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Illustrator ARICO

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The
Reincarnated Prince
and the
Kingdom in Woe

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik



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Prologue: The Downpour, the Pre-Order, and the Accident

Amidst the roaring, off-season downpour, the sudden shriek of brakes and a car horn tore through the heavy rain, echoing through the downtown skyscrapers. A passerby turned in astonishment to find a car crashed into the guardrails, a feminine umbrella lying on the road, and a motionless woman on the ground beside the car.

The woman's name was Ryoko Hayakawa, an ordinary woman one might find anywhere. Her family consisted of her parents and two younger sisters; as the eldest, she'd developed a stronger sense of responsibility than most. Still, she had no talents to speak of and a thoroughly average appearance. The only thing that separated her from the average woman was her love of video games, comics, and novels that she cultivated from a young age and never outgrew. She preferred going to manga cafes over bars and put her efforts into video games rather than searching for a husband. She was such a hardcore otaku that she prioritized waiting in long lines at the comic market for merch over enjoying the beach during the summer. Before she knew it, her 30th birthday had come and gone.

"My boyfriend stays on the other side of the screen."

Hearing their oldest daughter say this with a straight face when asked about her prospects for marriage, her parents understood how hopeless she was. When some of her relatives asked the same question, she gave a sad smile, saying, "If only the man I love was alive..." She added a silent "in the real world" and covertly stuck her tongue out at them, only to meet her mother's fury a few days later. While her mother's fists took their toll on her, it came with the blessing of her relatives ceasing their aggressive attempts to set her up with someone.

This voluntary-spinster otaku, Ryoko, worked at the headquarters of a publicly traded company. Since her income was a little bit more than the

average for women her age, she'd taken out a mortgage and purchased a condo close to her parents' house in her late twenties, with an eye toward retirement. She had no intention of getting married nor any candidates for it in her life. She strived to pay off her mortgage as soon as possible and thought the condo would be a fine place to live if she ever did marry; if not, she could sell it off later in life. With her parents' retirement and her own at the back of her mind, she was enjoying the stress-free single life.

While she always put her hobbies first, her career was still rewarding. As she did her job and trained newcomers, she acquired the position of the office momma bear before she knew it. At times, she cried when her best apprentice was snatched up by another department, and at other times she struggled with being bounced between departments herself. Even though she was no more than a small cog in her company's machine, she felt fulfilled. She had no doubt that she could maintain her stable work-life balance until she retired. However, her ever-unchanging days came to an abrupt end.

The day before her 35th birthday, the weather was more like winter than fall. She emerged from her office after putting in some extra hours, only to be met with a downpour. The rain was cold, obtrusive, and very raucous as it tore at the ground.

"The forecast said it'd only be showers..."

With a sigh, Ryoko produced her favorite fold-up umbrella from her purse. The forecast had predicted a low chance of rain and only brief showers at worst. It could not have been more off the mark.

I could stop by somewhere for dinner to wait out the rain, but I can't afford to miss the thing... Stupid rain.

With an internal grumble, Ryoko let out another little sigh. This wasn't just the day before her 35th birthday; it was also the release day of a new female-led romance game she'd been anticipating for months—over six of them to be exact. If only she hadn't had to work late. Usually, she would have left as soon as the work day had ended, ignoring the pleading glances of her coworkers. But today, her boss had begged her to finish up a task. Her nature as a lowly office worker did not allow her to refuse.

No amount of regret would bring back the time she had lost, though. To snatch up her video game as soon as possible, and to increase her play time by even a minute, Ryoko popped her umbrella open and stepped out into the downpour.

She was headed to the game shop she'd frequented since high school. Despite the convenience of ordering video games online and having them delivered, she couldn't help but purchase and pre-order games at this store because of an acquaintance that worked there. She would chat about the new titles with Ryoko, and even held some titles that technically could not be pre-ordered. Even though society may frown upon a woman in her thirties buying some of these games, Ryoko had no shame or regret in doing so if it meant that she could dive into heated discussions with her favorite cashier.

"Woah, the light's changing, and it's changing fast!"

Ryoko muttered to herself, which happened more and more once she began living on her own. Any single woman living alone would find herself responding to a TV program aloud, surely. The crosswalk before her was the final obstacle to overcome before reaching her destination. The light took a very long time to change, and it would have been excruciating to wait for it in the cold and pouring rain. Besides, Ryoko's fold-up umbrella didn't have the strength to completely protect her from the downpour. The boots she just bought the other day, her favorite coat, and the expensive purse she had fallen in love with at first sight—they were all soaked by the rain at this point.

So, Ryoko began to run across the crosswalk as the walk sign began to blink. She'd made the wrong call. The lack of visibility and the video game she was about to play consuming all her thoughts had drastically reduced Ryoko's common sense and situational awareness. As soon as she stepped from the curb to the second white line of the crosswalk, a car horn tore through the sound of the rain. When she turned toward the noise, a blinding glare turned her vision to white. Then, she felt a dull impact and saw the sky and the ground interchange in slow-motion. With a final thud, the world disappeared.

Ryoko could hear the pouring rain and screams in the distance as if she was submerged in water. The sounds retreated farther and farther away.

I have to call the store to let her know that I can't pick the game up today...

After that thought crossed her mind, Ryoko's consciousness was snuffed out, as if someone had flipped a switch.

Ryoko Hayakawa's ordinary life had come to an unceremonious end via an automobile accident the day before her 35th birthday.

Chapter One: Reincarnation, Small Maple Leaves, and Squishy Cheeks

In an instant, the darkness faded away. Her vision flared up as if the lights had suddenly turned on, making Ryoko squint. As time passed and her vision started to focus, she could see that there was an unfamiliar, porridge-like dish before her and a spoon in her hand.

“Urgh!?”

With the grunt that escaped her lips, the spoon fell from Ryoko’s hand into the bowl, splashing the porridge onto her clothes. The spoon bounced out of the bowl and onto the table, leaving a trail of porridge on the otherwise spotless surface of wood. As Ryoko remained frozen, unable to grasp the situation, a woman’s quiet sigh reached her ears. Ryoko slowly turned toward the sound to find a woman in her twenties, her brown hair tied up in a bun, chuckling. Her large, slightly downturned brown eyes were adorable. Ryoko imagined that the average man would feel the urge to protect her.

Her movements were swift yet precise. She produced a napkin, wiping Ryoko’s face and clothes as she slid the porridge bowl away. After cleaning Ryoko up, she picked up the strewn spoon and placed both the spoon and the bowl onto the tray atop a nearby serving cart. Finally, she wiped away all of the spilled porridge.

“There! All clean,” she said with a smile. She knew that toddlers generally wanted to eat on their own but usually struggled to do so.

The cause of the mess on the table, on the other hand, Ryoko herself knew nothing about her current situation. It was like a lightning bolt out of the blue.

“Ur? Ura...? Urgh...?”

First of all, she couldn’t form any words. The only things that came out of her mouth were meaningless noises. When she tried to move, all she could manage was barely wiggling her arms or legs. Her hands and fingers didn’t move right.

Ryoko turned toward her right hand, only to find a pale, tiny, baby-like hand instead, opening and closing much more slowly than her brain commanded.

What's going on!? Is this a dream? Am I dreaming!? ...Wait, wait, wait. Let's stay cool, Ryoko. I'm a woman who's got what it takes.

Ryoko controlled her panic with this mantra. Her mother, incidentally, had always told her that anything she “had” was pointless without putting it into practice. Ryoko turned to her left. Another pale and tiny hand moved just as she commanded it, albeit just as sluggishly as her right.

Am I dreaming about the reincarnation fantasy comic I read? Or that one novel? I think I played a game like this, too.

Ryoko recalled the comics, novels, and video games she'd been into lately. A lot of them were in the reincarnation genre, where a high schooler would wake up one day in another world, for example. Romance would inevitably ensue with all the hotties inhabiting said fantasy world, of course. A reincarnated protagonist usually had unimaginably good looks, Olympian-level strength, or incredibly powerful magic... Sometimes a faithful childhood friend would take a leap of faith, or a stoic knight would struggle with his romantic feelings toward the protagonist, and even the villain could fall for them...

