst before they even reached the witch, causing white sparks to light up the hall. With nowhere left to go, the residual energy swirled around and shook the air violently.

"…It…didn't work?"

The murmured words echoed off the stone floor, but it was impossible to tell who it had come from.

Aviella lifted her right palm and began to formulate a magic configuration.

Before long, an unavoidable, wide-ranging spell materialized. The

mages who saw it sensed their deaths were near—but suddenly, a blade appeared.

The flash of silver emerged from out of nowhere, its appearance so spontaneous that it took the mages a moment to realize that there was a person holding it by the hilt.

It was thrust upward from directly below the witch's palm. With the swiftness of an arrow, it pierced Aviella's right hand.

"…! …Huh?"

The witch's eyes widened as she looked at the blade that had impaled her palm. A feeble breath escaped her throat. The pain and shock of the attack caused her almost complete spell to collapse, and for the first time, a flicker of concern crossed her expression.

Aviella turned her head, trying to see who'd injured her.

But Kaito hadn't stopped there.

From the beginning, he hadn't paused for a single second. Everyone around him had only assumed he'd stopped because they couldn't comprehend what was unfolding before them.

With one hand still holding the dagger lodged in the witch's hand, he swung his slender longsword across her body. The blade sank into the top of Aviella's right arm, slicing up toward her shoulder in a single motion and splattering her own blood across her white cheek.

Kaito had wounded the witch.

Everyone must have felt that their first chance at victory had finally arrived. When a mage was injured, the pain could disturb their concentration, making it difficult for them to conjure complex spells. Now was the time to strike.

A few people began reciting incantations. The injuries the swordsmen had suffered made them unsteady on their feet, but they charged ahead nonetheless.

Kaito, however, ignored what everyone else was doing and thrust the dagger he'd pulled from her hand toward Aviella's chest.

It was a small movement—the most efficient path he could take.

A display of pure strength he'd executed hundreds of times before.

Kaito was racing down a path that could only culminate in death… but at the end of that road, he found himself looking into the witch's

eyes.

In that moment, he froze.

An invisible shockwave slammed directly into Kaito's body.

If it wasn't for the barrier Harve had cast, it would have gone all the way through his body.

The small boy was effortlessly lifted into the air and slammed onto the stone floor beneath him. The consequences were horrific.

His right arm contorted out of shape, and his dagger snapped at the base, leaving it without a blade. He shifted his body slightly, attempting to sit up, but even this slight movement caused intense pain to course through his body.

"Gahhh…! Agh…"

He could feel blood and stomach acid in the back of his throat. It seemed like not just his arms but some of his organs were also messed up. His body was such a wreck that it didn't even feel like his own.

He couldn't fight anymore. In fact, his injuries were so serious they could have killed him. He couldn't help but laugh at how quickly his demise had come.

A thought flashed through his mind:

I'm sure I could've killed her.

He could have done it, if he hadn't looked into the witch's eyes. If he'd been the person he was before he'd changed.

Kaito had faltered. He'd hesitated to attack her for a split second.

The witch had caused the deaths of so many more people than he ever had. Yet in her eyes, he'd seen compassion, loneliness, arrogance, sorrow, and even a faint glimmer of hope.

In that calm gaze, he'd seen a mix of conflicting emotions—just like those that Shizuku had revealed to him.

As Kaito lay on the ground, he heard someone scream. Another person collapsed.

The only things that reached him were the sounds of defeat.

Drenched in blood and cynicism, the boy closed his eyes.

"This is why…I…hate you," he murmured.

"Sorry, Kaito."

The feeble voice that echoed from directly above him was tinged with remorse. A woman stroked his forehead with her hand. She wrapped her small, warm, helpless hands around his head for a moment, then silently pulled away. In their wake, he felt a gentle breeze.

He could sense someone standing beside him.

He could tell who it was without having to look. Kaito grimaced as he strained his raspy voice.

"What are *you* going to do…?"

"Nothing. But…I'm ready."

There was no hesitation in her voice.

Leaving nothing but those words behind, the presence drifted away, and the boy's eyes closed as he fell silent.

※

"Swap the 1,265th sequence with the 1,272nd. Make sure they're the same height."

"…Okay."

It had been nearly fifty minutes since they began overwriting the spell, and Erik was starting to take longer to reply. He was also taking longer to ask Shizuku to continue.

This must be a sign that they were almost finished. The differences between the two spells, which were negligible in the beginning, had widened the further they'd progressed.

Shizuku checked that the spell structure visible in the darkness was already almost identical to the one depicted in the book. As she was waiting, Erik called out, "Next."

"Give the 1,213th sequence point symmetry. Do the same with the 1,290th."

"Got it."

The overwriting process was coming to an end.

This was obvious to Shizuku, who could see what it would look like, but she also knew that at their current rate, they weren't going to finish in time. There seemed to be fewer and fewer people around them. Something was off. Their comrades couldn't hold off the witch much longer.

Still, the entire fight had been nothing more than a passing fancy for Aviella. She could have easily opted to kill Shizuku and Erik right at the start, but instead, she'd chosen to test the people.

Everyone was being tested.

What exactly was she testing, though? Their capacity to become ruler, or how ready they were to die?

These two concepts were similar, yet worlds apart. Both must be correct, and both must be incorrect. In the darkness, Shizuku let out a small sigh.

What did the witch want?

What was Aviella hoping for?

It would be arrogant for Shizuku to say she knew the answers to those questions.

"…Done. What's next?"

"Get rid of every sequence between the 1,314th and the 1,376th."

"Got it."

"Can I keep going?"

Anyone could resolve themself to die.

Kaito had taken that stance when he'd been criticizing Shizuku, but unsurprisingly, she thought he was wrong.

It wasn't death that people prepared themselves for. They prepared themselves to fight. They might see death approaching, but dying itself wasn't their goal.

She had never wished for death. She didn't want to die.

She simply had things she wasn't prepared to compromise on.

"Anything else? Go ahead."

"Okay, ready? Connect the 1,389th sequence with the 4th, 58th,

133rd, and 742nd sequences. Split off the 1,498th sequence from the point where it intersects with the 882nd, and link it to the 992nd and 1,174th. Lastly, flip the 1,500th sequence around… Should I say that one more time?"

"It's fine. I remember it."

His predictable response made Shizuku smile. She released all the tension from her body and placed her hand on Erik's arm, which was supporting her.

"That's everything. You've got this."

"…W-wait."

Erik tried to grab her arm, but Shizuku slipped through his fingers. She stood in front of the man, who was unable to move.

This was likely the end.

Shizuku opened her eyes.

Their shared consciousness had vanished, and reality returned.

The connection between Erik and her was broken, and they once again became separate individuals.

Light flooded in. Her field of vision was white. As she squinted in the face of the brightness, the world spread out before her eyes. It was a world where blood and despair melded and flowed together. The scene in front of her was colored by people's feelings and determination.

"If we lose here—"

If Aviella won, Shizuku knew all that awaited her was death.

Her short life would come to an end in a faraway corner of another world that her family didn't even know about.

But if she managed to defeat Aviella through sheer luck, there'd be no going back to her old, peaceful world. Even if she did find a way home, she couldn't bring herself to return after killing another person.

Some people might call her stubborn.

Perhaps some would say she was foolish.

But even so, she couldn't give in.

She'd chosen not to surrender.

"Shizuku!"

"Don't worry. I'll buy us some time."

A hand reached out toward her.

Shizuku was standing outside of its reach, but she still felt the urge to touch it one more time. Memories of her journey so far came rushing back. It used to feel like she could take his hand whenever she wanted, but she'd realized long ago that wasn't the case. After all, on countless occasions, she'd resolved herself to die.

Maybe *this* would be the true final destination of their journey.

Shizuku took another step back and turned back toward the witch.

Every person who ventured into her castle was a challenger. Shizuku was no exception. She was going to throw down the gauntlet and fight.

Only determined individuals who demonstrated their strength could reshape the continent. And they could only do that once they'd killed the witch.

"Let's go, Mea."

"As you wish, Master."

Shizuku didn't want to kill anybody—but that was the answer, whether she liked it or not.

She needed to find the resolve to face the death of her opponent.

Shizuku moved forward, her footsteps heavy.

Clutching the cursed artifact that had bound the continent with its spell for so long, she took out her dagger.

"Oh? You're going to fight, too?"

Aviella's eyes landed on Shizuku, and she smiled.

The witch's crimson robe masked the bloodstains, but it couldn't hide the evidence of her other injuries. When Shizuku saw the blood stuck in her silver hair and the whiteness of her cheeks, she gulped.

This woman's a witch. There's no way I can beat someone like her.

Shizuku knew this, but she still had no intention of fleeing. Without looking over her shoulder, she calculated her distance from the magic circle.

At this stage, only Aviella, Shizuku, Erik, and two other mages were still able to move. One of the remaining mages was Harve, who was creating barriers and keeping Aviella distracted to protect the other mage while he healed the injured.

The witch had been watching him calmly, but she'd shifted her gaze to Shizuku as she made her way toward her. It was immediately obvious that Shizuku in her cloak was neither a swordsman nor a mage, and Aviella greeted her with a smile.

"We meet again, little girl."

"Yes. If it wasn't for your goodwill, I wouldn't have made it this far."

"Are you planning to challenge me with *your* level of power? How reckless."

"I'm well aware of how reckless it is. But first, I have a request for you."

Shizuku stopped a few steps away from Aviella and looked up at the witch, who was taller than her.

She looked into Aviella's clear brown eyes.

Even before she could understand why, she knew she was right.

The witch cocked her head slightly. "A request? What might that be? A plea for mercy?"

"No, it's not," said Shizuku. "Where is the book? If we win, I want you to give it to us."

Anyone else who heard Shizuku speak would have thought she was being arrogant and oblivious to the perils of her situation.

Most of the people who'd assembled in the hall had been struck down, leaving them dead or incapacitated, yet the weakest of them all was already demanding a reward in the event of her victory.

Even Harve, who was listening from nearby, was left speechless for a moment. He opened his mouth, hoping to bring Shizuku's heedless behavior to a stop.

In the end, however, he swallowed his words before they left his mouth. He and his allies had already been driven into a corner with

no way out. The least he could do was respect whatever idea Shizuku had.

The light in Shizuku's eyes suggested that she wasn't joking. Aviella must have known that, too. The witch looked down at her own empty hands.

"I see. You want to get your hands on that book… What for? Do you want to become queen? Or do you want to know the truth?"

The question was like sweet-smelling poison.

Shizuku's expression didn't change, though. She'd already decided upon her answer, but she ruminated on it anyway.

She had the option of telling a lie that the witch would like, then taking the book as she had before. There was also the option of feigning greed, getting the witch to drop her guard, and then destroying it.

Yet Shizuku knew these were the answers Aviella was looking for. They wouldn't be enough to make her act.

Most importantly, Shizuku didn't want to compromise her principles at that moment. She came straight out with her answer.

"I'm a scholar, too. I'm interested in the truth. That said, I want that book for a different reason."

"Oh? And what might that be?"

"I don't want you, or anyone else who wants to rule this continent, to take advantage of it."

Certain events that had undeniably happened—the death of the princess who'd loved the god of the lake, wars erased from history, the untold torment of the first queen—had been hidden away. Shizuku didn't want anybody to take advantage of the secret knowledge or power in that book.

The two books in the possession of Aviella and Shizuku respectively had originally been written so nonhuman beings could observe what humanity was doing. They couldn't allow forbidden curses sealed away with a power that surpassed the laws of magic to be exposed. They'd just feel helpless, like puppets forced to dance on the palms of those watching them.

Aviella's expression suddenly shifted. Perhaps she'd understood what Shizuku was trying to say. She didn't wipe the smile off her

face, but she dropped the testing, taunting look she'd been giving Shizuku.

She lowered her gaze and laughed, serenity in her eyes.

"But if we lose this book, some facts will be forgotten forever. Events that actually occurred will be dismissed as if they never happened. Are you really okay with that? The way things are right now, lessons gained through fierce battles are forgotten, and mistakes paid for with countless casualties mean nothing. Humans and their history should possess far greater potential. They should be able to choose the right path *without* any hesitation. They should reflect on the past instead of basking in the comfort of the present. Otherwise, they'll just continue to make the same mistakes."

Once memories fade, people end up treading the same path over and over again.

They end up disorientated and bewildered, unaware that someone else once bled in the same exact spot.

The witch was treating people's ignorance as a form of laziness, but Shizuku responded in a calm and steady voice.

"We might have forgotten most of the past, but not everything is lost, is it? I know that people have the ability to pass down knowledge over thousands of years. It's the willpower of human beings that makes something like that possible, and that's why it feels so valuable to me.

"That book, however, is different. It observes people indiscriminately, records their actions, and conveys that information to others. I can't approve of that sort of interference. I'm going to defeat you and get rid of it."

"…I see."

The witch was likely unaware of the interlopers' existence. She allowed her gaze to wander, seemingly thinking about something.

Her thoughts and desires were like silhouettes—you could only grasp their outlines, unable to see what was inside.

There was still part of her that Shizuku could understand, though. From the moment Shizuku heard the witch had declared war, from the moment she'd looked into her eyes, she'd come to one conclusion.

"Memories and records are passed down because of human willpower—but having that knowledge doesn't guarantee that everybody can make the right choices. History can still repeat itself, even if everybody's seen graphic accounts of similar events that occurred in the past. I'm sure you realize…that knowledge of the past doesn't serve as enough of a deterrent."

The witch knew that knowledge of the past wouldn't completely deter people, but she'd asked if Shizuku wanted to learn it nonetheless.

She'd urged Shizuku not to turn her back on the teachings of history.

The witch was a mere shadow of who she'd once been—a young girl who knew about history and was worried about the present.

She knew that the mistakes of history repeated themselves far too often, and this disillusionment had led her to where she was now.

"You understand this, which is why you became a witch. You reignited people's past fears and made sure the entire continent was aware of it. When a witch appears using forbidden curses to commit atrocities and people hunt her down, it reminds them of the horror of such spells. They reaffirm the fact that they can destroy those who use them and, eventually, people will learn to avoid them… You brought challengers here so they could kill you, didn't you?"

The Dark Age was ancient history. The Age of Witches had been relegated to the realms of fairy tales.

The continent, which once fought off the return of the darkness, would eventually forget what it was afraid of—unless, that is, they experienced huge losses.

They needed a reminder of the horror of forbidden curses.

The first time Shizuku had felt something was off was when she looked into Aviella's eyes.

The witch's gaze suggested she treasured humanity, even though she'd declared war on the continent. Shizuku found this puzzling.

That sense of discord became clearer once she entered the castle. Why would somebody with the power to defeat an army go through the trouble of assembling challengers? That was also something that puzzled her.

The events that had just played out in front of her were equally strange. Aviella hadn't tried to kill Shizuku and Erik first, even though she knew the significance of what they were trying to do.

She was hoping someone would defeat her.

Aviella would use death and her infamy to spread a new sense of fear throughout the continent and to show the people how stupid they'd been.

That was the ending the Seventh Witch had chosen for herself.

Shizuku's voice echoed hollowly around the room.

Aviella heard her, but she just smiled wryly, making no effort to refute Shizuku's claims. She shifted her clear gaze toward the woman before her, ready to accept any outcome.

"What a funny thing to say… You have quite the imagination. People who are constantly buried in their books tend to be like that. Still, I have no intention of letting you kill me."

"Of course. I know that. I could never be the successor you're looking for. I'm not strong enough. You're using this trial to pick someone with strength and determination, right? Someone heroic who'd become a good ruler."

"You're wrong there, too."

Aviella didn't elaborate further. Instead, she looked down at her hands, showing a slightly childish side to herself. She fixed her gaze on her blood-soaked left hand, and a red book appeared in her grip.

There was no title on the cover. Aviella looked off into the distance, thinking about the countless paths that had converged in this one moment.

But that only lasted for an instant. Looking back at Shizuku,

who'd refused to avert her gaze, she gave a dignified smile.

"Well then, here's the book you wanted. If you manage to defeat me, it's all yours. Don't hold back—give me everything you've got. I'll leave your corpse next to the others."

"With my level of strength, holding back isn't an option. I'll give this challenge my all. I refuse to accept your way of doing things, no matter what your perspective might be."

Shizuku held the short dagger she was clutching in front of her.

That single blade didn't give her much confidence, especially given that she was up against a witch.

She'd never expected to aim such a weapon at someone, yet she felt no hint of regret.

She held her breath and looked at her opponent.

She counted down inside her head, then took her first step, beginning the clash between power and willpower.

"It seems like she can only cast spells without incantations if she does it through her hands."

This piece of advice had come from Mea, who'd been observing the battle unfold inside the hall while Shizuku was overwriting the spell.

In fact, in the battle so far, Aviella hadn't used any incantations at all. Since it was a close-combat situation, chanting could create treacherous opportunities for her opponents to take advantage of. Still, the fact that she could hold her own against multiple opponents *without* using incantations only showed how fearsome the witch truly was.

After hearing Mea's assessment, Shizuku thought to herself for a few seconds, then nodded.

"Okay. In that case…let's prevent her from using one of her hands."

Shizuku had expressed her desire for the book, and just as planned, the red book now occupied Aviella's left hand.

Shizuku paid attention to the book-shaped cursed artifact that she

was holding beneath her cape.

Since Shizuku wasn't a mage, not being able to use one of her hands wasn't much of a hindrance to her. That said, their levels of power were still worlds apart, regardless of whether one of Aviella's hands was incapacitated or not. Shizuku wasn't optimistic enough to believe that sheer willpower alone could bridge that gap. As she took a step forward, she whispered to Mea, perched on her shoulder.

"…We'll do what we planned."

"Okay."

Her mouth felt dry. Her fingers trembled as she clutched the dagger. Her shaking was half physiological, so there was nothing she could do about it.

Shizuku met Aviella's gaze.

The witch looked at her with a hint of sadness. Maybe she was thinking about how reckless her challenger was. Still, no amount of sentimentality was going to affect how she acted.

Aviella raised her right hand and began to formulate a spell. She launched a projectile of light toward Shizuku in an apparent attempt to distract her and gauge her strength.

The burst of light was fired directly at Shizuku's heart, but Mea created a diagonal barrier to deflect it. Aviella's eyes widened in surprise as the projectile shattered the stone floor just behind Shizuku.

"Oh. Magic implements and an assistant demon?" the witch said, sounding impressed. But her comment made Shizuku tense.

Shizuku wasn't actually a fighter, so she'd been equipped with numerous magic implements to protect herself. They were supposed to counteract magic attacks from within a specific distance, but they weren't enough to completely nullify the witch's attacks. To make up for this, Mea had deflected the weakened attack. She hadn't shielded the attack head-on out of fear that it would pierce through the barrier.

Having immediately deduced their strategy, Aviella smiled scathingly.

"You're not holding your weapon properly. You're not the kind of person who should be fighting on the front line."

“That’s for me to decide,” retorted Shizuku.

With that, she suddenly dashed forward.

In the blink of an eye, she closed the gap between them and swung her dagger toward the witch—but just before the blade could come into contact with Aviella, Shizuku pulled it back. She immediately leaped back to dodge the witch’s next attack, and Aviella’s fingers narrowly skimmed past Shizuku’s chin.

“…”

The witch had reached out to slash Shizuku’s throat. If Shizuku hadn’t already been planning to retreat, she never would have dodged the attack. Shizuku took another few steps back, the close shave leaving her in a cold sweat. The witch closed the distance that Shizuku had just created between them, her steps graceful.

“What’s wrong? Have you lost your nerve?” Aviella asked mockingly, having formulated another spell in her right hand.

Her single spell conjured four blades of air.

The attack was invisible to Shizuku, and the blades neatly split apart and closed in on Shizuku from all directions.

“Master! Behind you!” Mea shouted sharply.

Shizuku responded to the small bird’s command by turning around and running back.

The blades attacked from the front.

Mea deflected them once again. The blades from the left and right collided with one another behind Shizuku, causing an explosion.

“Get down!”

Shizuku immediately crouched down just as a gust of wind passed right over her head.

A blade that just missed her throat lodged itself into the ceiling of the hall, causing fine stone debris to rain down onto the magic circle.

The pieces fell on Erik and the pool of water in front of him, creating small ripples on its surface. Yet Erik didn’t move an inch.

She was only a few steps away from the outer edge of the magic circle.

Shuddering with fear, Shizuku attempted to glance over her

shoulder—but at that very moment, her body was lifted into the air.

"Wait…!"

She was going to slam into the ceiling.

Sensing what was coming, Shizuku immediately curled into a ball to protect her head.

However, as soon as her field of vision turned upside down, the witch's interference was cut off and Shizuku went into free fall.

"Whoa!"

How could she brace herself for the impact? Shizuku was startled, but thanks to Mea's support, she managed to land on her feet.

All of Aviella's rapid-fire attacks had been avoided, and the witch turned around, smiling.

"Not bad."

She was looking at Harve, who'd made the hasty decision to thwart Aviella's spell. He was glaring at the witch, his face pale.

"You know you can't win just by defending, though, right?"

Her offhanded taunt hit Shizuku where it hurt. She had little combat experience to speak of, and Harve was a support-type mage. There was no way they could take on Aviella with Mea's fighting power alone.

Naturally, Shizuku had had a specific goal in mind when she stepped forward, but for her plan to succeed, she needed to lure the witch into the magic circle. Would Aviella really follow her if she continued to retreat? Shizuku waited for the right moment to act, making sure her intentions didn't show on her face.

Aviella, on the other hand, created a huge, area-wide spell that shattered Shizuku's hopes.

"I'm sorry, girl…but you're five years too early to challenge me."

Was she basing this advice on how old Shizuku looked? Annoyed, Shizuku felt the urge to ask, but just as she opened her mouth to speak, another voice echoed throughout the hall.

"In that case, I'll make up for those five years."

The man's laugh suggested he was enjoying the situation despite their predicament. Yet there was an iciness hidden at its core.

Everyone's eyes turned toward the entrance of the room. Two figures stood in the open doorway, both casting scathing glances at

the witch. The man stepped confidently into the hall, wielding a large sword.

He seemed unshaken, despite the gruesome sights that surrounded him. Shizuku called out his name, shocked that their paths had crossed again.

"Tarkis!"

"Shizuku! I'm just glad you're still alive. It looks like everyone else is doing fine—well, apart from all the dead."

"Actually, a fair few people are still breathing, but they're hanging by a thread," Shizuku said.

Following Tarkis into the hall, Lydia grouchily swept her hair to the side and shifted her gaze toward the witch.

Aviella looked at the pair with a hint of surprise. Perhaps she remembered having hired them.

Tarkis grinned defiantly as he readied his sword.

"I know it's been a while, but we'll be saying goodbye again before you know it… It's time to face the consequences of your actions, Aviella."

His blade gave off a dull gleam, and Lydia began to chant. When Harve noticed what she was doing, he started formulating a spell of his own.

Willpower, strength, and prayer were coming together.

As those elements intertwined and bounced off one another, a brief stillness fell over the hall. In the center, the witch lowered her gaze and formed a new spell inside her hand.

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The murky, expanding miasma silently reached out to both humans and animals, subtly distorting their minds.

When Leuticia saw how unwell the soldiers on the front lines looked, she ordered the chief mage to erect a barrier to protect them from the miasma. As she looked up at the massive horde of demonic spirits that loomed on the other side of the mountain path like a dark cloud, the princess of Farsas made a quiet comment.

"What a sickening sight. I wish I could burn them all to ashes."

"Do it, then. You'll feel a lot better," Oltovine replied.

"If I could, I would've already."

Her honest response made Oltovine scowl. The idea of having to fight those kinds of enemies made him miserable. Leuticia noticed his frown but made no effort to console him.

"We might be the magic kingdom, but we don't have an endless supply of mages. Most of them are researchers."

"I did reach out to a mage I know, but I'm not sure whether they'll come."

"Why not? Don't they work for your royal court?"

"No. I doubt they'd turn up when there are so many people around."

Leuticia shrugged at this enigmatic response. Once the pair were notified that the full army was ready to mobilize, they wordlessly began riding ahead, a grim atmosphere hanging in the air.

The location they'd chosen to use to form ranks lay beyond the mountain path, backed by a rocky cliff. It was a confined area, which made it difficult to use magic, but if they'd chosen an open area without any cover, it would be impossible to counter attacks from airborne enemies. Thus, the troops' first step was to decrease the number of enemies at that location.

Swaying from side to side atop her horse, Leuticia closed her eyes and focused her attention on her own magical powers.

Erik still hadn't finished drawing on her magical power.

She wasn't sure what that meant, but she got the impression that the level of miasma in the area had lessened compared to when she'd said goodbye to her brother a few hours earlier. She held back a sigh.

If Lars's trump card was Shizuku, then Leuticia's was Erik.

While he wasn't born with a significant amount of magical power, tireless study had helped Erik develop an extraordinary aptitude for constructing spells. Allowing him to use her own magical power was like having another version of herself on the battlefield. As a mage, Erik played more of a background role than Leuticia, but this meant he was more adept at manipulating spells. The fact that he'd

overwritten a magic-nullification spell during the battle in Kisk was proof of that.

"Erik… Please make it work."

If Farsas were to be defeated, there was no other nation on the continent that would be able to stand up to the witch. The continent would be plunged into darkness once more and they'd end up lost in the very state they thought they'd escaped.

"Leuticia, they've spotted us."

Oltovine's voice snapped the princess back to reality. When she looked up, she saw the dark clouds that had been swirling in the direction of the castle slowly start to move toward them. Leuticia curled her petal-like lips.

"Okay. I'll turn them all to ash."

"Halt the advance! Put up a defensive barrier!"

"Prepare area-wide fireballs! Intercept their attack!"

In an instant, the ranks of troops were thrown into chaos as the two royals began preparing for the upcoming battle.

This was a fight between two enormous armies—one made up of demons, and the other made up of humans.

A clash on a scale never seen before in the long history of the continent was about to begin.

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About eighty percent of the floor on the castle's spacious top level had caved in.

That wasn't all. The force of the impact had also devastated the floors below, creating deep holes from falling rubble that spanned several stories.

Elzard looked down at the still sight. Nothing but a gust of cold wind blew through it.

What kind of mocking remarks would Aviella make if she came back now? He quietly clicked his tongue in frustration, then landed beside the throne to repair the damage.

"You're all bark and no bite, you pest… You don't do anything

right."

"—I get told that all the time."

Lars's response was an obvious lie.

As he spoke, he brought his sword crashing down with incredible force. Elzard immediately dodged it. If he hadn't sensed the magical energy coming his way, the sword would have sliced deep into his skull.

He'd had a narrow escape from death, but the searing pain that followed made him scream. Clutching his severed right arm, the demon teleported to a faraway part of the hall.

He couldn't comprehend what had just happened. His mind went blank. It had been several years since he'd adopted a physical form, but this was the first time he'd been wounded.

As the demon stifled a cry, glaring at the dripping blood, Lars gave him a cheerful smile.

"It hurts pretty bad when you get hurt, huh? I recommend you choose the instant death option next time."

"You bastard… How?"

Aside from the shoulder wound that Lars had sustained earlier, he was totally unscathed. How had he managed to dodge Elzard's attacks?

The demon stared at the king—a man who was supposedly unable to use magic.

Although Lars, the wielder of the royal sword, *did* possess magical powers, he was unable to formulate spells. Akashia dispersed any magic its owner attempted to use.

However, on closer inspection, Elzard noticed another object that was emitting a small amount of magical energy separate from that the king possessed. It was a white stone ring on the man's finger.

When Elzard realized *that* was what had gotten him into this situation, his voice cracked.

"Is that a magic implement…? How impudent you humans are…"

"Sorry, but no. It's not a magic implement. It's something I borrowed from my sister."

Without hesitating, Lars took off the ring and tossed it on the floor. The small piece of jewelry immediately transformed into a

shimmering silver pool of water. It was only when the pale hand of a woman started creeping out of the liquid that Elzard understood.

White hair emerged from the fountain of silver.

The figure had a slender body, a small face, and silver eyes. The young girl was clearly not human—she was a spirit.

She was a high-ranking demon who'd served the royal family for centuries. When she spotted Elzard, a being from the same species as her, she smiled slightly. Then Lars issued her a simple command.

"Capture him, Silfa. I'll kill him once you're done."

"As you wish, King Lars."

The girl leaped off the ground with the grace of a dancer.

As Elzard saw her spell spreading across the room, he let go of his wounded arm and began forming a spell of his own.

The two demons' magical powers collided, generating a fierce gust of wind. The nonhuman forces they wielded competed against one another, resulting in a massive burst of energy that shook the towering castle to its core.

As the ground collapsed beneath him, Lars casually jumped over to a remaining section of the floor.

"Well, nobody's come through that hole we opened for them. Something must be going on. Better finish up quickly so we can go and check it out," Lars said, sounding completely unfazed.

On the top floor, fierce sparks of magical energy surged up once more.

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Aviella unleashed another strike. Tarkis dodged the crackling ball of electricity by turning sideways.

He dashed across the floor again, closing the distance between himself and the witch in just a few steps. His movements were more agile than you'd expect from someone with such a sturdy, tall frame. He used that momentum to swing his hefty longsword, but Aviella deflected it using the barrier she'd created in her right hand.

"…Oh dear, yet another troublesome opponent has appeared."

Aviella was holding the red book in her left hand, so she could only cast non-recited spells with her right one. If Shizuku were her only opponent, she might've been able to get away with it, but she was at a bit of a disadvantage against Tarkis.

Frowning, Aviella suddenly found herself besieged by magic from three different directions. Lydia, Harve, and Mea were all launching their attacks.

Before their spells could reach her, however, the witch vanished into thin air, leaving the attacks to collide right in front of Tarkis.

"Whoa! Cut it out, Lydia!" he exclaimed.

"You know you could have just dodged it, right?" Lydia replied.

As Tarkis stepped back from the aftershocks of the magic attacks, he glanced at the witch, who'd reappeared at the far side of the room.

Nobody said a word.

Aviella looked down at her book for a moment, then shifted her gaze to Shizuku.

When the witch saw the determination in Shizuku's eyes, she forced a smile. Still holding the book, she raised her right hand.

"I see. I suppose luck in itself is a form of power."

She didn't sound especially bitter. As everyone's attention concentrated on her, the witch formulated a spell with her pale fingers, then fired invisible bullets of magical energy at Tarkis.

"Go right, Tarkis!"

"Okay."

"Step back! Further to the left!"

"Which one is it?"

As confused as he sounded, Tarkis adroitly dodged the seemingly invisible attacks by following Lydia's instructions. Any attacks he didn't manage to evade were deflected by Lydia's barriers, and he didn't get hit by a single one. Shizuku watched the scene wide-eyed, while Harve stared in disbelief.

"Amazing…"

As a mage, Lydia's skills rivalled those of royal court mages, and she'd gained a wealth of combat experience through her mercenary work. Given that Tarkis had worked with her for a long time, it made

sense that he'd be able to evade magic attacks with her help. The swordsmen the witch had defeated so far had only been at a disadvantage because they couldn't see magical energy, so Tarkis and Lydia's skills filled Shizuku with a sudden surge of hope.

Shizuku ran across the hall, keeping an eye on what Aviella and Tarkis were doing, then grabbed hold of Harve and dragged him over to Lydia.

"Sorry, but I have a plan. Please hear me out."

"Sure. What is it?"

"I want to lure the witch into the magic circle. I'm going to trap her in the magical device."

"…Huh?"

"Wait, what?"

The two mages were shocked by Shizuku's suggestion. After all, she wasn't a mage herself.

Shizuku glanced at Tarkis, then continued. "This magic array is based on Helginis's purification barrier, but actually, that purification barrier itself was a forbidden curse."

"What?"

This time, only Lydia sounded astonished. Harve was surprised, too, but he quickly seemed to realize that Shizuku was using the book she was holding as her source. There was nobody else nearby, but Lydia lowered her voice nonetheless.