Making the villain fall for you was actually a lot of fun. There better be a sequel to that one... Wait, Ryoko. This isn't the time to dwell on sweet memories. This is a dream, remember!? I have to wake up and go get the game I pre-ordered...

Putting the breaks on her racing thoughts, she slapped her cheek with one tiny hand. She heard a flat *plap*, and she was greeted by the impression of a soft cheek. *Cheekums*, more like. Because that sounded softer.

It's so soft... These are bona-fide cheekums! They might be softer than my niece's.

Ryoko's family consisted of her parents and her two younger sisters. “Three's a crowd, especially with girls,” her parents used to say. The middle sister had married before Ryoko had a chance, and she already had a daughter. Ryoko's niece (and her parents' first grandchild) was as precious as an angel. Ryoko reminisced fondly of the times she and her sisters had to stop their parents

from spoiling her niece too rotten. Her niece had started elementary school that April and had been putting Ryoko's sister and her husband through the ringer by entering a sort of rebellious phase from growing up a little too fast, like many girls do. For some reason, though, Ryoko's niece never gave her aunt any trouble, other than throwing a tantrum because she wanted to stay over at her auntie's condo whenever she came over. It was only trouble because Ryoko had to hide all sorts of questionable "materials" that would lure her niece down the same rabbit hole she had gone down. Ryoko couldn't help but hope that her precious niece would not follow in her footsteps. If her niece should choose that path, however, she was the kind of auntie to fuel her obsession, full force.

"Now, now. What's the matter, Lord Herscherik?" the brown-haired woman asked with a smile.

This woman was the one who had just cleaned up the mess Ryoko had made. From the title she'd used, Ryoko guessed that the woman wasn't her birth mother.

"Ah..."

Ryoko tried to apologize, only to end up making some cute sounds. Sadly, she couldn't form words.

"Are you all done with your meal? Or are you still working on it?"

With that, the woman placed a steaming bowl that she must have just prepared onto the table. She took a scoop of the porridge with a clean spoon and blew on it a few times to cool it before bringing it to Ryoko's lips. It was a simple dish, like a rice porridge with sweet potatoes mixed in. Ryoko felt a sudden hunger for it and chomped at the spoon. The porridge itself was a little bland, but the potatoes were sweet with just the right amount of salt.

"Is it good? Do you like it?"

"Ugh!"

Ryoko tried to answer the woman but could still only make unintelligible baby sounds. But the woman seemed to understand since she scooped another spoonful of porridge and held it up to Ryoko's face. Just now realizing how hungry she was, Ryoko began taking one bite of porridge after another.

I'm like that baby bird I used to have...

It was a little weird comparing herself to a baby bird, but her hunger wouldn't let her stop eating. After cleaning out the bowl in a flash, an unmannerly burp escaped her mouth. The lady smiled and wiped Ryoko's mouth with a napkin before picking her up out of the baby chair and setting her onto the luscious carpet, placing a stuffed dog next to her.

It looks like Kuro.

The stuffed animal was a black dog, about as tall as her. It reminded Ryoko of the large black dog she had when she still lived with her parents. The dog was called Kuro, and it always obeyed Ryoko's orders. Ryoko gave the stuffed animal an experimental pet. The silky fur felt soothing to the touch, and she immediately liked it. In fact, maybe the woman had placed it here because it was the baby's favorite.

After watching the woman place the bowl onto the serving cart and wheel it away, Ryoko looked around the room. She was obviously not in her condo. In fact, the room was bigger than the entire floor plan of her condo combined. It had a medieval European style to it, like the ones described in fantasy novels. Come to think of it, Ryoko remembered that the woman who was just with her was wearing a maid's outfit she had often read about in these kinds of books, too. The room was wrapped in a calming emerald wallpaper and held a canopied bed. All the furniture was evidently well-crafted, even to the untrained eye. Ryoko couldn't help but make some calculations in her head to wonder how many months of her salary the shining leather sofa alone was worth. There was also a fireplace in the room with the portrait of a blond woman above it, painted in a pose similar to a world-famous painting by a particular Italian painter. She recalled a print of the painting that hung on the wall of the art room back in school, and some ghost stories that her classmates told about it.

I wonder if her eyes move at night...

The thought made her shudder. Ghost stories made her more than uncomfortable; she would have preferred death over living through one. Ryoko turned her head to look around some more but ended up losing her balance

and falling on her back. The expensive-feeling carpet protected her from any pain, comfortably embracing her as she fell. With warm rays of sunshine coming through the window that lead to the balcony, Ryoko could feel herself being lulled to sleep. Just when she felt the urge to take a nap, Ryoko came to her senses.

There's no time to nap!

Ryoko struggled to get up, rolling on her back. In her toddler body, she couldn't lift herself up using her abs alone. She might have had just as much difficulty in her original mid-thirties body with a pooch, though. She managed to push herself up and surveyed the room, only to yield no additional discoveries. She observed her own body once again: tiny hands, stubby arms and legs, a plump belly.

What a babe. Baby, that is.

Ryoko pondered.

What was I doing before I ended up here?

She crossed her shortened arms and frowned, trying to recall her memories from when she inhabited her original body.

I stayed late at the office, even though it was a release day. It was pouring rain when I left...

The off-season downpour and the blinking walk sign. The blaring horn. The white light. The sky and the ground. A dull thud. Screams... Then, darkness.

Oh, right.

Ryoko reached her cold, hard conclusion.

I died. In a car accident.

Ryoko accepted this fact; she had no other choice. Ryoko was reminded again that this was a common situation in many of the comics, novels, and video games she'd enjoyed. Some high school or college student in modern-day Japan dying from accident or illness, then being reborn into a fantasy world, carrying over the memories of their previous life... A reincarnation story. The protagonists of reincarnation fantasies would save (or conquer) the world,

enjoy a life full of romance, etc.

I didn't think I'd end up in some light novel situation. And in my thirties, no less...

Ryoko fell back onto the fluffy carpet. In this toddler body that she couldn't easily move, just sitting up was a workout.

...My mortgage is null and void, at least, now that I'm dead.

Looking up at the ceiling without focusing on anything, Ryoko recalled her previous life. People had always told her that she'd never know what life may bring, but she never expected she'd have to think back about what she'd left undone after her death.

The pre-order is automatically canceled since I didn't pick it up that day... Oh, but the cashier lady gave me such a nice call to tell me she'd saved a copy when I couldn't pick it up after working late, last time. Maybe she kept a copy for me again. I feel bad...

The cashier lady, whom she'd been acquainted with since high school, was the only non-family member she could show her true otaku colors around. She had always greeted her with a smile when she entered the store, so Ryoko always answered with a smile, too.

Speaking of, I've got a task at work that's due soon. I was going to input all the data tomorrow. I wonder if the newbie can handle it. I'm sure they'll help her with it. And there's a manual, too... Thank goodness I made that manual.

She'd jokingly told her apprentice, "I made you a cheat sheet in case I go AWOL or end up dead!" but she had never expected to *actually* end up dead.

I can only hope that my sisters wipe my hard drive before my parents look through it...

This was Ryoko's one and only regret in life. Her home computer contained all sorts of data that she couldn't allow anyone to find. This Pandora's Box contained X-rated materials, fanfiction, some emo poems from back in the day... If she could come back to life, she would erase them all with her own two hands.

I did tell my sisters to pour water on my computer and turn the power on to short it out after my death... And that I'd haunt them if they peeked. It should be fine... It will be fine... Please, sisters, I beg you. I'd rather die than... Well, I'm already dead, but I can't haunt them now that I'm reincarnated!

Now, Ryoko began to resent the strangest elements of her death.

Right. I can't watch the TV shows I've recorded, either.

With how busy she was at work, her pile of unwatched recordings of TV shows was constantly maxing out her DVR. She always forgot to watch them on the weekends and often had to make the difficult decision to delete an entire season, unwatched.

I was going back home this weekend, too. They always get me a cake. I wish I could have had it.

Perhaps out of concern for their still single daughter, Ryoko's parents had made sure to invite her back to their home at least once a month, whether it was for Christmas, family birthdays, or just because. After her sisters got married, it was rare for all five of them to be back at the house together, but they had planned to all come for Ryoko's birthday party.

I was going to buy some good ice cream for all of us...

Then, she realized. In fact, she had been avoiding the thought until now, but the realization hit her, nonetheless.

I'll never see my family, or my coworkers, or my friends, or anyone I know, ever again...

Once she'd finally realized this, she felt a sting in her nostrils and her eyes heated up. Sobs came up her throat, suffocating her.

The last time she'd seen her family had been a month ago. When she ran out of her stock of rice, she went to have dinner at her parents' house. As her mother scolded her for not calling before showing up, she clinked her glass of beer with her father's. She snacked on the sashimi and simmered potatoes her mother prepared while listening to her father complain about his work, and she wolfed down a bowl of her mother's special wild rice.

“Eat some vegetables, too,” her mother said, as she presented a plate of steamed spinach. Ryoko recalled how delicious it had been. Then, her mother poured herself a drink and asked, “You’re almost 35. Have you thought about marriage at all?”

When Ryoko jokingly responded, “No one’s fallen out of the sky and into my lap, so far,” her mother only looked exasperated, but her father gave a happy chuckle, perhaps encouraged by the booze. As she left, her mother told her to come over again on her birthday weekend. That she’d have a cake ready, at least. When Ryoko returned to the condo, she saw a pair of texts from her younger sisters, which was rare since they didn’t write (or type) her often. The messages were to tell Ryoko they’d be there for her birthday party, and that she should look forward to her presents. While it almost felt silly to have her birthday celebrated at that age, Ryoko distinctly remembered how happy those texts had made her.

I was actually looking forward to my present...

Albeit with small changes here and there, Ryoko was convinced that her ordinary life would continue. Maybe she would have gotten married, down the road. If she didn’t, she would have taken care of her parents while continuing to work hard. She would have spoiled her sisters’ children, and once she retired, she would have lived off of her savings, gone into a nursing home before dementia hit her, and would have been happy just to have her sisters take care of her funeral after she died. At the very least, she had no intention of disappointing her parents by dying before them.

...Sorry. I’m sorry... I’m sorry for being a bad daughter, a stupid sister...

With her family on her mind, Ryoko could no longer contain herself.

A baby’s cry echoed through the room. Meria, the nanny, rushed back in upon hearing the sudden outburst. Normally, Herscherik was very well behaved after meals. The worst he did was have a few crying fits at night. During the day, all he needed was his stuffed animal by his side to be completely content. It was in a baby’s nature to cry, but Meria would occasionally grow nervous of how easygoing Herscherik was. He ate a lot, slept a lot, and laughed a lot. Herscherik was the epitome of an agreeable child.

When Meria came into the room, Herscherik was on his back on the carpet, crying with his face bright red.

“Lord Herscherik, did you hurt yourself!?”

Meria frantically picked him up and rubbed the back of his head, where she suspected an injury. No bump on his shapely head, though. She held Herscherik so he could comfortably lean on her and stroked his back. As she did, his cries subsided and Meria sighed in relief.

“Did you fall over and give yourself a scare, Lord Herscherik?”

Meria stood, still holding the sniffling Herscherik, and gently bounced the baby to calm him down.

“Your face is all red now.”

With that, Meria took Herscherik to the full-length mirror. Since Herscherik had pale skin, his red cheeks particularly stood out. Meria stood in front of the mirror and turned Herscherik to see his reflection. When she did, he immediately stopped crying, strangely enough. Meria looked at Herscherik to find him frozen and his eyes widened. To top it off, he was pinching his red cheek with his little fingers.

“Lord Herscherik, don’t pinch yourself. That must hurt.”

With a gentle reprimand, Meria carefully detached his tiny hand from his cheek. Still, Herscherik’s eyes were as wide as they could be.

...For real?

Herscherik, or Ryoko, was too astounded to cry or try to speak. The reflection in the mirror was nothing less than that of an angel. With silky, light blond hair, innocent and pale skin... An infantile yet beautiful facial structure, and eyes like high-quality jade. Ryoko already had no doubt that the angel in her reflection would grow up to become a gorgeous girl. She recalled some scholar on TV who said that babies are all born cute so everyone will adore them. The beauty in that mirror, however, was on another level entirely.

Ryoko was, most decidedly, not a narcissist. In fact, she considered herself a four out of ten on a good day and didn’t like saying or hearing anything about

her appearance. Whenever anyone complimented her on it, she only wondered what devious scheme they were undoubtedly hatching. However, she also possessed the weakness of blushing and melting in front of the screen whenever a romantic interest in one of her games gave her a compliment.

Am I in a romance game!?

Internally, Ryoko cheered in victory. She did feel bad for her parents, and she would miss her sisters... She also felt sorry for the driver who'd hit her as she ran into the crosswalk on a blinking walk sign, who would have to live with the crime of manslaughter. In the case of the driver, though, they didn't stop or check to see if anyone was crossing the crosswalk, and it wasn't like she *wanted* to die, so...

We'll call it even.

She'd definitely died, yes, but to her fortune, she carried over the memories of her previous life onto a literal second shot at life.

As such a pretty girl, too!

She never disliked her appearance in her previous life, considering that her mother gave birth to her and her father worked hard to raise her. Still, didn't everyone dream of having a face as beautiful as the protagonist of a comic book or video game at some point in their life? Perhaps even men dreamed of looking like the male protagonists or handsome characters in whatever mediums they enjoyed, Ryoko imagined.

Blond hair and blue eyes! Thank you, god! Oh, thank you, thank you!

Ryoko was really grateful, despite her lack of faith in any god in her previous life.

"Let's change your diaper, shall we?"

Oblivious to Ryoko's internal overjoying, Meria placed the baby on the bed and began changing her diaper with familiarity.

I know it has to be done, but it's a little embarrassing to... What the!?

Having calmed down a little, Ryoko peeked her head up to look at her loins. There was something there that hadn't been in her previous life. The only times

she had seen that *thing* in real life was when she used to take baths with her father before she started elementary school. Between her legs protruded a decidedly *un*-feminine apparatus.

“Aggghhhhh!”

A baby’s cry, or more like a scream, echoed off the walls.

And so, Ryoko Hayakawa was reincarnated as Prince Herscherik, the seventh prince of the kingdom of Gracis, with blond hair, blue eyes, and looks as beautiful as a girl.

Chapter Two: The Prince, the Royal Family, and the Birthday

The morning for Herscherik Gracis, the seventh prince of the kingdom of Gracis, started late. He got out of bed after the royal wives had finished their breakfast, just about when the kitchen staff began clearing the dishes.

...I want to go back to sleep.

Preferably until noon, thought Ryoko (or rather, Herscherik) sleepily. In his previous life, Ryoko was secretly proud of her personal record of seventeen hours for the longest consecutive sleep session. Herscherik was not an early bird by any means. In his previous life, she needed three alarm clocks *and* the alarm feature on her cell phone just to barely wake up in time for work.

“Weird. Why do I wake up with alarm clocks in my bed?” she used to say, puzzled.

She would retrieve her cell phone from under her comforter, too. With the alarm feature turned off, of course. For a while after she started living on her own, there were many mornings where she was nearly late for work.

I have to get changed...

Herscherik leisurely climbed out of his bed and stretched, holding back a yawn. The sun was already high, the gentle rays of spring illuminating the carpet through an opening in the curtains. Two years had passed since the day Herscherik had recovered his memories from his previous life—from the day he gained consciousness. For Herscherik, who never found it difficult to sleep in or spend days doing nothing, living in a baby’s body was heavenly. Whenever he felt tired, he climbed into bed no matter the time of day; when he felt bored, Meria—whom he later learned was his nanny—took him on walks or read him stories. When he felt hungry, there was food on the table. He was enjoying the baby-life in the lap of luxury. Only while he was a baby, though. As time passed, now that he could stand and walk on his own, Herscherik felt embarrassed

about having his nanny do everything for him.

Just like that one comic, I'm an adult in a child's body... A mid-thirties woman in a baby's body, that is.