"I know there's that legend about the saint, but the spell's range and effects *did* seem inexplicably large. Still, though, a forbidden spell? Now that you say it, it does make sense."

"The first saint infused her soul into this magical device when she made it. It's considered a forbidden curse because these devices require women's souls to work."

That was why they'd been extracting souls from women in Farsas. They were using them to power the device.

Aviella had been gathering souls from all over the place to help her transform Helginis into the underworld.

"In the past, Helginis would sacrifice a powerful female mage every few years to keep the device running. The downfall of Helginis six hundred years ago was caused by an attempt to trap one of the

witches into this device.”

“They tried to put a witch in there…? But how?”

“That pool of water is the key. When someone falls into it, their magic and soul get siphoned away. That’s how they restrained the Witch Who Cannot Be Summoned six hundred years ago. Helginis was destroyed because other witches viewed the situation as too dangerous and intervened. In other words, if Aviella’s alone, she won’t be able to escape once she falls into the pool of water.”

That was what Shizuku had been aiming for from the outset. She wanted to lure Aviella over to the basin of water.

Casting a barrier all the while, Lydia lowered her voice to respond to Shizuku’s idea.

“Doesn’t Aviella know that story, though? Won’t it be hard to tempt her over to the pool of water?”

“No. Just getting her into the magic circle will be enough. Once she’s there, we’ll be able to reach with the water.”

Shizuku exchanged glances with the small bird on her shoulder.

Mea, Shizuku’s assistant demon, had originally acted as the core for the castle at the bottom of the lake. As a result of that, she was adept at manipulating water. If they could lure Aviella inside the magic array, Mea would be able to control the water in the shallow pool and drag the witch in.

After Shizuku explained this, Harve and Lydia finally seemed to understand her plan. Thirty seconds after their hushed conversation had begun, they refocused their attention on Aviella.

“Okay. Let’s give it a go.”

“Thanks.”

Lydia ran off to support Tarkis, and Harve cast a barrier as he made his way over to the mage who was still continuing to heal people.

Shizuku, meanwhile, went back to stand in front of the magic circle.

The rewriting process wasn’t complete yet.

It would be done soon, though. Then Erik would be able to move

again.

There was just something Shizuku needed to do before he reached that stage.

"Mea, help Tarkis and Lydia. I'm going to lure Aviella toward the magic circle."

"As you wish."

Thanks to the arrival of Tarkis and Lydia, they'd narrowly managed to avoid defeat—but to Shizuku's frustration, Aviella had strayed far away from the magic circle. To win, she had to do everything she could to bring the witch back over toward it.

Shizuku put away her dagger and clutched her book tightly in both hands. As she watched the two mercenaries putting up a good fight against the witch, she forced her mind to slip toward the depths of the books.

Her vision began to blur.

The world she could see withdrew into the distance.

She followed her connection to the cursed artifact deep within. Riding that current, she stretched her consciousness deeper, further away.

The vast expanse made her feel like she was about to fade away, and once Shizuku was there, she started to look at the red book.

This was a method she hadn't been able to use before. It required intense concentration, so it was impossible to do while dodging Aviella's attacks. For now, though, Tarkis and the others were keeping her occupied.

If the books meddled with her own mind, would it be possible to use the two of them to peer into Aviella's?

She wasn't sure, but it was worth trying.

Shizuku ventured deep.

Into the book. Into the depths of her being.

This sinking process was incredibly dark.

It wasn't as if there was no light—it just felt "dark."

Dark and lonely.

And frightening.

She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd been cut off from everything else.

She wanted to interact with the world, to interact with people. But she was an anomaly that couldn't reach them.

And so, sobbing, she descended into the darkness.

She traveled deeper, even further into the depths.

What awaited her there was something she should have already known.

Something she understood, but had forgotten.

As well as her power, willpower, spirit, and soul.

Deeper.

Only deeper.

"Oh, I get it…"

At long last, Shizuku recovered her fragmented memories.

The very start of her journey. The time when she'd confronted the serpent of Negativity. Words. Picture books. Death.

How had she forgotten all of those things? Had she been *made* to forget them?

Everything that had happened up until now fell into place.

She was getting a better grasp on how to use the book and its power.

In the depths of the darkness, Shizuku lifted her tearstained face.

She saw the mind of the person who'd come into contact with the book.

It was a white light.

A flame burning in the darkness. A hopeful prayer.

The trajectory of a sorrowful, pitiful, hardworking person…

Shizuku stared into the white light.

Then she took a deep breath and blew gently into it.

The distance Aviella had created by teleporting a short distance away was shrinking. The man with the defiant gaze, who was receiving support from his comrades, had closed in on her again.

His sword was fairly large, but he wielded it flawlessly. Aviella, meanwhile, deliberately left herself vulnerable at times, hoping he'd chase her too far, but Tarkis wasn't going to take any risks. After all, he was a seasoned mercenary who'd survived countless close calls.

Fighting Tarkis with just her right hand, Aviella had already evaded his attacks using teleportation on three occasions. As she deflected his sword with the barrier she'd created, she glanced around at the challengers scattered throughout the hall. It seemed like the surviving people had been receiving magical treatment while Tarkis was distracting her. Some had even managed to stand up again.

After teleporting away for the fourth time, Aviella muttered to herself.

"I doubt I'll lose at this rate, but winning will probably take some time…"

If she wanted to guarantee victory, it might have been wiser to target the female mage or the one overwriting the spell.

This thought brought a wry smile to Aviella's face. She thought about the remark a certain young girl had made earlier.

"You brought challengers here so they could kill you, didn't you?"

That was part of the truth, but not all of it. In fact, the witch had no intention of being killed—not yet, anyway. She wasn't nearly satisfied. She wanted to leave a mark that would curse the continent for centuries to come.

She didn't want her legacy to be that of ambitious people picking up their swords, or heroes as powerful as they were determined trying to slay the witch.

She wanted to leave behind a much more profound sorrow. The anger that stemmed from cruel injustices; the grief of the survivors, left to grapple with what had happened and the future that awaited them; and the repentance inspired by the pervading memory of history's cruelty.

That was why she was taking some lives while leaving others behind. She wanted the survivors to pass down tales of hatred and fear for generations to come.

It was like making a small hole in a wall before a massive crack

formed, allowing a surging torrent to escape. She didn't expect anyone else to understand her arrogance—she didn't even want to accept it herself.

Still, after taking a farsighted look at the continent's long history and traveling from country to country, Aviella had gained a crystal clear perspective.

If things continued the way they were going, the continent would eventually slip slowly into a long period of darkness once again.

"You can't keep running away!"

The blade of the large sword came crashing down toward Aviella. She deflected it with a barrier, but the sheer force of the blow made her lose her balance. She blocked the follow-up strike, then conjured dozens of fire arrows above her head.

"—Fire!"

"Lydia!"

"I'm already on it!"

The downpour of arrows pursued Tarkis, who'd taken a large leap back to dodge the attack.

Fortunately, Lydia had unleashed a spell that had swept away more than half of the arrows.

Tarkis deflected the ones that remained with the magic sword he'd drawn with his left hand.

However, dealing with the arrows had given the witch enough time to complete her spell.

"Tarkis! Below you!"

At almost the same moment that Lydia delivered her warning, an invisible force wrapped around both of his ankles. Tarkis felt a sharp pain, like thin vines digging into his skin. Clicking his tongue in annoyance, he crouched down, hoping to sever the invisible shackles with his magic sword.

It hadn't even been ten seconds since she'd cast the fire arrows, but in that time, Tarkis's battle-hardened instincts had told him that something was wrong. He looked up and met the witch's gaze.

There was a sorrow in her brown eyes, almost as if she was looking at someone who was about to leave her. A mass of magical energy strong enough to change the atmosphere around them hung

in the air.

She got me.

Tarkis's frown elicited a smile from the witch.

She was about to unleash an unstoppable strike. It was an attack intended to take his life.

Tarkis knew he was defeated. But just as she was about to unleash the spell…

Aviella's face froze.

Picking up bones.

She was picking up the bones of a child who'd died on the dry earth.

It was a minor dispute. A conflict between remote tribes.

Plenty of fights like that happened in all places, in all eras.

So she knelt and gathered the bones.

The spell she'd created distorted.

Aviella pressed her right hand to her temple, then met Tarkis's puzzled gaze.

Something was wrong, but she didn't know what.

She attempted to put together a new spell.

Out came a twisted, golden blade. She hurled it at the man.

Feeling dizzy, Aviella took a few wobbly steps.

Every step of her journey came flooding back.

Why was this happening *now*, of all times?

"So, you're *a high-ranking demon. You look pretty human to me."*

"Oh? You're just a kid? What do you want from me?"

"What do I want? Hmm… Well, I'm an evil mage. How about we wreak havoc across the continent?"

"Would that be fun for you?"

There was somebody lurking in the depths of her mind.

Someone other than herself—and they were staring straight at her.

From time to time, she would look at Aviella. She was sobbing, her big, dark eyes filled with tears.

She blew out another breath.

"Tarkis! Press her from the left!"

"Yeah, I know."

A fierce slash came toward her. Aviella didn't take it head-on but silently leaped to the side, sending invisible vines twisting toward the man's legs.

But it was an attack they'd seen before, and Lydia immediately released a small burst of magic to send the vines in another direction. The stone floor shattered beneath Tarkis's feet, prompting him to retreat slightly.

Pressing her hand against her temple, the witch began to construct her next spell.

Once upon a time, she'd tried to have faith in human intelligence and reasoning.

She believed that as long as she had the book she'd inherited from her grandfather, she could save people from repeating the same mistakes.

Yet the words Aviella had written with this belief in mind didn't resonate with anyone anywhere.

The only people they had reached were those who could see nothing but what was right in front of them.

"What does it matter that it's a forbidden curse? Whether ten thousand people die ten years from now is irrelevant—we need this

power to save a thousand people now."

"Past failures are in the past. I'll handle it better this time. Just lend me your knowledge."

"Secret history? How ridiculous. What's more important is what we can do right now."

At the end of the day, people thought, *What's done is done*. They never considered the same things could happen to them, so they carried on trying to make the same mistakes, believing that they'd be the ones to get away unscathed.

Aviella's struggle to get her message across had taught her about human nature.

That was why she'd chosen another path—one that nobody could turn a blind eye to.

She started traveling the continent with a demon by her side.

In the process, they'd impart their knowledge to people. Good and bad, concealed, forbidden—all of it.

From time to time, she'd also collect junk.

At what point did she start picking up things the dead had left behind?

Aviella wasn't sure, but the fact remained that she collected the relics of both those she'd killed and those killed by others.

She'd line them up in her small room and lose herself in thought for a moment.

She couldn't be sad. She couldn't let herself feel regret.

She'd renounced the right to lament her actions a long time ago. From the moment she began wandering the continent, spreading her knowledge of forbidden curses, she'd stopped looking back.

The desire to save people…was something she'd given up as mere arrogance.

Her thoughts were in disarray.

She couldn't formulate spells properly.

As soon as the sword drew near, Aviella just released a burst of magical power and took a few steps back.

Tarkis bounded toward her.

She knew she had to counterattack before the sword struck her, but for now, creating a protective barrier was all she could manage.

The man, brandishing his sword mere inches away from her, smirked at the breathless witch.

"What's wrong? Feeling under the weather?"

"Who can say."

If some people were defective and inhumane, then Aviella was undoubtedly among them.

She could only see life through the lens of history. To allow tens of thousands to live in the future, she needed to kill thousands in the present. She just had to choose how.

This was an incorrigibly arrogant way of seeing things. She was no different from the foolish rulers she'd reviled in her youth—she'd realized how foolish it was long ago. If she kept taking things from others, she'd never be able to leave a true legacy of her own.

But even so…

She pushed back the man's sword with a defensive barrier.

After retreating even more, Aviella abruptly sensed something and allowed her gaze to wander. She caught sight of the girl in front of the magic circle, clutching a book.

She thought about the occasional sobs that echoed from the depths of her mind, and the breath that had triggered a change in her.

Who were they coming from? Who'd concealed themself inside her, beneath her notice?

Aviella stared at the black-haired girl.

A sense of déjà vu swept over her.

"…Is it you?" she asked, and Shizuku opened her eyes.

Their eyes met.

Compassion and loneliness. Pride and grief.

Their contrasting gazes, both reaching out for their own meager ideals, met for a moment.

There was, however, an ineradicable disparity between their two perspectives.

"You…"

At that moment, Aviella grasped both what was happening and who was making it happen.

Everything made sense to her.

This was a power that defied the laws of magic—the same power possessed by the red book, which exposed the secrets of history.

On numerous occasions, she'd questioned why such a book existed. Even Elzard, who came from a different realm, had no idea. While its true nature seemed impossible to uncover, everything Aviella wanted to know was revealed in its pages.

Still, after everything she'd been through, Aviella could tell what it really was.

It was understandable that it didn't abide by the laws of her world. After all, it didn't belong there.

"How dare you…!"

In a fit of fury, Aviella pieced together a spell. She was planning to shoot a bolt of magic through Shizuku's body, as well as the book she was holding.

At that moment, however, the water in the shallow pool erupted violently, crashing toward her.

"—!"

It swallowed up Aviella's entire body as if it were a living being, dragging her toward the basin. This water could draw out a person's soul. Her magical power was being pulled into the circle.

Aviella struggled against the ferocious current. She formulated a spell, hoping to escape before she reached the basin—but just before her spell was complete, she was struck by a sudden impact, causing her to collapse into the pool behind her.

Water splashed high up into the air. Aviella shot a vicious glare at the girl who'd slammed into her.

"You…"

"We won."

Inside the pool of water, a completely drenched Shizuku flashed the witch a pained smile and took out her dagger.

There was no doubt in her expression. She wasn't going to hesitate.

Driven by sheer determination, Shizuku swung her blade down at the witch she'd pinned to the floor. The sharp point of the blade stayed on target, heading straight toward the witch's chest.

The very next moment, however, a jolt ran through her body.

"Shizuku!"

A man shouted her name.

Shizuku looked down at her chest.

Red blood began to gush out of a small wound that had opened above her heart.

A magic projectile had been fired at her at close range. The caster, Aviella, pushed Shizuku aside. Shizuku immediately collapsed into the pool of water.

Her body was cold. Her vision was growing darker by the second. Through her blurry eyes, she saw a hand reaching out toward her. She could tell who it belonged to, so she just closed her eyes.

She wanted to tell them that it was all right, but the words got stuck in her throat.

They thought they'd won.

If expecting victory was a crime, then Lydia and Harve were equally guilty.

They'd drawn the witch into the pool, as intended, and the device had begun to absorb her immense magical power. Just when they thought they'd succeeded, however, their triumph turned into failure.

Aviella staggered to her feet and emerged from the water.

Most of her magical power had been drained from her, leaving her lethargic.

She brushed off her drenched mage's robe, then turned to look down at the woman lying in the shallow pool. The blood from the hole in her chest had begun to disperse into the water. Her navy-

blue book was floating right by her side.

"…What a shame," Aviella said callously.

She didn't make any further remarks. At the end of the day, Shizuku was an audacious spectator from outside her world. Aviella didn't feel like offering her even the slightest shred of pity.

Aviella was about to turn around when she spotted the man right beside the shallow pool. Erik, still connected to the magic circle's spell, had reached into the water, trying to lift Shizuku's body up.

He grabbed her soaked hand and pulled her into his arms, his expression the picture of desperation. As he began reciting an incantation in an attempt to heal the wound on her chest, Aviella seemed torn. She considered pointing out how pointless his actions were, but had second thoughts. Instead, she gathered the magic she had left into her fingertips.

"You may as well follow her."

"Erik!" Harve shouted, having run over to them.

Flying around above Shizuku, Mea countered Aviella's attack by unleashing a blade of wind. Lydia also sent a barrage of attacks her way, but Aviella blocked them with barriers, having let go of the book.

The witch turned away from the pool of water, smirking at the three frustrated individuals.

"What's wrong? You should have known what was coming. The weak are destined to die."