While he still couldn't move his body correctly, he acted like any other baby. Meria graciously took care of him—changing his clothes, feeding him, bathing him, and even changing his diapers. As he grew up and gained more control over his body, though, he was eager to leave behind some of these silver spoons. After pondering how to convey that fact to Meria, Herscherik decided to employ the tactic that most toddlers used: the 'I can do it myself' tactic. Every time Meria tried to tend to him in some way, Herscherik threw a tantrum, saying, "No! I can do it!" When she tried to change him, he snatched the clothes out of her hands, and he begged to hold the spoon himself during meals. He went to the bathroom on his own and insisted on taking his own baths. While Meria seemed wary at first, as Herscherik gradually learned to dress himself, feed himself, and use the toilet himself, she began to relax and didn't tend to him when it wasn't necessary. She was by no means neglecting her job, though. Ready to jump in at any moment, she was always standing somewhere nearby. She never left anything like a knife or pair of scissors anywhere near him, and whenever Herscherik accomplished something, she praised him like he was her own.

I did have to play some tricks, though... Those were embarrassing.

Herscherik remembered how, in an effort to look more natural, he would skip a few buttons on his shirt on purpose, or try to put on his shoes on the opposite foot, as well as intentionally dropping his spoon or knocking over his glass. He silently apologized to Meria every time she let out a little sigh when he did these things, as he gradually improved at each task. Thanks to his efforts, Meria now didn't help him at all with changing clothes in the morning, but she did bring breakfast with her when she arrived at his room. Herscherik told himself that his occasional genuine oversleeping just added to the act.

Herscherik jumped off of his bed and landed on the lush carpet. Unable to support his weight, he tumbled forward onto his palms but saved himself the embarrassment of falling flat on his face. Walking, which he struggled with at first, was now as natural as it had been in his previous life, save for the

difference in the size of his stride.

Holding back another yawn, Herscherik headed to the sink. Stepping on the step stool prepared for him, he turned on the faucet to fill the bucket with water before washing his face. The refreshing, cold water snapped him right out of his drowsiness.

I wasn't expecting any modern technology after being reborn in this kind of world...

Herscherik couldn't help but be impressed all over again as he turned off the faucet. The appliances of this world were almost at the same caliber as modern-day Japan. Water came out of faucets, and toilets flushed. He could take a shower or soak in a bath. The utter convenience of it made it seem like he was living in a dream, but he'd passed hundreds of days and nights here without waking up from it.

After washing his face, Herscherik trotted into his closet.

And was this a big surprise...

The closet was a room of about 300 square feet, adjacent to his bedroom. When he stepped inside, he was greeted by overtly extravagant outfits hung up on either side of him. In addition to clothes, the closet held an array of shoes and accessories all tailor-made, without exception.

Still overwhelmed by the glittering selection, he picked out an outfit.

Let's go with navy today.

Herscherik slowly took off his pajamas. While he could perform the task on his own, his three-year-old body only moved so fast. He put his arms through the sleeves of his blouse, pulled up his shorts, and put on his jacket. From how comfortable they felt, he could tell that they were made of quality fabric. Gold buttons gleamed on the jacket, indicating that it must have been detailed by a top-notch artisan.

After changing his clothes, Herscherik combed through his silky, blond hair to flatten his cowlicks. In his previous life, Ryoko had fought long, hard battles with her curly hair every morning, but this blond hair only took one satisfying comb to straighten out. Finally, Herscherik did one twirl in front of the floor-length

mirror. Seeing the reflection of a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy as cute as a girl, he gave a satisfied nod.

Night and day, compared to before.

Herscherik thought back on his previous life. Ryoko had had no interest in clothes or jewelry, despite being a woman. She wore a uniform at work and sweatpants at home. When she went out, she usually wore jeans and a T-shirt or hoodie. The only time she'd dress up was when she went out with friends or family. As a sensible adult, she did make sure to be presentable during her commute, but that hardly classified as dressing up.

I sure pay more attention to my appearance now, Herscherik said, praising himself.

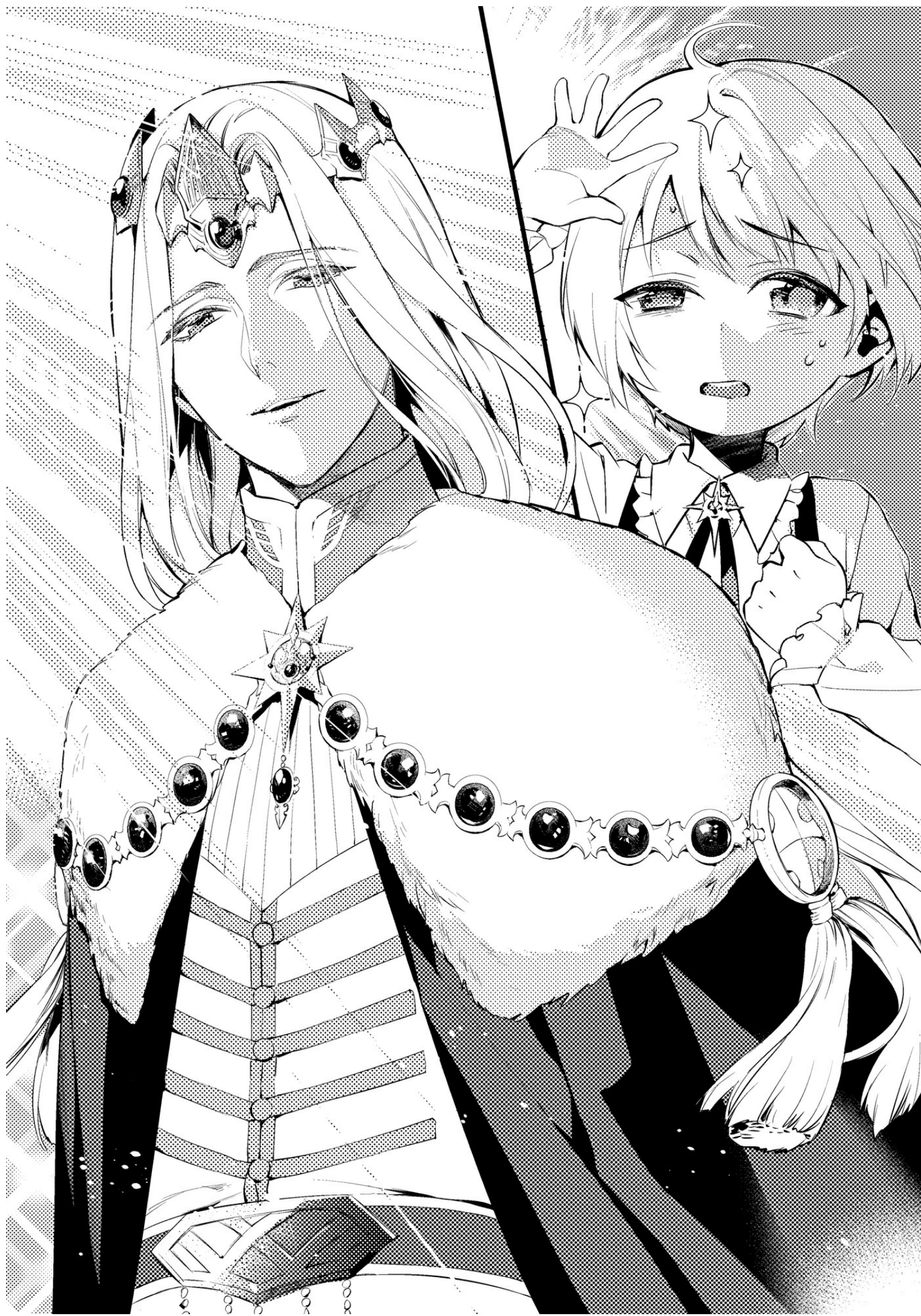
While he couldn't help but think that he was wastefully growing out of his custom clothes, he would have felt guilty not wearing the outfits available to him.

"Good morning, Hersch. Where are you?"

When he heard a young man's voice calling him, Herscherik peeked out of the closet to find Meria with his breakfast alongside the young man who had just called out.

"You got changed all by yourself? Good job, Hersch," he said, smiling.

The smile was so bright that Herscherik couldn't help but squint a little. The man had platinum blond hair that looked like it was woven out of moonlight and the same jade-colored eyes as Herscherik. His sunken and slightly downturned eyes gave off a gentle impression. All in all, he was an attractive young man that appeared to be in his twenties.



However, Herscherik knew that the man was actually in his thirties.

He's pretty much as old as I was in my last life... Life really wasn't fair.

Herscherik buried his internal lament with a smile and said, "Good morning, father."

As Herscherik greeted him, the young man—Herscherik's father—hoisted up his son and flashed a smile that could have made any woman fall in love, before stroking his silky blond hair. As Herscherik had never gotten used to having his hair stroked, he looked tickled and embarrassed. For an old maid of 35 trapped in a three-year-old's body, this was the best reaction she could muster.

As he gave an embarrassed giggle, Herscherik recalled his astonishment when he'd found out that this man was his father. In this life, Herscherik considered himself as adorable as a princess, even for a baby. The goose that had laid the golden egg that was Herscherik, though, was platinum—more precious than gold. When they'd first met, Herscherik mistook his youthful father for his brother, albeit a much older one. Since his father didn't regularly come to visit him, Herscherik was concerned that his "brother" didn't have a steady job. Once he found out what his father's occupation was, though, he realized those worries were groundless.

"Pardon my interruption."

Their quality family time was interrupted by the deep voice of a gentleman who had been standing beside them. The man with steel-colored, not-quite-emerald green hair and similar eyes was Rook, the butler who exclusively served Herscherik's father. Most people realized that only the wealthy had butlers. Combined with the existence of his nanny, Herscherik had guessed that his father was a noble or some other upper-class citizen. The truth, however, far exceeded his expectation.

"It is almost time for your meeting, Your Majesty."

As his butler said so, Herscherik's father, Solye, the 23rd king of the kingdom of Gracis, reluctantly lowered Herscherik to the floor.

Gazing up at his somewhat disappointed father, Herscherik held back a dry chuckle.

Just going by my quality of life, I assumed that I was reborn as an heir to some rich noble... But a prince...? What can I do but laugh?

Herscherik's thoughts when he discovered this were indescribable. Surely, almost everyone dreamed of being a prince or princess at one point in their life. Ryoko was no exception. When she was little, she'd also daydreamed about being a princess. Now that she'd been reborn as the opposite gender and was actually a prince and not a princess, instead of just enjoying this dream come true, she was mostly curious about why she'd daydreamed about that sort of thing in the first place.

A daydream kind of loses its luster in real life, doesn't it...?

So early in life, Herscherik already felt like he had lost an important piece of himself.

"I'd best be going, then."

"Have a good day at work, Father."

Solye smiled at Herscherik and gave his son's head one last pat before leaving the room with his butler in tow.

After seeing his father off, and as Meria prepared his breakfast, Herscherik quietly sat in his chair, staring at the painting above the mantel. It was the portrait he saw directly across from him whenever he sat down to eat—a portrait in the style of the Mona Lisa. Just recently, Meria had informed him that the subject of the portrait was his mother, who had died from complications shortly after giving birth to him. According to Meria, his mother was the most beloved among the king's queens and concubines. However, since his mother was of lesser birth and the king already had a First Queen, Herscherik's mother was never granted that title. As for how they met, Herscherik couldn't tell how much of it was the truth and how much of it was Meria's exaggeration.

Apparently, his father had met his mother on one of his secret trips into town. Then, after a series of events that, if factual, could understandably send Herscherik down the road of delinquency out of sheer embarrassment as well as make anyone who heard it blush, (yes, even avid readers of shojo comics!) the proposal came. His mother had proposed to his father. At that point, his

father and mother were more than a decade apart in age. Herscherik kept wondering if his mother actually wasn't bothered by it, or if his father was some kind of pedophile since he was practically in his thirties when he'd married his mother, who had been eighteen at the time.

Since Meria was one of his mother's ladies-in-waiting, she told Herscherik with nostalgia in her eyes that she'd chatted with his mother often. Apparently, his mother was considered less attractive than the First Queen and even the other royal queens. By the ridiculous beauty standards of the queens, at least. She was plenty attractive by ordinary standards.

His mother was always cheery, Meria had said. She had never seen her upset about anything. Herscherik's mother was always bursting with energy and loved to do household chores, despite being a queen. She often caused trouble by starting to clean things on her own or sneaking into the kitchen to make cookies or cakes to take to the queens' tea parties. Once, she startled the king to tears at the end of a long day by greeting him in terrifying ghost makeup. She was one strange queen, indeed.

Eventually, she bore the king's child, Herscherik, in exchange for her life. The king had lost his true love. It was apparent to anyone that his father had treated his favorite queen better than any other. He was still so smitten by her child that he now came to see Herscherik every chance he got during his busy schedule. However, that didn't mean that the king neglected any other queens or their children.

Herscherik was the youngest prince, seven years the junior of his youngest sibling. His older siblings all attended the academy and weren't around during the day. The queens, perhaps thanks to the king's character, did not pursue any schemes motivated by envy or political ambition. In fact, they often had a sort of girls' day where they elegantly discussed how to cheer up their exhausted king over tea, as Meria had witnessed on her walks through the courtyard. While she was there, she was occasionally given some snacks, too. Herscherik's first thought was to hope that the queens stayed away from ghost pranks like his mother had loved to pull. He could easily imagine his father *becoming* a spirit instead of regaining his.

"Lord Herscherik, aren't you excited for tonight?" Meria said, as she served

him his late breakfast. “What outfit should we wear? How about the brand new burgundy one? Oh, but light green suits your hair so well.”

As Meria looked at him with glittering eyes, Herscherik swallowed a piece of bread and crooked his neck.

“What’s tonight?”

“Oh, my!” Meria’s eyes widened in disbelief. “Tonight is your birthday party, Lord Herscherik. And your debut.”

Herscherik crooked his neck again at Meria’s explanation.

Above the well-maintained royal garden, the ballrooms connected to each other via balconies. The best musicians, summoned from the four corners of the country, played in an area that hosted a dance floor in the center, where a few couples were dancing to the music. The ladies’ vibrant dresses twirled like flower petals, making them look like fairies that had come to announce the commencement of spring. The party had prepared food for the guests, too, albeit just a buffet. A crisp, white table cloth lined the serving table packed with dish after dish showcasing the best efforts of the royal chefs. Meanwhile, the waiters carried trays through the crowd, stacked with glasses filled with top shelf liquor prepared just for the occasion.

This is like a Shichi-Go-San, I guess? I wish I was out there eating, too...

Watching his guests enjoying the food out of the corner of his eye, Herscherik couldn’t help but be disappointed. At the far end of the ballroom, Herscherik sat beside his father dealing with the endless wave of guests, his exasperation completely concealed under the customer service smile he had mastered in his previous life.

Apparently, it was customary for royal and noble children to be introduced into high society at the age of three. Members of the royal family, in particular, remained in the palace until this point, with little opportunity to meet with other nobility. The closest interaction a royal child had was with their mother’s family, but Herscherik’s only relatives on his mother’s side were his elderly, commoner grandparents. When his mother married his father, though, they had disowned her. Never seeing his grandparents, Herscherik had met very few

people in his life aside from his father, his nanny Meria, and Rook the butler. He had met the other queens and his siblings only a handful of times before now.

Tonight, at his third birthday party, was his first time meeting a significant number of non-relatives. His true high-society debut would come when he would turn sixteen, and he would be considered an adult (and allowed to drink) at eighteen. He only knew this because the First Prince, who would turn sixteen this year, had come with the First Queen to discuss the matter with his father. The king calmly acknowledged everything and reminded him to represent the kingdom of Gracis well.

However, much more than the topic of discussion between his father and his guests, Herscherik was interested in the fact that the queens and his siblings exceeded his expectations on how unimaginably good-looking they were.

Genes really are a powerful thing...