"N-nonsense!" Harve shouted, positioning himself in front of the witch.

Although his eyes were filled with turmoil, Harve did not hold back his anger toward Aviella.

"All you're doing is desecrating the past! You're ignoring the determination shown by people! How can you drone on about history when you're just going to reject their efforts?! *You're* the one making people stumble into the same pitfalls! Witches are obstacles that people have no way of avoiding!"

"That's still better than doing nothing."

The witch's voice was frosty. She glanced down at the water dripping from her silver hair, which was gradually forming a puddle

of water atop the magic circle.

"If things continue the way they're going, the continent will descend into another era of warfare in the next few hundred years. There are no more witches on the continent, and the Farsasian royal family's magical power has been diminishing with every generation. With Farsas weakened, the continent will lose its deterrent. Research on magic implements will advance further and further, and countries will start dabbling in forbidden curses. It'll be worse than the Return… This continent will descend back into darkness itself."

One period in history had made Farsas reluctant to sell magic implements to other countries—an era known as the Return.

About three hundred years earlier, a new method of creating magic implements had been discovered in Gandona. After that, dramatic progress was made in the research and production of magic implements, and before long, these new tools were used in fierce battles.

Citizens noted that this era of warfare, which raged across the continent for almost ten years, felt like the second coming of the Dark Age—earning it the name "the Return."

Many countries, including the Great Nation of Tayiri, fell during these conflicts, reminding people that there was no country that couldn't be destroyed.

At that time, Farsas and Gandona played key roles in quelling the chaos.

Still, not even those two countries could stay powerful forever. They, too, would decline, and figures like the infamous disgraced king would emerge. Once the equilibrium between nations was disrupted, the continent would plunge into darkness once again. No one could say how long that darkness would last. The future was unknown.

Though it wasn't as if the witch cared to know.

With a self-deprecating smile, Aviella gathered her magic into her fingertips once more. Then she fixed her aim on Harve, who showed no signs of retreating.

"I want to leave my mark, no matter what you fools think. As long as I do—"

But that was as far as she got.

Aviella's eyes widened as she looked down at her own body, soaked in water.

Her mage's robe was red.

For some reason, the sharp point of a silver blade had jutted out from just below her chest.

"You won't leave anything behind. Because I'm going to kill you."

"Kaito!"

Lydia's voice trembled with shock. Behind her, the mage who'd healed Kaito gasped. Tarkis frowned. Harve was speechless. Shizuku kept her eyes closed, and Erik refused to look up.

It was as though time had come to a standstill. Aviella grasped hold of the blade that had pierced her body and slowly turned around.

The boy was on the brink of death. His pale face told her he was about to collapse at any moment, and he was barely standing. His derisive gaze taunted the witch.

"Nothing…will be left behind… You'll be killed by someone who's about to die… Serves you right."

This scathing comment was all he could manage before he tumbled to the ground. His gauntleted hand fell into a puddle of mixed water and blood.

Aviella stared intently at him.

The dying boy was curled up like a baby, his body growing colder by the second.

It was as if he were a child who nobody had been able to save, much like all the other corpses in the pile.

Alone, disconnected from everything and everyone, his life was drawing to a close.

Having given up on everything—including making her mark and leaving it behind—Aviella looked down at her injury.

The wound on her chest was fatal. She didn't have much magical power left, either.

She looked down at the boy one more time, then knelt beside him.

She extended her hand above him and poured all of her magical

power into his broken body.

The warmth of her healing prompted Kaito to open his eyes. The woman gave him a serene smile.

"…See? I did leave something behind," she whispered in his ear.

Then she collapsed without a sound.

Aviella exhaled deeply. She calmly closed her eyes, as if she was drifting off to sleep.

And with that, the witch fell silent, disappearing from history without another word.

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His senses trembled.

Fending off a sequence of fierce attacks from his fellow demon, Elzard grew tense for a brief moment. He leaped back and looked around.

"Aviella's…dead?"

He'd always been able to sense his contract holder, no matter where she was—but now, it felt as if the connection had been severed. Her presence had vanished from the castle.

What could have happened…? There was only one answer.

She was dead.

She'd died. Her body would rot, and her soul would melt away and never come back.

In the midst of his confusion, Elzard heard Lars's raspy voice.

"What's the problem? Did someone kill the witch? That'll save me the trouble of searching for her, at least."

The king let out a snort of laughter. Elzard, however, didn't hear him. He was focused on identifying where Aviella's presence had disappeared.

It was gone.

If that was true, he needed to confirm it for himself.

What had she left behind? What kind of death had she faced?

He wouldn't gain anything until he had answers to those questions. His arrival in this world would have been futile.

He set the coordinates to the hall where Aviella's presence had been lost and began constructing a teleportation spell, but it was immediately shattered by one of Silfa's attacks.

It was a spell that seized him by the limbs and dragged him toward her. Having been captured, the only thing that awaited him was the king's sword.

Lars grinned, Akashia in hand.

"Well then, it's about time you made your exit, too."

The double-edged blade was thrust toward him at a terrifying speed. Elzard stared in astonishment as the sword pierced through his body, and his flesh began to disperse into a black mist from the spot where the sword had run through him.

He showed no emotion as he watched himself disappear. A clear voice echoed around his fading consciousness.

"Humans are beautiful, Elzard."

He'd never understood what she meant. Not even in that moment.

Yet there was one thing that was crystal clear to him.

As Aviella had tried to alter the unchangeable, murky tides, she'd been exceptionally beautiful herself.

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Nobody said a word.

It was as if a heavy curse had filled the entire hall.

In the midst of that silence, Kaito was the first person to move. As he rose to his feet, he examined his body, then looked down at Aviella's corpse with bitterness on his face.

Despite being dead, her expression was incredibly peaceful. He glanced at the face of the woman liberated by her own death, then turned on his heel and left the hall without saying a word.

The sound of his footsteps must have brought Lydia back to her senses, because she started tending to the injured, dragging Tarkis with her.

Holding back everything he wanted to say, Harve approached his

friend.

"Erik…"

"What?"

"U-uh, is Shizuku…?"

"She's alive. I sealed her wound, so just keep an eye on her for a minute."

"What?!"

Harve hesitantly took hold of Shizuku's drenched body. When he examined her closer, he saw her chest rising and falling slightly. He'd assumed that she'd been killed instantly by the witch's attack, so the revelation that Shizuku was actually alive made Harve sink to the ground. In the process, he almost bumped her head against the floor and panickedly wrapped his arms around her.

"What a relief… How did she survive, though? I thought she was done for."

"Thanks to her magic implements, I suspect. I made her put on all kinds of protective items. They probably lessened the impact."

"I see…"

The number of casualties was immense, but at least they'd exterminated the witch.

Harve had mixed emotions, but he let out a sigh of relief nonetheless. Erik responded with a casual wave of his hand.

"Sorry. I stepped out of the magic circle. Now that I've finished rewriting it, I'll activate it."

"Oh, okay."

Holding an unconscious Shizuku in his arms, Harve walked outside of the large magic circle.

On his way there, the red book lying near the witch's corpse caught his eye, but he simply shook his head and made no attempt to pick it up.

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The soldier used the blade of his sword to deflect the claws plunging toward him from above.

It was difficult to keep the demonic spirit's immense strength at bay, even using two hands. In that fleeting moment of stalemate, however, a nearby mage cut through the demon's body.

"Thanks for the help."

The soldier offered a brief expression of gratitude before positioning his sword and searching for new foes.

They'd been clashing with the horde of demons for the better part of an hour. As they continued to fight, they started to get the impression that their enemies were truly infinite.

No matter how many they managed to kill, demonic spirits kept appearing. The demons attacked relentlessly, trying to tear their bodies to pieces. There was no end in sight, and most of the troops felt like they were going to run out of willpower before they ran out of stamina.

"Shit!"

The soldier stepped back, shielding his head from the acid being sprayed in his direction.

How long would it go on? He wanted to scream, but this was a fight they couldn't back down from. He used a cloth to fix his grip on his weapon's slippery handle, which was covered in blood and sweat.

At that moment, a gust of wind swept across the battlefield.

The stagnant atmosphere shifted. A strong wind was coming from the direction of the castle.

Filled with incredible power, it rushed down the mountain path awash with chaotic battles.

The soldier instinctively shielded his head as the cries of demonic spirits echoed above him—but then the noise gradually faded into the distance. Their sharp shrieks seemed to get carried away by the wind, allowing a calm stillness to spread through the air.

The man cautiously looked up.

"…What's that?"

Light was shining across the previously gloomy wasteland. The sudden change in atmosphere left the soldier flabbergasted. To his surprise, the number of demonic spirits in the sky had halved.

Not only that, but the thick clouds that had previously obscured the sky had dissipated so quickly it was almost anticlimactic. The

soldiers and mages exchanged bewildered looks, cocking their heads in confusion.

"Did that wind just blow away the clouds and demonic spirits?"

"That's absurd. But…"

The troops couldn't believe their eyes, yet the scene that had suddenly greeted them could only signify hope. Without delay, they resumed their attack on the remaining demons with renewed vigor.

Having been giving orders among the ranks of troops, Leuticia heaved a sigh of relief when she realized what had happened.

"They purified the area… That's a bold move."

Her praise was directed toward a man who wasn't even there.

Smiling at the skill of her subordinate, she issued new commands to subjugate their remaining foes.

Oltovine, who'd been fighting elsewhere, looked to the sky and exhaled.

"Looks like we'll be able to manage somehow… Right?"

There was still a swarm of demonic spirits in the sky, but the horde didn't look as endless as before. If they managed to reduce the demons' numbers a little more, he might be able to take over command from Leuticia and let her venture into the tower before the rest of them.

"That said, reducing their numbers will be near impossible."

They'd need to mobilize a significant number of mages to strike down the flying horde. But for the time being, everyone had their hands full. They had no choice but to take it slow, fighting one step at a time.

But just as Oltovine was thinking this, he heard the sound of a new set of wings flapping behind him.

A large shadow appeared on the ground. A few soldiers lifted their heads to see what was there, only for a white flash to scorch their vision.

The massive beam of light pierced through the sky, engulfing a cluster of demonic spirits. In complete silence, they vanished without a trace.

Everybody watched in mute amazement as a red dragon circled around above their heads. The young girl with long black hair sitting

on top of it showed her face. When she spotted Oltovine among all the horses and people, she gave him a light-hearted wave.

"…Lyshien, you came."

The girl was the princess of Anneli—a country that Oltovine himself had destroyed. Blessed with powerful magical energy that had seen her imprisoned since birth, she had been contacted by Oltovine ahead of the battle.

According to the records, Lyshien was meant to be dead, so Oltovine had doubted that she'd make a public appearance, but in doing so, she'd made a huge difference.

The state of the battle made Oltovine breathe a sigh of relief. Victory was starting to look like a possibility.

In front of him stood the witch's twisted castle, now fully exposed in the light of day.

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"Shizuku. All the answers are already inside you."

When Shizuku regained consciousness, she discovered that someone had laid her down at the edge of the hall with the magic circle in it.

She slowly sat up and looked around, then picked up the little bird by her side—Mea.

The oppressive feeling that had pervaded the hall earlier was gone. All that was left was a small number of individuals, rushing around in a frenzy.

When he noticed that Shizuku was awake, Erik came over to her from where he'd been standing in the center of the room. Holding two books in one of his hands, he positioned himself in front of Shizuku and placed the books on the floor.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm…fine. Just a little dazed," Shizuku replied.

"That's good to hear. You always dive right into things. The stress of watching you is going to take years off my life."

“S-sorry.”

When Shizuku looked down at her chest, where she’d been attacked, she spotted a small round hole in her clothing. She looked through the hole and checked that there were no wounds on her skin, then lowered her gaze.

“Um, what happened to the witch…?”

“She’s dead. I finished overwriting the spell, too. We can use teleportation now, so we’re in the process of sending the injured outside,” Erik said, before crouching down next to her. “I’ve also gotten in touch with the princess. It sounds like they’re exterminating the enemies outside the castle. Once someone fetches the king, we’re done here.”

In other words, they’d won their reckless battle. The silence that naturally came between them ended when Shizuku’s attention drifted toward the two books.

“Erik, are those…?”

“Yeah. I think we have no choice but to dispose of them. We wouldn’t want anyone getting hold of them. We can’t do anything about the third one, since it’s on another continent, but judging by what’s been recorded so far, destroying these two books won’t cause the information in them to transfer to the third.”

“Then should we burn them right away?”

“Yeah, probably. They’re too bulky to walk around with.”

Erik looked into Shizuku’s eyes. Once she gave him a silent nod, he placed his hand over the stacked books. A magic spell poured down, and the two books slowly began to burn.

Before long, only ashes in the shape of the books were left.

Erik offered Shizuku his hand.

“Can you stand?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll open a teleportation gate. Let’s head back to the castle.”

His gentle voice sounded comfortingly familiar and brought a bittersweet smile to Shizuku’s face. She glanced around the hall.

“Before we leave… Is the king still inside the castle? I want to tell him something about the books.”

“He should be. He’s probably on the top floor.”

"I'll be back in a minute, then."

Shizuku stepped into the hallway with Mea. Without hesitation, Erik joined her and stood by her side. The pair took each other by the hand and started strolling down the gently curving corridor.

"It…feels strange that it's all over," said Shizuku. "It feels like my mind's gone blank."

"That's because the tension's gone from your body. You must be exhausted. You should have a long rest when we get back."

"I'll probably wake up with sore muscles."

It was no longer dark outside the windows. When Shizuku saw the clear blue sky, she smiled.

Erik gazed at Shizuku's side profile. She looked like she'd been set free.

"When we get back to Farsas, my contract will almost be up. Why don't we visit another country?"

"Oh, that reminds me! Is it true that the waters in the south are crystal clear? That's what Mea told me."

"Apparently. I've never seen them with my own eyes, though. If you're interested in taking a look, we can head down south."

There was a gentle breeze. The little bird on Shizuku's shoulder chirped, and she reached out to stroke Mea's back.

The breeze wafted Shizuku's loose hair upward, revealing the part of the cloak underneath it. Without saying a word, Erik stared at the hole in her back that the witch's attack had left. Shizuku gathered her disheveled hair together using only her hands.

"Were you the one who healed my wounds, Erik?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Thank you."

Eventually, the staircase at the end of the corridor came into view. There was nobody else in the hallway.

Shizuku squeezed Erik's hand tighter, then came to a stop.

Erik glanced over his shoulder, and she smiled at him.

All of the answers had been inside her.

She'd already known that, but just hadn't been able to remember.

After all, if those memories came back to her, she wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret any longer.

"Erik… When did you realize…that *I'm* the interlopers' cursed artifact?"

That was a secret she was no longer able to keep.

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The news that the witch had been defeated reached Medial Castle via the nation's army, which was still engaged in battle.

As cheers erupted inside the meeting room, Ortea let out a small sigh and rose to her feet. Hoping to put the tense atmosphere behind her, the queen stepped into the hallway without any attendants accompanying her. One man, however, followed her out.

When Ortea turned around, the man bowed deeply.

"Your Majesty, Queen of Kisk… I apologize for my rudeness the other day."

"The other day? Oh, you're the prime minister of Medial."

When Shizuku had gone missing a few days prior, she'd sent Niké to confront this man. Shiron had gone pale in response to the queen's frosty gaze, and he offered her an apology.

"I had no idea that girl had been one of your close aides… I interrogated her, thinking she might know where to find my stolen family treasure. Not only that, but I did something awful to her even though she was still alive… I can't apologize enough. But please, make sure that I'm the only one who's held accountable…"

"Just forget it. Shizuku was fine. I don't wish to create any more commotion over this."

Ortea waved her fan in a show of annoyance, making Shiron lower his head even further. As she gazed at the back of his head, a spark of curiosity struck the queen, prompting her to ask a question of her own.

"What was that family treasure? Has it not been found yet?"

"Well, I heard it was in the witch's possession…but it doesn't matter now. There must be something ominous about the Immortal Toad that Recounts History. From now on, I'll put it out of my mind."

"An immortal toad?"

The witch had possessed a *book* that recounted events from history—not a *toad*.

Still…the concept sounded oddly familiar. Ortea thought to herself for a moment, and then it clicked.

A similar tale had featured in one of Shizuku's picture books.

Stories about talking animals didn't exist in Ortea's world, so she'd been convinced it was a fairy tale from another one.

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A breeze flowed between the two of them.

Shizuku no longer felt any icy coldness in the wind, likely because sunlight had begun to shine through.

Erik had been staring at Shizuku in silence. Finally, he began to speak in a monotonous voice.

"I first realized it when I saw your picture book in Medial. When I read the story about the toad that knew all of history…it raised some questions. My suspicions grew more distinct when you were rescued from the snow. It was strange that you hadn't died, considering how long you'd been outside. The prime minister of Medial confirmed that you were dead, which is why he discarded you in the forest. Just as I began to suspect there was something unusual about you, Lera told me that the story from the picture book originated from Medial."

"Yeah. That toad is my predecessor. It's the core and true form of the cursed artifact… The three books serve as external records and amplification devices."

Shizuku brushed her long hair aside.

There was a hole in the back of her clothes. Aviella's attack had undeniably pierced her heart, yet Shizuku hadn't died. She was never going to die, even if she sustained injuries and lost blood.

Yet that was only natural. After all, from the very beginning, she'd been "an immortal cursed tool." Erik had sealed up her wounds despite knowing this.

The mage let out a weary sigh.

"It didn't take much to figure it out. The one thing that linked the cursed tools was spoken language. It's abnormal for records to exist solely in written form; unlike spoken language, written characters vary depending on the country and era. They're something that people from this continent created."

Why had history been recorded in the books using characters that humans had created?

The answer was simple—there was more to the cursed artifacts than just those books.

Shizuku smiled bitterly and shrugged her shoulders.

"You're always so quick to figure things out… In its truest form, the cursed artifact is a storyteller—a being capable of reading all three books. That's how it continues to recount what it's learned. It's only natural that I can speak your world's language, because the core of the cursed artifacts lies within me."

Shizuku placed a hand on her warm chest and closed her eyes. Something that wasn't her lived deep inside her soul. She could sense it now.

Erik watched her black eyelashes tremble and frowned.

"When did you remember that? Did you know from the very beginning?"

"No. It just came back to me a moment ago. When I tried to manipulate the witch's mind, I thought *Oh, I'm able to control this book*. Once I realized that, everything came back to me. I remembered why I was brought to this world…"

It had all started with a battle in the desert.

After passing through several pairs of human hands, the stolen toad was discovered by the Cursed Artifact of This World.

This artifact, made to observe the continent, was opposed by another, created by the world to stop it from interfering.

From the moment they met, these two conflicting beings engaged in fierce combat. Eventually, their conflict reached the desert, where the toad was ultimately killed.

After checking that the toad was dead, the Cursed Artifact of This World left the desert to heal from the severe injuries it had sustained in battle. However, even with the toad dead, its core retained a glimmer of strength.

As a result, it had opened up a hole, hoping to find a new host within which it could lie dormant and regain its power.

"It seems like humans from other worlds make better hosts than people from this one. If a human from this world assumed that role, their soul could have gotten sucked into the core… But since the makeup of my soul is different, there's no chance of the soul forgetting its true nature. The core manipulated my memories to make me forget it had become one with me, then fell into a slumber to recover its power."

Shizuku remembered a cold power entering her in that hole between worlds.

In that moment, she'd gained an understanding of everything… and just forgotten it all.

Aviella must have recognized Shizuku's true nature when her mind had been interfered with. She'd been repulsed and rejected her, realizing that Shizuku wasn't a human being challenging fate, but an impudent observer from outside her world.

What Simila had said was true: She was, without a doubt, an abnormal thorn that needed to be eliminated.

As Shizuku calmly explained herself, Erik checked to make sure he was on the same page.

"So the epidemic that led to the loss of innate language skills was the result of the cursed artifact's powers weakening in that battle? And the children in the castle were able to speak again because the cursed artifact regained some of its strength during its slumber… Is that right?"

"Yeah. At this rate, it'll recover completely, making it possible to

regain control over the continent's language. By that point, it might be able to emerge from my body and move freely, but since the core is already affixed to my soul, I could die if it gets pulled away."

"I doubt the cursed artifact would kill you. If it leaves your body, it's at greater risk of getting destroyed."

Erik gazed out the window with his deep-blue eyes. Suppressing all the emotions he was carrying, his calm voice echoed down the long corridor.

"From the cursed artifact's perspective, a human's lifetime passes in the blink of an eye. I'm sure you could continue living the way you are."

With these words, he was attempting to offer her some hope.

Erik had probably been the first person to realize the truth about everything.

Yet he'd chosen to protect Shizuku. He believed that Lars would kill her if he discovered that she herself was the cursed artifact, so he'd lied and said she was just being manipulated by the book.

When Shizuku's memories had returned, all the examples of how he'd cared for her came into focus.

As grateful as she was, she knew she could never repay him for everything she'd put him through.

Shizuku closed her eyes and smiled. She squeezed the hand that was holding hers.

"You have nothing to worry about," he told her. "Just live your own life. A cursed artifact would never inflict harm on someone directly. It'll probably limit your actions, so returning to your old world might not be a possibility…but there's a place for you here, too."

Erik reached out, stroking Shizuku's hair with the large palm of his hand.

Its warmth brought Shizuku to the verge of tears, so she pursed her lips together to suppress them.

Back in the library where they'd met, all she'd done was cry.

They'd met purely by coincidence, yet he'd never attempted to abandon her.

Not even now, when it went against his principles.

If Erik claimed she could carry on living in his world, he had to be telling the truth. Maybe she could live a peaceful life in a small town somewhere. For a moment, Shizuku found herself envisioning such a future.

"Thank you so much… I really mean it."

Shizuku was frustrated that this was the only reply she could muster.

She let go of the hand she was holding and lowered her head in a deep bow. When she raised her head again, she stared at the man before her.

Words were restrictive. She could only get a small part of her message across.

She didn't know any other way of communicating, though. And it was words—as restrictive as they were—that had linked the two of them together. She was more than happy with that.

Shizuku held out her fingers for Mea. Once Mea had fluttered over from her shoulder to sit on them, she turned her hand toward the window.

"Thanks, Mea."

The little bird left Shizuku's hand and settled on the windowpane. When Mea cocked her head slightly, Shizuku smiled at her and took a step back. She spread her empty arms out wide.

"Wait, Shizuku…!"

When he sensed what Shizuku was trying to do, Erik's face fell. He reached out for her, trying to grab hold of her open arms—but just as he was about to touch her, Shizuku used her power to vanish from sight without even needing a spell.

※

Once upon a time, the whole world had spoken the same language.

That had all changed when people began building a tower to the heavens, incurring God's wrath.

If God's decision to jumble up the languages was the thing that granted them their freedom, then this continent was still a sandbox

—a miniature garden to be watched over, from which no one could escape.

That is, until people noticed that deception and rejected it…

※

Having teleported to the top floor of the castle, Shizuku looked out through the crumbled walls.

The land around the castle was vast and dry, but with the miasma gone, the sky was clear and blue. She was moved by the vivid color.

Shizuku smiled, holding onto her hair fluttering in the breeze.

She couldn't see the army fighting the remaining demons from where she stood, but she was sure things were going smoothly. In fact, she couldn't see a single demonic spirit in the sky.

Shizuku breathed in the cold, clean air, causing a small twinge of pain deep inside her lungs.

"—What are you playing at? How did you get here?"

The voice behind her belonged to a man she knew well.

Shizuku turned around, her bittersweet gaze directed toward the floor. She went and stood in front of the king, who seemed sluggish.

"Oh, King Lars. Are you hurt?"

"It's already healed. I sent Silfa back to Lettie, though."

"You sent her back? How are you going to get home without the spirit to help you? Are you going to use the stairs again?"

"Lettie will come and fetch me, no doubt. Until then, I'll just stare at the view or something."

Lars leaned against the crumbled throne, feigning indifference.

The king had taken matters into his own hands since setting foot in the castle, so Shizuku didn't know what he'd been up to, but the collapsed floors gave her a clue. She averted her gaze from the deep, slanted hole in the ground.

"Could I have a word with you while you're waiting, then?" she asked.

"What is it? Did you screw up somehow?"

Lars was unshakeable, regardless of the situation. He refused to

let her off the hook.

If he were any different, though, Shizuku wouldn't have been able to confront him like this. In that sense, his personality might have been a small blessing.

She looked up into his blue eyes and smiled.

"King Lars, the truth is, I was the cursed artifact all along."

If she'd remembered the truth when she first arrived in this world, she never could have come to this conclusion.

She'd have cried, screamed, and curled up into a ball, confused and helpless.

Now, though, she could stand on her own two feet.

She could stand there and make a choice. That was everything.

"…A cursed artifact? *You*?"

"Yes. It came back to me. I'm the true cursed artifact, in charge of the three books. I'm a cradle for it, brought to this world from another so it could hide its core. My memories of that were just sealed away…and the core of the cursed artifact is attached to my soul."

The king frowned as he looked down at Shizuku, likely struggling to grasp this revelation.

She tried desperately to stop her voice from shaking, though the complete lack of kindness in his eyes gave her a sense of relief.

Why her?

Why had she ended up in this reality?

If she'd never encountered that portal, she could have lived a quiet life in her old world.

Nothing would have taken over her soul, and she wouldn't have ended up in countless life-threatening situations.

And yet…

"What do you want me to do about it? What are you hoping for, as a vessel for the cursed artifact?"

“I want you to kill me.”

She was glad she’d come to this world.

Shizuku clenched her trembling fists, determined to keep smiling.

She didn’t want to cry. It would make her feel like this ending was defeat for her, which she didn’t want.

Still, her throat was burning, and she couldn’t prevent her vision from going blurry.

The thought of having to say goodbye to everything was just sad, no matter how she looked at it.

She smiled at Lars, and he scowled as he watched the colorless tears trickle down from her black eyes. After letting out a sigh, however, he assumed a regal expression once again.

“Is that really what you want?”

“Yes.”

She’d been made immortal. Not even the witch’s powers had been able to kill her.

However, the royal sword was probably strong enough to destroy the cursed artifact. After all, Akashia was one of the few forces that could counteract the interlopers’ cursed artifacts. Shizuku had proof of that, too—at times, the core’s trepidation had filled her with fear of the royal sword.

Once the artifact was destroyed, its long reign would end. Freed from the restraints of words, the people of the continent would regain the potential that had been stolen from them. History would continue to be woven, but it would no longer be mirrored in the pages of ominous books. As in any era, people would wrestle with hardship and pain, but now their gazes would remain firmly fixed on the future.

Shizuku stared at her own hands.

Erik claimed that from the cursed artifact’s perspective, a human lifetime passed in the blink of an eye—but he’d been wrong. Shizuku was already immortal. Being fused with it, she would wander the

continent for all eternity. Once her mind had completely worn away, she'd become the "storyteller" itself—a tool for transmitting knowledge that had no will of its own. In that state, she would record and preserve history, while also maintaining the boundaries of language.

She would surrender her mind and become a vessel. That wasn't a future she was prepared to choose.

In order to defend human dignity, she refused to let her own be compromised.

It was through her journey that Shizuku had come to understand the importance of those things.

"I'll gladly accept our world's lack of convenience over corruption from outside influence."

It was something Erik had once said to her—and his words had left their mark.

Lars straightened his posture and drew Akashia. Moving slowly, he directed it toward her.

His eyes, devoid of sorrow, were fixed on Shizuku.

She simply faced the king the way she always had.

"King Lars."

"What?"

"I'm human."

That was her one point of pride she refused to concede. Her words earned a firm nod from Lars.

"Yeah. You are human."

Satisfied with his response, Shizuku smiled.

The light glinted off Lars's sword, and he raised it.

In her final moments, Shizuku let out a small sigh and closed her eyes.

"—Shizuku!"

A scream echoed from below the rubble.

Erik had made his way up through the castle, and he swiftly

began to chant, shooting an arrow of light toward the uppermost floor.

As the king was about to bring his sword down, the arrow raced toward him at an alarming pace.

When Lars noticed it, he immediately pulled back his sword to deflect the arrow—but just as it was about to hit Akashia, it darted in another direction, striking him in the wrist.

There was a dull thud, and Akashia spun across the floor. The king scowled as he held onto the remains of his right hand—half of it had been gouged out.

"That jerk…"

"What are you doing?! Erik!"

With a furious yell, Leuticia appeared. Seeing that her subordinate had attacked her brother, she lifted her pale right hand, enraged.

The magic implement on Erik's right ear shattered to pieces, and blood splattered across his cheek.

Despite this, he didn't glance back at Leuticia. Erik's gaze was fixed solely on Shizuku. She'd picked up Akashia, which had slid across the floor.

Clutching the heavy longsword, she retreated and stood with her back toward the hole in the outer wall.

A slightly troubled, bittersweet smile crossed her face.

She propped up the middle of the longsword with both hands, then pointed its tip toward her chest.

Her dark eyes, teeming with unquenchable emotion, met Erik's gaze.

"Stop!"

Now that his magic implement had been shattered, he had no magical energy to use.

Yet there was something else he could rely on instead.

Having come to a swift decision, he began to recite an incantation. It was a forbidden curse that would convert his soul into magical power. The color of Leuticia's face changed once she realized what he was doing.

There are always possibilities available to you, no matter where you find yourself.

It's human willpower that chooses whether or not to embrace them.

The key is having something you hold dear to your heart.

"Stop that, you idiot!"

The forbidden spell was nullified.

Her yell bounced off the walls.

She blinked slowly.

Distance separated them.

Erik rushed up the rubble slope.

All that laughter,

all that adversity,

it had been so much fun.

It had made her so happy.

Shizuku drove the blade of the cursed artifact-destroying sword into her own chest.

As if retracing the witch's condemnation, as if following the man's lies, it plunged into her heart.

The weapon fell onto the floor, seemingly unable to bear its own weight.

Blood dripped from the wound.

Shizuku caught her own blood in a blistered hand.

When she looked up, she saw the man rushing toward her.

He held out an arm, and she smiled.

"Shizuku…!"

His hand wouldn't reach.

She launched herself off the floor and leaped into the air.

Ahh,
thank you
for always staying by my side.

She was falling.

Something deep inside her wound writhed around, attempting to heal it up.

Sensing this movement, Shizuku gently closed her eyes.



At that moment, her body was slammed into the distant ground below her, smashing her into pieces.

※

She felt no pain.

That probably meant she was dead. She couldn't recall experiencing any pain on the numerous occasions she'd died in the past.

She'd collapsed in the desert at the start of her journey, suffered magic attacks in Candela Castle, been attacked by demonic spirits at the castle in Medial, and had Aviella shoot her in the chest—but she didn't remember being in pain any of those times. She'd simply lost consciousness, only to come back once she'd been revived. She'd probably been manipulated so that she wouldn't notice she was unique.

Which was why she didn't feel any pain this time, either. All she had was her consciousness.

Oh, this sucks.

She knew that her body was in tatters. Her head and abdomen were split open, and her limbs had been torn apart and scattered across the ground.

She couldn't see it, but she could still tell what had happened. After all, she was conscious…and the cursed artifact hadn't been totally destroyed yet.

A feeble amount of power shifted inside Shizuku's body, attempting to restore her physical form one step at a time.

"…S-stop."

She mustered a shred of determination, trying to stop the movements of the cursed artifact.

Akashia was a sword that severed magic. It had the same effect on otherworldly cursed artifacts, which was why this one had retained so little of its power.

Actually, I'm glad I'm conscious, Shizuku thought, changing her opinion.

As long as she was conscious and had her mind, she could fight to the bitter end and drag this cursed artifact with her into death.

There in a pool of her own blood, Shizuku flexed her willpower.

Little by little, the presence of the cursed artifact began to fade away, as slowly as the blood she'd spilled seeped into the earth. She could end things right here and take this stubborn thing with her.

Still, would she have been able to think if it weren't for the cursed artifact's power?