Just from the few meetings he had with them, Herscherik was already aware that the queens and his siblings were attractive. But seeing his royal family dressed to the nines blew him away. All of the queens were sublimely beautiful, with bodies so slim that Herscherik couldn't believe that they had each borne a child. Since they were attending a party, of course, their makeup, hair, and dresses were all perfect. Naturally, they all pulled it off wonderfully.

The princesses, too, were all stunning girls. "Beautiful as a flower" seemed to be a comparison concocted for the sole purpose of describing them. And all the princes were handsome to match the queens and princesses. Herscherik didn't know how else to describe them.

Take the oldest of his siblings, the First Prince, for example. He had spectacular red hair, as if the purest rubies had been melted into strands on his head, and eyes of the same color that gleamed with unwavering willpower. His mother, the First Queen, was filled to the brim with sensuality that had unmistakably been passed down to the prince, whose every gesture was extremely elegant. His elegance was only enhanced even more by his well-built body clad in a perfectly tailored outfit. After greeting Herscherik and the king, he was immediately swarmed by ladies of the nobility. Dealing with all of them without showing even a touch of annoyance in his expression made him look

like a prince among princes.

The next oldest, the Second Prince, looked more like the king. He had the same platinum blond hair as his father, loosely braided in the back, and his eyes, as blue as the deep ocean, gave off a different sort of sensuality. His beauty was as cool as a clear crystal ball.

Herscherik had six older brothers in all, each varying in style but all equally beautiful. As everyone congratulated him, Herscherik gave his thanks in return, but his mind was wandering.

What kind of shojo game am I living in!? Is there anyone not beautiful around here!? Herscherik internally interjected. He was quickly getting fed up with his dressed-up siblings.

Couldn't one of them have been a disappointment!? This isn't right! ...That probably means I'm the disappointment!

His internal comedic monologue concluded with this depressing realization. Still, Herscherik was adorably put together, thanks to Meria's efforts. He was adorned with an ornately embroidered emerald outfit with buttons and cuffs of intricate designs glittering on them, and a light green ribbon stylishly tied around his neck. Both Meria and his father had showered him with compliments, so he had gotten a little cocky, feeling like maybe he was kind of good-looking, too. After his gorgeous siblings greeted him one after another, though, his fragile self-confidence was shattered into dust. Herscherik was now aware that he was lacking some sort of style or princely aura. While he was a stereotypical blond-haired, blue-eyed prince, Herscherik now learned that he was short on flashiness compared to his siblings. If his oldest brother was a rose and his second oldest was a lily, Herscherik was a sprig of baby's breath; this vague comparison seemed fitting to him.

They say it's what's on the inside that counts...

Herscherik wondered what chance he had against them when he was an otaku woman in her thirties on the inside.

Besides, any compliments from these good-looking people don't make me feel better. They just sound sarcastic...

His siblings had all welcomed the youngest into the family, and complimented his mannerisms and outfit, too. The fact that he couldn't take the compliments at face value was on Herscherik himself, who was being a little sensitive. A comparison he imagined was the awkward feeling of giving the cutest girl in class a compliment, then having her reply, "no, you look cute, too!" Of course, Herscherik was being entirely paranoid.

As his cockiness was smashed to pieces and blown away, the wave of guests transformed from royalty to nobles. The first noble to greet them was a minister of Gracis, Marquis Volf Barbosse.

"An honor to meet you, Lord Herscherik."

It's so nice to see a normal face after all the beautiful people...

A thought that would have been extremely disrespectful to say out loud crossed his mind. Marquis Barbosse was a middle-aged man with hazel eyes and hair, with an impressive mustache, who exuded an obvious aristocratic air. But his sharply shining eyes, as if he was evaluating Herscherik, made him uncomfortable all of a sudden. Come to think of it, even during his previous life, Herscherik was always terribly sensitive to feeling as though he was being looked at, whether it was friendly or not. At her office, Ryoko had a little trick of sensing her boss looking at her and responding before her name was even called. She must have also had a sort of sixth sense, as she could pick up the phone almost the instant it began to ring. Her apprentices were more scared than impressed by these tricks, though.

Herscherik instinctively straightened his back and put on a gentle smile.

"The pleasure is mine, Minister. Thank you for coming."

His accumulated experience allowed him to respond with etiquette too refined for a three-year-old. He realized after that fact that it sounded unnatural. In his previous life, Ryoko's mother had told her, "The less you like the person, the more polite you act toward them." Her mother had had the same temperament, too. "It's maddening when someone you don't like is super polite with you, isn't it?" she had said, grinning. She really was Ryoko's mother, all right.

To avert the minister's sharp glare of suspicion, Herscherik maintained his

calm smile. Make a mistake? Smile and nod. Just a survival tactic that any adult would learn eventually, although this one required the user to pick their audience. In turn, Marquis Barbosse broke into a smile that wiped away his glare.

“What a clever child. You must be excited for his future, Your Majesty.”

“...I am. He is my treasure. I can’t wait to see how he grows up,” the king answered with a smile.

But Herscherik didn’t miss his father’s face stiffening for just a moment nor the strange beat in the conversation. Seeing that the two men carried on as if nothing had happened, though, Herscherik couldn’t interject.

When the wave of nobles started to die down, a man with a desperate expression came up to the royal hosts of the party. Herscherik only noticed him because of his intense stare. The man was in his late thirties with mustard-colored hair. He wore a slightly wrinkled burgundy outfit and had a rugged face, but he was much skinnier than the other nobles. More accurately, he was more worn out than the others. Seeing his appearance and intense attitude, everyone around him kept a certain distance.

With determination, the man clenched his fists and stepped forward.

“Your Majesty, I must make a report.”

Herscherik jolted at this sudden proclamation that began without even a greeting. His father took a step forward, as if to protect him, and faced the man down.

“What is it?”

The king’s tone was not the kind one he used when he talked to Herscherik. Now wearing the expression of a serious leader, Solye demanded an answer from the man. Peeking his head out from behind his father’s back, Herscherik looked at his father, the man, and the people around them. The glitz and glamor of the party from a moment ago had dissipated from the ballroom. The music had stopped and everyone kept their mouth shut, leaving the oppressive tension to rule the room.

“Your Majesty, your people are being pushed closer and closer toward their

breaking point, year after year. The annual tax increases, the forceful collection... Nobles and court officials are becoming more corrupt and self-serving by the day. I beg of you, Your Majesty, face up to what your people endure!”

The man’s voice echoed through the hushed ballroom.

“At this rate, the legacy of the Gracis Kingdom that has lasted over five hundred years will end in self-destruction!”

“Mind your tongue in the presence of His Highness! Step aside, Count Ruseria!”

Marquis Barbosse was the one who interrupted the plea. But the skinny man, Ruseria, glared right back at the minister.



“You should step aside, Marquis Barbosse. Beneath the mask of a noble and minister, you are nothing but a beast that gnaws at our country from within!”

“...Pardon?”

“I know you’ve deceived, embezzled, and now betrayed our country by selling state secrets!”

Count Ruseria produced a piece of paper and approached the king. A knight who had been standing beside Solye took a step forward to intercept, but Solye held him back with a raised hand. Ruseria knelt before the king and presented the paper with a bow.

“Your Majesty, this is one piece of evidence I’ve collected that proves his corruption. Please accept it.”

Solye timidly took the paper and read it. Herscherik could practically hear his father’s astonishment.

“This...”

While he didn’t describe the contents of the letter, it was evidently shocking. The hint of a quiver in the king’s voice was proof of it. Complete silence enveloped the ballroom. It was Marquis Barbosse, the defendant himself, who finally broke through it.

“Your Majesty, that paper is a fake.”

His tone was eerily calm, almost confident. Herscherik turned to find Barbosse sharply glaring at Ruseria.

“I was aware of the groundless rumors that suggested a connection between myself and these foreign nations. But I had no idea where they originated.” Barbosse gave a dramatic pause before continuing. “So, I conducted my own investigation to find that someone had been using my name while aiding enemy nations. ...I’m talking about you, Count Ruseria.”

Herscherik didn’t spot Barbosse’s serious expression shift for a moment as both corners of his lips twisted up in perverted victory. On the contrary, Ruseria’s expression remained contemplative for a few moments before the color, and hope, drained from his face.