She'd slammed into the ground from a considerable height. Her brain had probably been destroyed, yet she was still able to think. Maybe she had the power of the cursed artifact to thank for that. Or maybe her brain was still functioning when only a tiny part of it remained.

There was so much she didn't know.

I wish I could have learned more, she thought to herself. There were still so many things she wanted to explore.

That said, she didn't regret the choice she'd made. She knew that someone else would weave together new thoughts, new knowledge, even if she couldn't.

Shizuku recalled the faces of the people who were precious to her—her family and friends from her old world, as well as the people she'd met in her new one, like Ortea and Erik.

All of them would probably get angry at her for making this choice, but no matter who scolded her, she'd still make the same decision.

Only Shizuku could destroy the cursed artifact in this way. She couldn't surrender that opportunity.

Shizuku observed its power and her own life as they both dwindled away.

That burning flame was gradually shrinking.

Her strength was waning. Her consciousness slowly began to fade.

It'll be over soon.

Just then, she heard the sound of large wings flapping through the air. It made no sense—her ears shouldn't be working.

The cursed artifact shuddered inside of her, startled.

She couldn’t see anything, but she could sense the red dragon landing close by.

It was the same dragon she’d seen flying over the desert when she first arrived in this world.

That could mean only one thing: The cursed artifact from this world had come back yet again.

“…Ah.”

Someone positioned themself beside her. She sensed an aura similar to that of the royal sword nearby, causing the cursed artifact to tremble.

It had been killed by this sword once before.

It was that death that had led Shizuku to fall into this world. Back then, the cursed artifact had taken the form of a toad, small enough to fit in your hands. This time, it was inside a broken human corpse. Could the sword tell it was the same artifact?

If so, maybe it had come to destroy its core once and for all. Or perhaps it was hoping to witness its final moments.

Shizuku’s thoughts faded away. Her spirit began to dissipate. The cursed artifact, which had restrained the continent for so long, was going to be destroyed by human will. And so it would end.

Relieved, Shizuku started letting go of her consciousness.

At that moment, however, a pair of warm hands touched her face.

“Shizuku.”

She heard the voice of a young girl. It was a voice she’d heard somewhere before—clear and resonant, and filled with strength.

“I…believe in your freedom.”

5. The White Hall



"That's the end? Aren't you going to read the rest?"

Hearing those words, Shizuku opened her eyes.

She was in a pure white space, white as far as the eye could see. There was no sky, just a white floor that went on forever.

In front of her was a desk, with a single book lying on its pure white surface.

On the other side of the table stood a lone woman. For some strange reason, Shizuku couldn't see her face.

"I was thinking it would go on forever," the woman said. "Both the interesting and the less interesting parts. I assumed things would continue to be written, whether I read them or not."

"It's up to individuals to determine what is preserved and what isn't," responded Shizuku. "Outsiders shouldn't take the liberty of making that choice."

"Who are you to say that? You came from another world, too, you know."

"I think it'd be more accurate to say I was brought here."

Shizuku pressed her temples. It felt as though she'd been stuck in this entirely white space with this woman for a long time. She couldn't remember what they'd talked about, though. It was as if time had come to a standstill, as if both the distant past and distant future had been compressed onto a single flat sheet of paper.

The woman embodied the remnants of the interlopers' consciousnesses. These interlopers had created the cursed artifact that unified the continent's language.

"Won't it benefit humanity if all of the past is preserved?" she said to Shizuku. "Surely people will stop making mistakes."

“You’ve got it wrong. It doesn’t matter how horrific the records are, the same errors will still be repeated. What we really need to acknowledge is that humans make mistakes. Unless we understand that, a book chronicling the entirety of history will only breed arrogance.”

Shizuku cast a glance at the book on the table. It was a compilation of records connecting them to the past.

That wasn’t the only way the artifact was unique, though.

“Why did you make everyone speak the same language?”

The interlopers had eliminated existing writing systems and imbued people with innate language skills. They’d acted arbitrarily. Why had they chosen to standardize the language people spoke, instead of just documenting history?

The woman took a moment before giving her response.

“I felt that if there were multiple languages, people wouldn’t be able to convey their intentions as clearly.”

“Didn’t you think that would restrict human thought?”

“The potential for misunderstandings to disrupt progress is a far bigger issue. A shackle isn’t a shackle if you don’t realize it’s there.”

The woman let out a deep sigh. Although Shizuku couldn’t see her face, the woman was definitely glaring at her.

“You never should have been summoned to this world.”

“I’m glad I was.”

“Why did you sacrifice your life? Is it that insignificant to you?”

“It’s not insignificant at all.”

Shizuku felt like she’d heard this question countless times since arriving in this world, but her answer was always the same.

“I don’t want to die. I don’t like pain, either. My life is precious to me, and that’s exactly why I’m using it to protect something even more important.”

“Which is?”

“The mind.”

She wasn’t just talking about her own mind. She valued the minds of others and the thoughts that originated from them.

She believed they were important. That was why she was prepared to put her life on the line for them. She could keep going

when it was for something more important than her own life.

She didn't expect others to understand her decision. She simply wanted to demonstrate that this was the choice she'd made.

"Why do you people interfere with this world?" Shizuku asked.

"Because that is the role that was given to us. Our duty is to interact with this world and accumulate knowledge."

"Your duty? What purpose does that serve?"

"Well… To find out how we could have lived happy lives, perhaps?"

It was an incredibly vague response. The ambiguity that Shizuku sensed appeared to dissolve into the open white space surrounding her.

The woman briefly averted her gaze, then continued.

"Also… We wanted reassurance. Knowing that all the things we had and hadn't had the chance to read were documented in those books gave us peace of mind. This way, they'd never get lost."

"We already set fire to two of them."

"Yes. Not only that, but they've lost you as well. The books may as well not exist at all if there's no one to read them. People will come to speak different languages. They're sure to fight again."

"There's freedom in that, though."

Shizuku thought about the people she'd met on her journey.

Some of them were easy to understand, while others had remained an enigma right up until they parted ways.

Some had become important to her, while others were already important to someone else.

And then, there were those who rejected everyone and everything, choosing to be alone.

It didn't matter if the loss of the books or the division of language sowed the seeds of conflict.

People would still move forward, making mistakes along the way. That was why it was far better for their minds to be free.

Shizuku's reply made the woman fall silent.

After a moment, she pointed at the space behind Shizuku.

"You should be on your way now."

"What? Where to?"

“I don’t know. I’m just a vestige of what once was.”

Shizuku turned around. There, in a space that had previously been empty, stood a small door.

“You can go wherever you like. You’re free, aren’t you?”

And so, Shizuku…

6. The Final Words



"Nice to meet you. My name is Shizuku Minase… Who are you?"

She felt like she'd had a weird dream.

That was the first thought that went through her mind when she opened her eyes. She raised her sluggish arm and held it out toward the ceiling.

Her hands were small, and her nails were cut short. It was the same hand she'd known for the past nineteen years, but she looked up at it, blinking repeatedly. Then she sat herself up, pushing her elbows against the bed.

The large room she found herself in looked familiar. She'd woken up there before, though only once. *Actually, when was that?* She wracked her brains for that seemingly distant memory, then shook her head.

The ceiling was bright green, and the furniture inside the spacious room was all high quality. She stretched her neck, trying to look out the window.

At that moment, the bedroom door opened.

The woman who opened the door and poked her head inside was someone she knew well. Shizuku cocked her head to the side and called out her name.

"Yura?"

"Nea, Vivia!"

Yura was so surprised to see Shizuku awake that she dropped the iron water jug in her hands. Despite her shock, she ran over and hugged Shizuku around the neck.

She could hear Yura sobbing in her ear. She was whispering, too, although her speech was broken up. Her words express just how deeply worried she'd been, but when Shizuku heard them, she let out a voiceless sigh.

She'd known what was coming, but now that it had happened, the sadness of it came over her like a wave.

She couldn't understand what people were saying anymore.

Shizuku silently started to cry. Yura rose to her feet and shot her a puzzled look. She kept speaking to Shizuku, but as soon as she realized her friend wasn't going to calm down, she used gestures to tell her to wait. Yura immediately picked up the jug of water and rushed out of the room. Shortly after, there was a knock on the door, and another person appeared.

It was a man with deep-blue eyes, dressed in mage's attire.

This man, who'd spent the most time with Shizuku in this world, had a soft but sorrowful look in his eyes.

"…Erik."

"Vivia," Erik replied.

The word didn't ring a bell. Shizuku scrunched up her face, and Erik cocked his head in confusion. He thought to himself for a moment, trying to retrieve a memory, then walked over next to her.

"*Shizuku*."

That was all he said, but it made Shizuku's eyes widen in surprise. She muttered a response, not bothering to wipe the tears away that were pouring down her face.

"…You…remembered. You remembered my name…"

She didn't say anything else.

There was nothing more she *could* say.

Erik sat down beside her, a serious look on his face. He combed his fingers through Shizuku's messy bangs.

They might not be able to communicate or understand what the other was saying, but his warmth remained the same. It hadn't gone anywhere.

They hadn’t lost their connection. It had been there waiting for her.

A wave of relief washed over her, and everything she’d been holding back came pouring out.

Shizuku let out her stifled voice and cried as she clung to Erik.

“I-I’m so sorry…”

She buried her face in his chest like a child, her shoulders shaking as she cried. Erik smiled slightly, then quietly stroked her head.

※

“What does Vivia mean?”

As soon as Shizuku was given a pen and paper, she’d used a mixture of English and his world’s common language to ask Erik this question.

She made this her first question not only because it was a simple question to phrase, but also because everyone who had come to visit her had been using that word.

Erik’s answer was somewhat expected. He wrote down the kanji character for *“Shizuku.”*

“Vivia” must have meant “Shizuku” in this world’s language. When they first met, Shizuku had introduced herself as “Shizuku Minase.” Erik had remarked that this was an unusual name, so she’d taken another approach, explaining that her name meant “water droplet.”

On reflection, he must have been calling her “Vivia” ever since, and it had just sounded like “Shizuku” to her ears.

That said, Erik hadn’t forgotten the name she’d introduced herself with. Hearing him call her “Shizuku” was strange and unfamiliar, and the sound of it made her feel shy.

The next thing she wanted to know was how she’d managed to survive.

She couldn’t understand the language people were speaking anymore, which suggested that the cursed artifact was gone. In fact, she couldn’t sense its presence within her, even when she focused

her undivided attention on it. She puzzled over how to ask this question, trying her hardest to piece together an English sentence, and when Erik noticed her distress, he gave her a piece of notepaper.

On it was a short sentence, written in English.

When Shizuku grasped what it meant, her eyes widened. She automatically looked up and met Erik's gaze.

It was a phrase that signaled the end of her long journey.

"You can go back to your own world."

It took a long time for Shizuku to gather the whole story from Erik's written explanations.

It was already a complex sequence of events, and it took a long time to decode words when one of them was struggling to understand.

Eventually, though, Shizuku grasped that the artifact had reached its limit before she could die. She'd nearly been killed on impact when she'd slammed against the ground, and although the cursed artifact had tried to regenerate her body, her injuries were too severe. Weakened by Akashia's blade, it had exhausted its power halfway through the process.

Shizuku was at death's door, but someone had managed to heal her just in time: Lyshien.

"I knew that voice sounded like Lyshien…"

Immediately before she lost consciousness, Shizuku had heard someone say, "I believe in your freedom." That person had turned out to be Lyshien. Shizuku had believed in Lyshien's freedom when their paths had crossed earlier in her travels, and Lyshien returned to help Shizuku in her time of need. It was an incredible stroke of luck.

Erik nodded and expanded on his explanation.

"The truth is, Lyshien and Oscar possess an artifact capable of countering the interlopers' cursed artifact."

This was the "cursed artifact created by this world to counter that

of the interlopers" that Lars had mentioned before. Lyshien and her protector, Oscar, were currently able to wield its power and had arrived at the scene of the battle after receiving a message from Oltovine. From there, they'd rushed over to Shizuku, who'd fallen from the tower.

Come to think of it, Lyshien's huge vast magical power did meet the conditions to wield the opposing cursed artifact. Maybe Shizuku should have looked into that sooner.

"Had you already realized that about Lyshien and Oscar, Erik?"

Erik had previously asked Niké and Shizuku if they knew how to get in touch with Lyshien, but it turned out she'd only given her contact details to Oltovine, the king of Rozsark, who'd annexed her homeland, Anneli. If they'd been able to reach her earlier, things might have ended differently.

Erik shook his head in response to Shizuku's question.

"I wasn't entirely convinced, but there was a portrait of two people who looked a lot like them sandwiched between the pages of that book. I contemplated what it could mean, but eventually concluded it might be a warning, telling people to watch out for the two people capable of destroying the book."

The pair, often referred to as "The Deviators," were believed to possess power on an otherworldly scale in the form of this world's cursed artifact. With enough study and experimentation, they should be able to create a "hole" leading to Shizuku's old world, like the one the cursed artifact's core had created.

"Still, Lyshien is unreliable in terms of technique, and she's the person that really matters. I think the princess and I should analyze the data the Deviators have accumulated so far and construct a spell that will open up a hole that Lyshien can then use."

"That…sounds like a ton of effort. I'm sorry."

Shizuku had said this in Japanese, but Erik seemed to get the gist. He patted her shoulder as if to say, "Don't worry about it."

As he was rising to his feet, the door opened, and two new people stepped inside. It was Lyshien and her protector Oscar, the very people they'd just been talking about.

Lyshien's face lit up as soon as she saw Shizuku, and she ran over

to hug her. Although Shizuku couldn't understand what Lyshien was saying, her joy was obvious. Shizuku wasn't sure what to say…so she simply thanked her in Japanese.

When she looked over at Oscar, he bowed his head and spoke. Shizuku couldn't understand what he was saying, either, but she immediately knew what he meant. Shizuku had come to this world because Oscar had defeated the immortal toad in the desert. The cursed artifact inside of her had remembered that. That's why she'd felt unwell and fainted when she first met Oscar. She'd wanted nothing more than to flee from him as quickly as possible.

Shizuku smiled at the apologetic man in front of her.

"Please, don't apologize. I've…been through a lot since arriving in this world, but I don't regret it. In fact, I'm glad I came."

If she hadn't encountered the portal that fateful day, she never would have met the people of this world.

The path she'd walked was by no means an easy one. She'd suffered pain and hardship. And yet, she was happy with where she'd ended up.

Shizuku had learned a lot over the course of her travels. She'd met people, discovered how complex they were, and uncovered her own identity. She felt no regret whatsoever.

"Actually, I want to thank you for saving me. Really… Thank you."

She bowed deeply, then penned a thank-you note on a piece of paper.

The simple sentence, written in the continent's common language, didn't contain everything she wanted to say, but it seemed to get across her appreciation. Once again, Lyshien wrapped her arms tightly around Shizuku's neck, and Oscar pried her off with an awkward smile.

Once Oscar had left, carrying Lyshien under his arm, Erik wrote Shizuku a note saying, *"Get some rest,"* and made his way out. As soon as he'd gone, Mea came in and took his place. Shizuku didn't have an appetite, but her assistant demon arranged some sliced fruit on a plate for her nonetheless.

As Shizuku was picking up a piece, the words "thank you" slipped out of her mouth. Mea's confused reaction made Shizuku's heart

ache.

People couldn't even understand the simplest of her statements anymore. The realization dampened her spirits.

Nevertheless, Shizuku smiled warmly at Mea, hoping to convey her feelings to the girl, who wasn't very good at reading or writing. Picking up a piece of deugo, she let out a sigh.

"I guess I'll have to learn how you pronounce things," she said to herself.

Shizuku hadn't needed to understand how the common language was pronounced because the cursed artifact had always translated it for her automatically. She muttered this comment without thinking—but then, she remembered something that made her fall silent.

There was a chance she could return to her old world soon.

If she did, she'd never use this world's language again. Even if it took a little effort, she could already communicate through simple written messages, so she didn't need to go out of her way to learn the pronunciation.

"I'll get to go home…"

It didn't feel real yet. Shizuku gazed intently down at her hands.

That night, she took out her cell phone for the first time in a long while and reread every single message saved on it.

※

Shizuku didn't really understand magical spell configurations.

As a result, she ended up killing time in her room while Erik and Leuticia were busy studying the "hole." She tried reading books since she had nothing better to do, but nothing would register. It felt like her thoughts were racing, leaving an indelible mark on her mind.

Just as she was beginning to toy with the idea of taking a walk to clear her head, she heard a small knock—Lyshien. The young girl showed Shizuku the bundle of cards and the notebook she was holding, then spread them out on the desk. Shizuku was shocked to see the flashcards she'd made after such a long time.

"Oh, those…"

Lyshien was holding a writing practice book designed for children, and she eagerly tried to say something to a wide-eyed Shizuku. It was a challenge to communicate with Lyshien, since she wasn't very good at writing, but it seemed she wanted to study with Shizuku. After spending so long in confinement, she still had trouble with reading and writing herself.

"Oh, right! This might work perfectly!"

Shizuku didn't know how words were pronounced, and Lyshien was terrible at writing. They had completely different skills, but once they'd spread some flashcards and picture books out on the table, they started comparing what they knew. Lyshien watched intently as Shizuku drew pictures, calling out the names of what was depicted. Shizuku wrote down characters from the common language, recording their pronunciations along the way, while Lyshien transcribed what she'd written.

They kept studying, mixing in games as they swapped knowledge with one another. This continued until the evening, when Oscar came to take Lyshien away. When they showed him the notebook that contained the fruits of their learning, he smiled. *"I hope you'll hang out with her again,"* he wrote down, then showed it to Shizuku.

Oscar was helping Erik and Leuticia, so he wouldn't be able to keep an eye on Lyshien while they were working on the unknown spell. Given that he was spending his time researching a way to send her home, Shizuku immediately agreed to take care of Lyshien.

Beginning the next day, they began spending half the day together.

※

"We could hold back a little, you know."

The princess's exasperated remark made Erik raise an eyebrow. He looked at the crystal ball set in the center of the round table.

The magic implement Erik had used to borrow Leuticia's magical power had been destroyed in the castle, meaning his body had returned to its original state with little magical power to utilize.

Not only did this make it impossible for him to construct and demonstrate spell configurations, but the diagrams he drew were also devastatingly hard to comprehend. For those reasons, he was using a crystal ball containing magical power to experiment with different spells.

As he was dismantling the spell he'd assembled using the Deviators' notes, Erik took a sip of his tea and responded to Leuticia in an uncharacteristically sharp tone.

"Why would we do that? I don't understand."

"If we complete the spell, Vivia will end up going home. Are you okay with that?"

"If the spell's not up to scratch, she could fall between the two worlds. What would we do then?"

"…Good point."

"So don't hold back anything."

This pair were the best spellcrafters in Farsas, the nation at the forefront of spell technology.

After that exchange, they immersed themselves in trying out different spells once again. About thirty minutes later, however, Leuticia looked back up.

"Aren't you going to stop her from leaving?"

Erik didn't answer right away.

The better part of a minute went by. Once the steam had stopped rising from his tea, Erik began to speak in a flat tone of voice.

"She wouldn't be happy, staying in a world where she can't even understand the language."

It was hard to tell to what extent this response reflected his true feelings.

Still, there was definitely a hint of truth in his statement.

The princess let out a sigh and picked up a pen to make a note of the spell they'd tested out.

Only Shizuku could decide what made her happy and what choices she was willing to make. She wasn't supposed to be in this world to begin with—both Leuticia and Erik knew that. So neither of them said a word.

Erik took a sip from his tea, which had since gone cold, and let

out a raspy breath.

The pale moon had appeared in the sky outside the window.

※

Ortea visited Shizuku four days after she regained consciousness.

The queen had been busy dealing with the aftermath of the events that had occurred, and she silently entered the room, then glared at her as Shizuku hurried to her feet.

Without saying a word, she slapped Shizuku across the face.

This satisfying sound echoed throughout the room. Lars, who'd brought Ortea to see Shizuku, chuckled from his spot in the doorway.

"P-Princess…"

"You fool! Can't you stay true to your word?! You said you'd come back. What did you think you were doing?!"

The moment Ortea opened her mouth, a torrent of fury came rushing out. Shizuku couldn't understand what Ortea was saying, but she could tell she was being scolded. And since Lars had brought Ortea with him, he'd probably given her a brief summary of what had transpired. Shizuku kept hearing the same word over and over again and, figuring Ortea was calling her a fool, she lowered her head repentantly.

"I-I'm sorry, Princess…"

"A simple apology isn't going to cut it, you fool!"

Shizuku's faltering attempt at an apology in the continent's common language brought a scowl to Ortea's beautiful face.

Shizuku had seen Ortea's raw emotions several times before. The look in her eyes threw Shizuku into a fluster, leaving her at a total loss.

This sudden turn of events had made Lyshien's eyes widen in shock.

"Come on. I'll play with you," Lars said, beckoning her over.

Once the door closed behind them and Ortea and Shizuku were left alone in the room, the queen fell silent. It was as if she'd never

been angry at all. She stared at Shizuku, looking somewhat helpless.

"Are you going home?"

She was asking Shizuku a question. Recognizing the word for "home," Shizuku gulped.

She *was* going home. She was going back to her old world, never to return again.

There was nothing strange about going home. It was the reason she'd been traveling for so long.

She missed her family. She wanted to speak to her friends.

That wish had stayed with her, and yet she couldn't bring herself to confirm Ortea's suspicions.

Ortea stared at the silent girl in front of her, then extended her slender arms.

"You *are* going home…"

The warmth of Ortea's embrace made Shizuku want to cry even more. That was a testament to how much Shizuku loved her.

Shizuku buried her face in Ortea's shoulder and closed her eyes.

She might not have the opportunity to see the queen again, but she'd never forget her.

She'd remain in Shizuku's memory forever. That was a promise she could make with confidence.

"I love you…Princess."

Ortea didn't understand what Shizuku had said.

Shizuku couldn't understand what Ortea was saying, either.

Despite this, she had faith that they could understand each other on some level, and a single tear slid down Shizuku's cheek.

※

"Complex" didn't even begin to describe the spell detailed in the Deviators' files. It was nothing short of overwhelming.

It had been a week since Erik and his companions had begun constructing a spell to create a portal with the help of these notes, presumably penned in an attempt to cross over to another world.

Erik had been devoting nearly every waking hour to these

experiments. Late one night, on his way back from the laboratory, he caught sight of Shizuku sitting in a cloister of the second floor.

Bathed only in the blue hue of moonlight and the contrasting shadows, the world seemed muted—making Shizuku in her white nightclothes especially conspicuous. She was sitting on the railing, looking up at the sky.

What was she doing outside of her room this late at night? Before Erik could ask this question, he found himself wondering what she was looking at. He followed her dark gaze up toward the sky.

"The moon… Beautiful."

These words fell softly from Shizuku's lips. Alarmed by her unexpected comment, Erik looked back at her, only to find that she'd turned her gaze toward him. A serene smile appeared on her shadowed face.

"Were you looking at the moon? You're going to catch a cold."

"Catch a cold?"

It appeared that Shizuku hadn't understood his second sentence. The way she repeated his words like a child made him smile awkwardly. He walked over to her and lifted her small body up.

"Also, you shouldn't be sitting in a place like this. If you fall, you'll hurt yourself."

"Sorry…"

This time, Shizuku seemed to know she was being chastised. When she lowered her head and apologized, Erik almost burst out laughing.

The first words Shizuku had learned after losing the ability to understand his language had been "thank you" and "sorry." This seemed to exemplify her personality perfectly, which he found funny. Come to think of it, she'd always apologized a lot, even during their travels.

"You'll get to go home soon, so I don't want you catching a cold or injuring yourself. Be more careful."

"Go home?"

It evoked some sort of emotion in Erik when she whispered parts of his sentence back to him, but he couldn't figure out what. Erik erased the expression from his face and began walking down the

corridor, holding her in his arms.

Her dark eyes widened in surprise.

"I'm fine, Erik."

"You always claim to be fine."

"Claim?"

That word seemed to confuse her. Noticing the frown on her face, Erik clarified himself.

"You're just saying you're fine."

In an instant, the look on her face grew troubled.

Erik had grown accustomed to using higher-level vocabulary when Shizuku had understood what he was saying.

When he talked to her, he built sentences using whichever parts of his boundless vocabulary he preferred.

Now, though, that wasn't an option. Every single word frustrated Shizuku, which quite deterred him from speaking.

When he simplified what he was saying, it felt like he was revealing something he shouldn't be, so naturally, he chose to stay silent.

After turning two corners in the corridor, Shizuku's room came into view.

Once they reached the door, Shizuku took the key out of her pocket and unlocked it. Erik lowered her to the ground.

"Thank you," she said.

"No problem," he replied.

"Good night."

"Night."

Erik patted her shoulder, then turned back around. He'd only walked a few steps when he heard Shizuku's voice again.

She was making a quiet plea in a language from outside his world.

When Erik turned around, she looked as if she was trying to say something.

In that instant, everything else was still, and a deathly silence

hung in the air.

It was a moment they'd only have now, yet Shizuku said nothing more.

Erik forced a subtle smile, then continued walking away.

Three days later, they completed the spell configuration.

※

"I barely have any luggage!" Shizuku couldn't help but yell, having stuffed all her belongings into her bag. It was the first time she'd had to pack her things in a while, and Mea tilted her head quizzically by her side.

In reality, though, Shizuku had nothing to take home from this world. Once she'd sorted through her stuff, she was left with nothing but what she'd been bringing home from university.

Shizuku slung her bag over her shoulder and left the room. Mea had turned back into a little bird, and she was perched on Shizuku's shoulder. She gently stroked the bird's vivid green body with her fingers.

At first, Shizuku had intended to take Mea with her, but both Erik and Leuticia had put a stop to that idea. They warned her that taking a demon with her could lead to unforeseen consequences, since the structure of Shizuku's world was so different. They also pointed out that Shizuku and Mea could no longer communicate, making it hard to utilize her assistant demon.

Having to say goodbye to Mea weighed heavily on her, but she understood the reasoning behind their advice. Once Shizuku was gone, Erik would become Mea's master, as specified in her contract.

Shizuku lovingly stroked the small bird's back over and over again.

As Shizuku made her way to the office where they were supposed to meet, she spotted Erik coming from the other direction. He seemed to say something about how he'd been coming to get her. He approached her, and they walked down the hallway side by side.

The weather outside was pleasant. Beams of sunlight a little too warm to describe as gentle poured down from above, and a calm breeze drifted through the air.

Shizuku gazed at the greenery through the window, then came to a sudden halt.

"Oh! Right!"

"What's the matter?"

"We should take a photo! A photo!"

"*Photo*."

Erik, who had a good memory, seemed to remember what that word meant. Shizuku got her phone out, and he gave her an awkward smile. She grabbed a court lady who happened to be passing by and asked her to take the picture for them.

Having suddenly been handed an unfamiliar device and asked for a favor in a language she'd never heard before, the court lady looked startled. Erik, who'd more or less figured out what Shizuku wanted, stepped in to provide an explanation, and the woman nodded and got the small screen ready.

"Whoa, I feel like I'm being reckless because I'm about to leave. Sorry."

The court lady was definitely bewildered by the situation, but she didn't let it show on her face. Impressed by her composure, Shizuku stood next to Erik by the window. With a slightly bashful smile on her face, she waited for the shutter sound.

That photo would be preserved on the small screen of her phone, but even without it, she'd never be able to forget this faraway world and its people.

Her refusal to let her memories fade would keep them alive forever, right up until the day she died.

When Shizuku got her phone back and looked at the screen, she laughed at how they looked. She showed it to Erik and shared her honest thoughts.

"It feels so strange to have a photo of us!"

"I wonder how that thing works. The fact that it's not magic makes it even more bizarre."

The pair had a somewhat disjointed conversation in their

respective languages, and Shizuku carefully put her phone and the photo on it back in her bag. Shortly thereafter, the pair arrived at the office. The four other people who would witness Shizuku's departure were already there.

The royal siblings and the two Deviators were the only people in the castle who knew Shizuku was from another world.

Ortea had chosen not to come, saying that she'd only get angry. Lars, however, had argued that she was really just afraid of crying. Both reasons seemed plausible to Shizuku.

After checking that everything was ready, Leuticia opened a teleportation gate.

It had been a year, but the desert was just as hot as Shizuku remembered.

The blistering wind whipped up the dry sand, creating elegant patterns on the pale ground.

Beneath the blazing sky, which felt like it was going to burn them, the group climbed onto the dragon and adjusted their coordinates. The creature was even bigger than the last time she'd seen it.

Shizuku gazed down at the large shadow it was casting on the distant sand.

"It…feels weird to be riding the dragon I looked up at back then."

"If you lean that far forward, you'll fall off."

"Heights don't bother me anymore. I had to force myself to get used to them."

Shizuku murmured words only she could understand, holding down her hair as it whipped in the breeze.

It had all begun when she'd appeared in that desert.

It was hard to determine whether the journey to get back here had been long or short.

"Oh, I think it was around here."

Shizuku pointed at the shadow of some low foliage far below her. The spot where they opened the portal would determine where in her old world she'd reappear, so she needed to be precise.

Concerned about the realistic possibility of teleporting right into the middle of a road, she dismounted the dragon and stepped onto the sand.

She surveyed her surroundings, checking whether the scenery looked familiar.

"Yeah. I think this is the place… It has to be."

"We can always adjust the position slightly. We can check it once it's open."

She didn't understand what Erik was saying, but he was probably telling her not to worry. That said, Erik never said anything irresponsible. Perhaps he was saying something more practical.

Shizuku forced a smile and nodded. Once she'd stepped away from that spot, everyone but Lars began to chant, focusing on the empty space.

It was a truly bizarre sight. Come to think of it, she'd never understood the words people chanted. Automatic translation probably didn't work on incantations, as they were too closely linked with this world.

As Shizuku was absentmindedly waiting, the king quietly spoke up. "You can stay, you know."

"King Lars?"

Was he telling her to go and come back once she'd rid the world of carrots?

Shizuku settled on saying, "Don't be so ridiculous."

The two fell silent so they wouldn't get sand in their mouths and continued to watch the incantation.

As each moment passed, the hot sand danced in the wind, slowly changing shape.

This was the perfect metaphor for how the continent's language would gradually evolve.

When would the changes Shizuku had set in motion become apparent? In ten years? A hundred? Even longer? For a moment, Shizuku's thoughts drifted to the future of the continent that had had its language disrupted.

She was still a little unsure whether she'd done the right thing.

Still, she was the only person who actually understood the

freedom of language, so she decided to believe that it would be fine.

Thoughts transformed into words, and words shaped thoughts.

Those two elements intertwined as they grew and evolved, reflecting the emotions people wished to convey.

The chanting stopped.

Shizuku felt a weird tickling sensation inside her ears. It was as if the air pressure had shifted.

She watched with bated breath as a hole appeared in the empty space in front of her.

Unlike the portal she'd traveled through when she first came to this world, this hole let you see through to the other side, just like a teleportation gate.

Through it, she saw a familiar place. Shizuku caught her breath.

The surface of the portal shimmered, as if there was a veil of water covering it. Behind that thin film, she could see the street where she'd vanished that fateful day.

It was the same path she'd taken every day for four months on her way to university. The nostalgic vision of the Japanese street tugged at her heartstrings. Drawn toward it, she walked across the sand and positioned herself in front of it.

"It's…really Japan."

How much time had passed on the other side of that portal?

Everybody must have been worried sick. Her older sister had likely cried her eyes out. Her younger sister had probably been furious.

When she got back, she'd head straight home to apologize to her family. She'd need to apologize to her friends and the university, too. She had to give her books back to the college…

All of a sudden, her thoughts overwhelmed her. Struck by homesickness, Shizuku looked behind her, feeling a dull ache in her chest. She bowed at every person who'd helped create this opportunity for her.

"Thank you so much. I'm so happy."