At Marquis Barbosse's call, a man appeared out of nowhere and presented a letter to the king. The letter was wax sealed, definitely unopened.

"One of my men captured a spy leaving Count Ruseria's manor. The spy was carrying this."

"...Count Ruseria, is this your seal?"

The count answered the king's question with silence. A wax seal was made by imprinting a unique mark on melted wax. Opening the letter would break the seal. Hence, the seal's presence was evidence that the letter was unopened. Ruseria didn't utter a word as the king broke the seal, read the letter, and let out a heavy sigh.

"A letter seeking refuge in a foreign nation... Asking for status and monetary reward in exchange for our national secrets... With Count Ruseria's signature and seal."

His father's words, or rather his tone, struck Herscherik as odd. He sensed a note of dejection. Someone else shared that same tone, too.

"...He was one step ahead."

That voice belonged to Ruseria, uttered so softly that only Herscherik and the king, who directly stood beside him, could hear.

"Detain that traitor!"

Barbosse's order echoed like a victory call. Knights stormed the ballroom, pinning Ruseria's head to the ground. As the ballroom erupted in cacophony, a flicker of light shot across the marble floor and bumped into Herscherik's shoe, coming to a halt. An antique, silver pocket watch. Herscherik picked up the watch from where it lay next to his foot. It barely fit in his three-year-old palm. When he looked back up from the watch to the rest of the ballroom, Ruseria was already bound and well on his way to being marched out of the room.

"...I'm sorry to ruin your party, Hersch."

As he heard that voice from above, Herscherik was hoisted up by his father. Now that their eyes met, he could see that his father looked exhausted, on the verge of tears.

“Let’s call it for the night, shall we?”

That was the call to conclude the party, and the king exited with his son in his arms. Only the king’s butler followed them, and no one stood in their way.

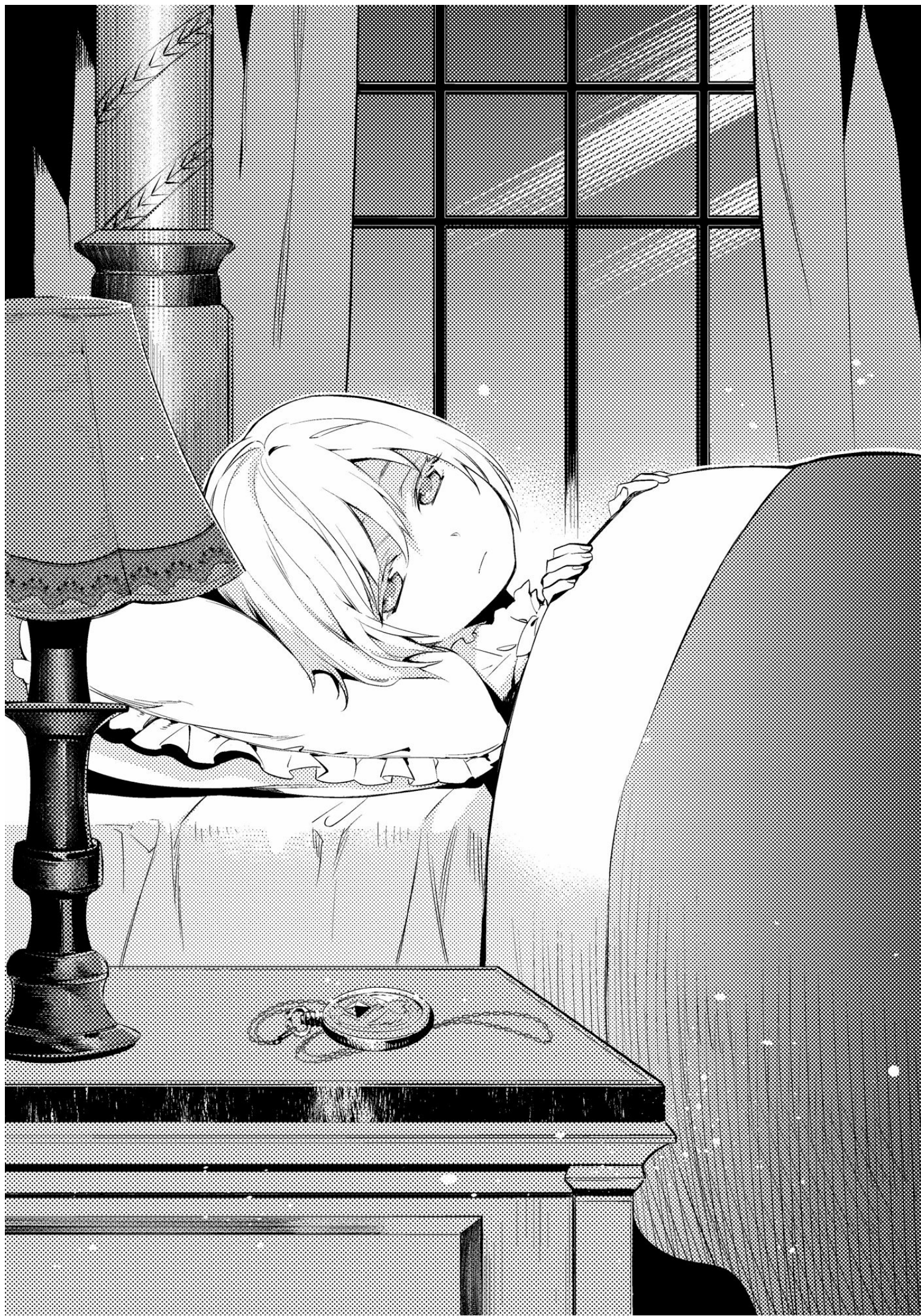
Something’s not right...

Still being carried by his father, Herscherik stared at the watch, which he’d ended up taking with him. For the first time since his rebirth, he felt a sense of discontent and uneasiness in his royal life. In contrast from his previous life as a middle-class worker, the royal life at the top of society had been filled with surprises. All of the surprises so far had simply been changes in his lifestyle that he had eventually understood and gotten used to. None of those changes had been more taxing than simply eating bread instead of rice. This uneasiness, though, was of a completely different nature. The sound of the second hand ticking from within the pocket watch only made Herscherik more nervous.

Chapter Three: The Pocket Watch, the Count, and the Marionette

“Urm...”

With a muffled groan, Herscherik tossed in his sheets that were made from the best materials in this world. After that disaster of a party, he'd been brought back to his room by his father before taking a bath. Meria consoled him, even though she seemed more upset about it than he was, before he changed into his pajamas and crawled into bed. Normally, he would have flown off into dreamland in a matter of minutes, but from how wide awake he was tonight, that land of dreams seemed impossibly distant. When Herscherik stirred again, he spotted the antique silver pocket watch on the nightstand.



It was the same object that had happened to tumble right to his feet when Ruseria was arrested under the charge of treason. At the time, Herscherik's eyes were drawn to it like a magnet, and before he knew it, the watch was in his hand. Now, the silver dully reflected the moonlight that had snuck into the room through the gap in the curtains. He had brought it all the way back to his room without anyone stopping him. Well, no one had noticed him carrying it amidst the commotion, at least.

Herscherik crawled out of bed and took the watch. It opened with the press of a button, revealing the watch face. Just as he had assumed from his life so far, days in this world seemed to be divided into 24 hours, too. While they differed from those of the old world, twelve numbers did occupy the watch face in their familiar positions. Judging by the hands on the watch, he discerned that the time was just past ten o'clock at night.

...Why did father look so sad when Count Ruseria was declared a traitor?

His father's sorrowful expression was burned into Herscherik's memory. In that situation, any king would certainly have been angry over the count's betrayal. While his kindhearted father might have been saddened by it, his expression was more dejected than anything else.

Besides, the count didn't look like a bad person...

To Herscherik, Ruseria looked like he was sincerely concerned for his country and, at the same time, like he had been backed into a corner.

Something's not right about this.