Shizuku's statement was hesitant but sincere.

Oscar smiled and waved at her. Lyshien looked a little sad but reciprocated Shizuku's smile and bowed her head.

"Take care," replied Leuticia, a regretful look in her eyes.

"Don't act too recklessly," her brother said simply.

Lastly, Shizuku looked up at Erik.

"Good luck."

He gently patted her on the shoulder.

She loved how kind he was. It had been her salvation on numerous occasions.

He'd given her so much… She wasn't even sure if she'd repaid half of it. Shizuku bowed in his direction once again.

Mea fluttered over to Erik's shoulder, and Shizuku whispered "Thank you" to the small green bird.

When all was said and done, fate was something that individuals had the power to control.

Shizuku had arrived at the ending that she'd chosen for herself.

Shizuku turned back toward the hole, holding onto her bag. She took a deep breath, inhaling the dry air and wind of this magical world.

She loved this world and the people who lived here so much that she wanted to take every person she'd met by the hand and thank them individually.

She loved herself, too. The person she'd become only existed because she'd arrived in this world. She'd become her own unique person.

The person she'd grown into wasn't all bad. She was stubborn, reckless, and often a nuisance to those around her, but she'd also refused to surrender the things she was unwilling to give up. She was a little proud of that.

Shizuku gripped firmly onto her bag.

She felt no hesitation.

It was there somewhere, but she couldn't feel it. Convinced that

she was confident about her decision, she looked ahead.

She'd made plenty of monumental steps throughout her journey, and that trend only appeared to be continuing. She released all the air in her lungs.

"*Shizuku*."

The booming voice made Shizuku turn around. She gazed at the man who never said very much.

Erik wasn't going to repeat the words he'd uttered in the freezing castle. If he did, something would change, so instead he'd keep those words to himself until the very end.

Shizuku smiled and bowed. Then she took a step toward the hole, reaching out the hand she was carrying her bag with.

※

She'd been carrying that bag with her for so long.

Erik watched in silence as her battered bag, worn out by its extensive travels, passed through the hole. With that, it landed on the asphalt on the other side of the portal, from which no sound could be heard.

At that moment, Erik opened his mouth.

"…*Shizuku*."

His whispered words fell from his mouth like droplets onto the patterns in the sand beneath him.

"You…really…"

A powerful gust of wind came rushing through the air.

The spell the four individuals had created faded away and vanished, as if it had fulfilled its purpose.

Nothing was left in its wake.

Squinting in the scalding sunlight, Shizuku looked behind her.

"I know this is insulting to my parents, but it's this world that shaped me into the person I am today."

Shizuku had thrown her bag, packed with all her belongings, into her old world.

With a troubled yet determined expression on her face, she

timidly extended her hand to her speechless friend.

"So teach me your language."

With that, the pair's journey came to an end.

The name Shizuku Minase would not be recorded anywhere in the history of the continent.

However, one scholar's name was referred to in historical accounts surrounding the beginning of a particular era. Heralded as the Era of Great Change, it followed the loss of innate language skills.

Known in records as Vivia Babel, the woman was noted for her role in establishing language acquisition methods in early childhood, as well as for being the author of several dozen picture books, quietly making her mark in the annals of history.

As she stood in the desert where it had all begun, Shizuku smiled.

Erik took hold of her outstretched hand.

"You always surprise us, don't you?"

"Erik?"

"Deciding to live in a world where you don't understand the language…"

Refusing to finish his sentence, Erik smiled.

He met her gaze, his eyes full of earnest, warm passion.

As he held the hand of the girl who'd never given up, he replied to her earlier statement.

"It would be my pleasure to teach you. I'll be strict with you, though."

"Strict?"

"You'll have to work really hard."

History did not speak of the journey the girl and the mage embarked on, nor did it reveal what happened in the end. It was a

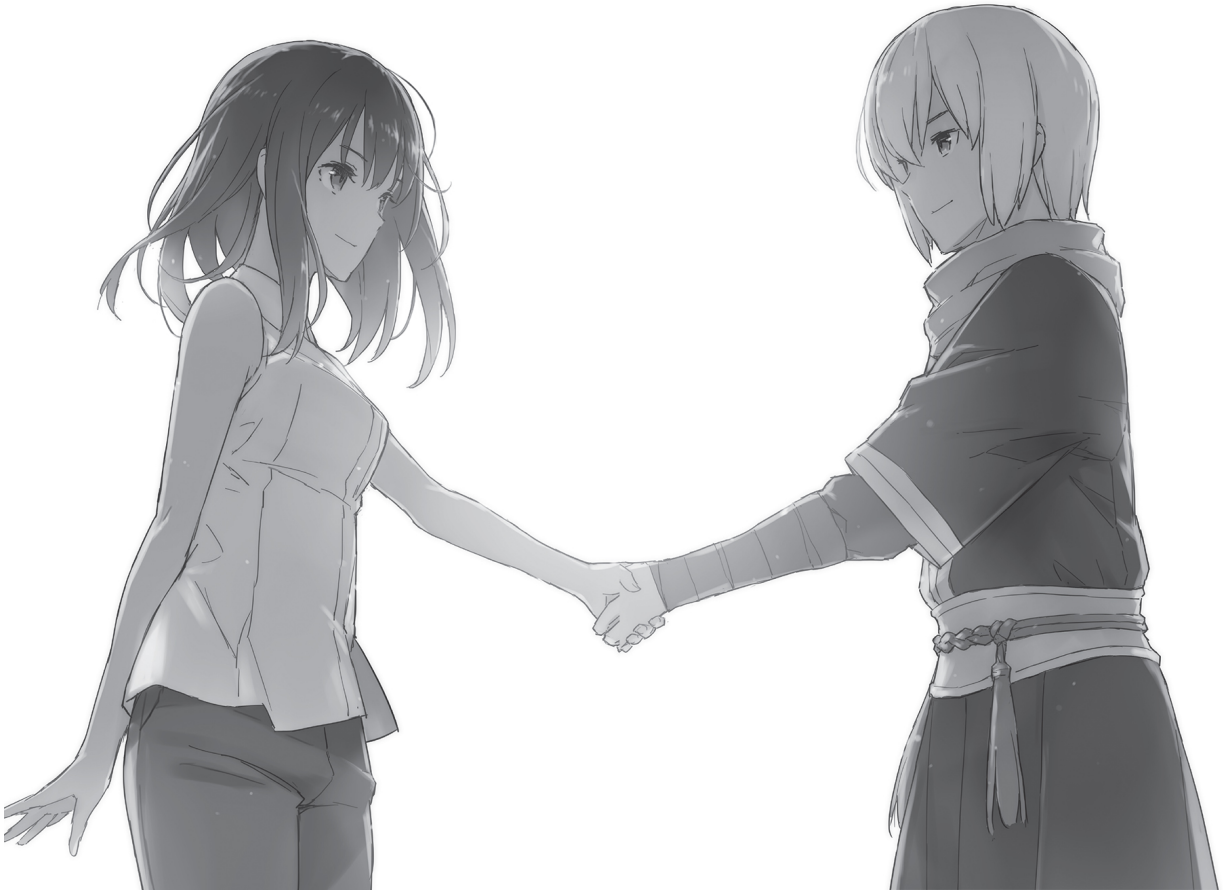
tale unknown to the people of the continent.

With the struggles and change that swept across continent firmly behind them, the pair peacefully made their way back, side by side.

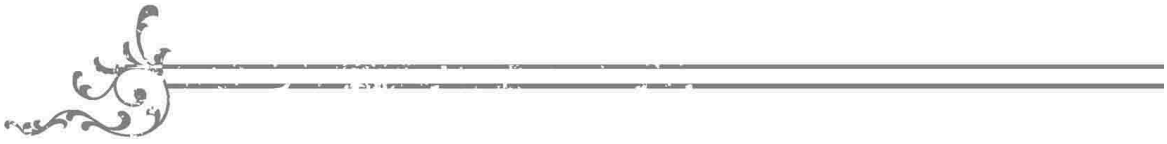
They exchanged words, sharing their feelings with one another.

The final book that Shizuku would draw, depicting her happy life, would go on to be shared with children for generations to come.

THE END



Afterword



Thanks for reading. This is Kuji Furumiya.

Thank you so much for picking up a copy of *Babel*, Volume 4, the final volume of the series.

Shizuku's journey, which lasted around a year, comes to an end here. As the subtitle suggests, this marks the dawn of a new era. How has our powerless protagonist changed over the course of her travels, and what sort of choices has she made? It makes me happy for you to be able to see the story through to its end.

The story of the continent's language has also come to a close, but I think there are still a few mysteries that weren't related to the main plot. There's the mystery of the sudden appearance and disappearance of an army during the war two hundred and forty years earlier—the incident that motivated Erik and Shizuku to start their journey in the first place. We also don't know exactly why Farsas retracted information related to this event or the details the oral tradition passed down through the Farsasian royal family encouraging them to exterminate interlopers. These stories are told in the six volumes of *Unnamed Memory* and its sequel, so I hope that those of you who are interested in not only Shizuku's journey, but also this world and the fight against the interlopers' cursed artifacts, will take a look at those.

Now I'd like to take this opportunity to thank a few people.

As always, I'm incredibly grateful to my editors. I'm sorry for

making every volume so thick. I couldn't have concluded this story in four acts if it wasn't for you two. The publication of these books, alongside *Unnamed Memory*, came about so quickly. Thank you so very much.

I'd also like to thank Haruyuki Morisawa for beautifully illustrating this *isekai* fantasy series with so much emotion. I was truly fortunate to get to see the world you portrayed on such a large scale. I am extremely grateful that you, once again, kindly accepted this job and conveyed Shizuku's transformation and growth so vividly. Thank you so much.

Lastly, I'd like to extend my gratitude to all the readers who've joined me on this journey.

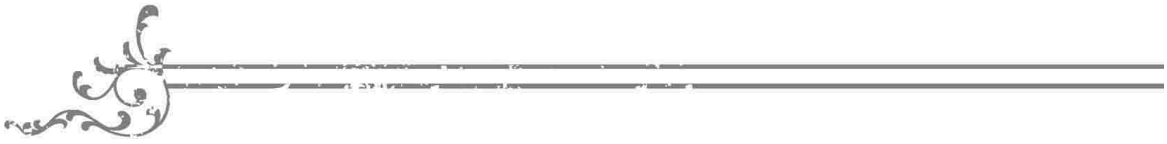
I couldn't have completed this story if it wasn't for your support. Thanks to you, I came fifth place in the paperback category of *This Light Novel is Amazing! 2021* published by Takarajimasha.

There has always been a wide variety of stories about teleporting to another world, but I hope that this one, with its focus on language and the growth of an ordinary person without powers of their own, will retain a place in your memory.

I hope we can meet again in another era, on another continent, or on someone else's journey. Thank you so much for reading!

Kuji Furumiya

The Letter



One year ago, Umi's sister had suddenly gone missing. At the beginning of July, the police had gotten in touch to say they'd located a bag believed to be hers.

Umi's younger sister, Shizuku, had always been strong-willed—she'd just never let anybody see it. Umi saw her as more levelheaded than herself, and more relaxed than their youngest sister, Mio. She also took a long time choosing the best course of action, which Umi found a little too neurotic.

So when Umi had heard she was gone, her immediate thought was *Oh no, she's gotten dragged into something bad*. Shizuku would never disappear without contacting her family, as long as she was able to do so. Her parents and her other sister seemed to feel the same way, because they never gave up, even when the search concluded that no foul play had been involved in her disappearance.

They were stuck for clues when her bag happened to turn up. Inside it were several books, a diary, some random belongings, her phone, and last of all, a letter addressed to her family.

"If you're reading this letter, then I've decided to stay where I am."

The letter was penned in beautiful handwriting. In it, Shizuku spoke of spending the past year visiting unfamiliar places and receiving help from the local people. She also mentioned that she felt it was important to see out the changes that would result from the decisions she'd made there.

Reading this, Umi felt oddly relieved.

"Shizuku… I'm happy for you."

She knew this day would come eventually. She'd thought the same thing when Shizuku left home to go to college. Out of the three sisters, Shizuku had always been the most independent, ever since she was a little girl. She'd grown up admiring her older sister and taking care of her younger sibling, so Umi always believed that she'd venture far from home to pursue her own goals someday.

That "someday" had come one summer day a year earlier, as well as today. After a year of struggling in her new world, Shizuku had chosen her path. She'd decided to stay in the world that she'd transformed.

Umi found that reassuring. She was still sad, but her happiness was greater. She'd always suspected that Shizuku was struggling to live the life she truly wanted to live. Now that her wish had come true, the least she could do was celebrate that. It was an older sister's prerogative to get to support this new chapter of her younger sister's life.

"I'm really sorry for making you worry and not being able to come home, but I wouldn't be the person I am today if it wasn't for you—my family. Thank you for giving me so much love. Thank you for being there."

"Thank *you* for being my little sister, Shizuku," whispered Umi.

The eighteen years they'd spent together had been a blessing. Umi loved her younger sisters way more than she loved herself.

A teardrop fell onto the letter she held open in her hands, causing the black ink to glisten.

"If I get another chance, I'll make sure to send you another message. I love you."

"Yeah. I'll be waiting."

After reading the letter again, Umi found a photo saved on Shizuku's phone and smiled.

Her hair had grown really long, and she was with an unfamiliar young man, looking incredibly happy.

※

"Princess, the trees I've been growing at home have fruit on them, so I picked a few and made some jam. I left it in the kitchen, so please try some when you decide to have a snack."

After skim-reading the letter penned in the continent's common language, Ortea looked up. The woman who'd written the letter was standing in front of her office desk, so Ortea gave her honest opinion.

"Okay. I'll eat them later. You've gotten much better at writing letters, too. Good work. This was no trouble to read."

"Thank you…very much, Princess."

"…Your conversational skills still need some work, though. But I can tell you're trying."

"I stuppying erry dee," Shizuku said.

"Wait, I can't even tell what you're saying," Ortea replied, bringing a troubled look to Shizuku's face.

She wrote the words *"I'm studying every day"* on a piece of paper and showed it to the queen. Ortea said the phrase slowly and clearly, and Shizuku mimicked her pronunciation several times, then puffed out her chest, brimming with unfounded confidence.

"I got it," she declared.

Her friend's performance brought an awkward smile to Ortea's face.

"Well, take it slowly. There are people who are willing to help you out."

It had been a year since the upheaval involving the witch. After losing the ability to understand people, Shizuku and Erik had lived together in Farsas Castle for a while, but they'd since returned to a town near Souit Desert where Shizuku was helping out while she learned the language. Occasionally, she came to hang out in Kisk, but she never stayed for very long.

Ortea, meanwhile, always looked forward to her simple conversations with her friend, who was learning more of the language with every day that went by.

"That reminds me. I heard that stupid king gave you a last name."

"Wad dib oo ear."

“Uh-uh.”

Ortea repeated her sentence using simpler words, writing the words on a piece of paper. When she showed it to Shizuku, she smiled awkwardly.

On their continent, last names were usually only granted to non-nobles when they’d accomplished something remarkable. Shizuku had probably received hers for her role in defeating the witch. When Ortea heard about it, she was annoyed, wishing that she’d been the one to give Shizuku a name. Still, as far as wedding gifts from the stupid king of Farsas went, it wasn’t a bad one. In fact, it might have been quite nice. The queen smiled and looked up at her friend.

“Vivia Babel, huh? That’s a great name,” she said. “Oh, here’s your wedding gift from me.”

Ortea took a flower-shaped hair ornament carved from a large crystal out of her desk drawer. It was enchanted with protective magic, so it was sure to keep Shizuku safe, even when she was away. Shizuku’s dark brown eyes widened.

“Princess… I’m very…happy. Thank you…so much.”

Just as Shizuku was accepting the gift, there was a knock at the office door. Someone must have come to fetch her. True enough, the person who’d acted as her protector for so long—now her husband—had arrived.

The newlyweds politely thanked Ortea, then started making their way back home.

After watching them leave, the queen returned to her work, feeling just as content as they were.

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