That hunch he had at the scene of the arrest had been keeping Herscherik awake. It made him more nervous with time and had culminated in a sense of growing urgency. Desperately trying to uncover the meaning of his instinctive suspicion, Herscherik pored over every aspect of the incident. The paper Ruseria had produced, his father's astonishment, Barbosse's sealed letter... the contrast between Barbosse's confidence and Ruseria's hopeless expression. In order to recall every last detail, even the ones that he didn't find important at

the time, Herscherik replayed the scene over and over again in his mind.

...Oh!

As soon as the revelation hit him after several mental replays, his sense of urgency dissipated. The pocket watch fell from his hand, which he'd relaxed without realizing, but he couldn't be bothered by it.

The evidence the minister presented doesn't match the count's reaction.

The minister's evidence was definitive. But, would someone trying to seek refuge in a foreign nation take the risk of presenting false evidence to the king just to frame someone else? If Herscherik had been in the count's shoes, he would have made a run for it as soon as he could. It would have been easier and less risky than trying to frame another man for the crime. What kind of burglar would walk into a police station, evidence in hand? Come to think of it, some parts of the minister's reaction didn't make sense, either. How was he able to determine that the count's evidence was falsified without even looking at it and supposedly not knowing the contents?

...Did he already know what was on that paper?

Once Herscherik noticed this discrepancy, he couldn't stop noticing all the suspicious moments during the encounter. Most of all, he couldn't get Barbosse's final expression out of his mind. It rubbed him the wrong way that the marquis looked like some kind of TV villain mocking the protagonist.

...He was one step ahead.

Ruseria's final whisper haunted his mind. Herscherik climbed out of his bed and picked up the watch from the floor. Perhaps from the shock of the fall, it had opened. Seeing its contents, Herscherik's eyes widened in surprise. The watch face was no longer visible, but a small portrait could be seen in its place. Herscherik thoroughly inspected the watch to find that it had two layers. Pressing the button lightly opened it to show the watch face, and holding down the button while opening the lid revealed the portrait. The painting depicted a youthful and healthy-looking Ruseria with a woman that appeared to be his wife holding a baby in her arms. All three were smiling happily.

The count will be executed, surely...

He recalled a conversation between two nobles that he had overheard on his way back to his room.

He must be locked up in a cell by now. Should have kept his mouth shut.

Herscherik closed the watch and returned it to the nightstand before crawling back into bed.

I doubt I could see the count. Not right now.

It was easy to imagine that he was currently being interrogated.

Tomorrow, I'll wake up early and go see him.

For some reason, Herscherik felt like he absolutely had to see the count. Even though he didn't feel like he could sleep at all, he still closed his eyes to make an attempt.

Two years had passed since Herscherik had regained his adult consciousness after being reborn in this world. His royal life so far had been one of inconceivable luxury compared to his previous life. Food was brought to his table without having to lift a finger, and all of his clothes were made-to-order from the highest quality materials. Even though his mother had passed away, his nanny Meria was kind to him and his father was a gentle and handsome king. He'd thought his world would always be just as dream-like, and he'd continue to be fed everything in his life with a silver spoon... It was as if he had won the lottery.

The world around him, as he was beginning to realize, wasn't quite the sweet dream he thought it was. Come to think of it, there had been plenty of indications before this that the world around him was not quite as perfect as it seemed. Still, he had pretended not to notice. He feared that if he were to accept those things, he would entirely move on from his previous life and forget everything about it. Maybe he had been drowning himself in the surface-level bliss of this world in order to deny the reality that Ryoko was dead and she could never see her family again.

For the first time, Herscherik faced the emotions he had been turning his back on. Righteous curiosity struggled viciously with the fear of facing his reality within his mind.

In the pre-dawn darkness of four in the morning, Herscherik got out of bed and quickly changed his clothes as quietly as possible. As the season was only on the cusp of spring, the air felt a little chilly, so he decided to put on a coat before opening the door. He peeked his head out into the hall to make sure no one was there before sprinting down it.

Good thing I had Meria show me a map of the castle.

Usually, Herscherik was accompanied by Meria whenever he left his room. They never left the royal quarters or the courtyard, but whenever Herscherik had asked, Meria had opened a map and patiently explained how to get to each part of the castle from where they were.

In general, the castle was comprised of four areas. The royal quarters to the north, political facilities to the south, research labs to the east, and military housing to the west. While Herscherik wasn't sure of all the various subsections within them, right now he only had to know how to make it to the western area where the prison cells were.

He made it through the unoccupied hallway to exit into the courtyard, which was accessible to anyone who lived in the royal quarters. During the day, the royal wives engaged in blossoming conversations as they admired the flowers, but during the pre-dawn hours, the courtyard was completely empty. Herscherik walked through a passageway adjacent to the courtyard, passed under the gate into the main castle, and turned west. Down that path, he could see his destination.

Dodging soldiers on night patrol along the way, Herscherik managed to arrive at the western quarters. Then, walking through the passageway that connected the main castle with the military facilities, Herscherik came to the training grounds. During the day, it was bustling with soldiers and knights, but now it stood empty in the middle of the other military facilities. On any other day, Herscherik would have been excited about his first venture beyond the royal quarters, but he didn't have the time for that now.

The cells are on the very western end of the western area...

Recalling the map of the castle from memory, Herscherik carried on. He hid behind a few corners here and there to make it past the soldiers on patrol

before finally arriving at the other end of the military facilities. The land between the building and the castle wall was unkempt, weeds growing free and tall amidst the planted trees. Fortunately for Herscherik, the grass was tall enough that he could conceal his toddler body just by diving down to the ground. On the walls of the building, he could see openings just above the grass—barred windows, albeit with no glass between the bars. These windows, definitely made as small as they were to prevent the prisoners inside from escaping, served as the light sources for the cells that were dug halfway into the ground.

I hope the count is here...

Clutching the silver pocket watch in his hand like a talisman, Herscherik approached a window.

“Count Ruseria, are you in there?” He called in a whisper to avoid being detected, but there was no answer.

He repeated the question at window after window to only hear silence in return.

The next one is the last cell...

“Count Ruseria, please answer me if you’re here.”

Herscherik knew that if the count wasn’t in this cell, he would have no chance of finding him. As he squeezed the watch even harder, Herscherik’s call came out sounding more like a prayer.

“Who is it?”

That voice was none other than that of the man with the mustard-colored hair that he had heard at the party. Herscherik nearly cried out in joy at the voice that came from within the cell, but he hurriedly covered his mouth with his hands. All of his hard work would be for naught if he raised his voice now. Herscherik crawled toward the window carefully and peered through the bars. Inside, he found Ruseria, without his jacket. Ruseria’s eyes, gazing up at the barred window, met Herscherik’s eyes peeking down from above. Seeing the unexpected figure, Ruseria’s eyes widened in shock. Unbothered by the reaction, Herscherik observed the count and noticed that his clothes were badly

stained and torn. What drew his attention the most, though, was the count's forehead, which must have been injured during the arrest and barely tended to. It was still stained by the streaks of blood.

"Is your forehead all right?"

Herscherik's biggest concern came pouring out of his lips. Of course it wasn't all right. He immediately regretted the question. A noble—a count—had been subjected to violence and imprisonment in a place like this. Stretching his hand through the bars toward the count, Herscherik presented the watch he'd been holding onto, as the count still seemed frozen in surprise. After all, Herscherik had set out in order to return the watch to him in the first place.

"I came to return this. It's something precious to you, isn't it?"

"...Yes, it's very precious."

"I'm glad I could get it to you."

Taking the watch from Herscherik, Count Ruseria stroked it with nostalgia in his eyes. Then, he held the watch tightly with his eyes closed, and a bitter pain flashed across his expression. Just as Herscherik was about to ask him about it, the count looked up at the prince again. His intense stare halted Herscherik's question on the tip of his tongue. In turn, the count knelt to one knee and bowed his head. Later on, Herscherik would learn that this count had saluted him with a pledge of loyalty.

"Lord Herscherik, I beg your forgiveness for ruining your celebration last night."

Herscherik shook his head. "That doesn't matter. But Count Ruseria, I want to hear your side of the story."

"...My side?"

The count looked up from his bow and absentmindedly parroted the phrase in a somewhat taken-aback tone.

"I'm the traitor who was arrested for trying to frame Minister Barbosse. I'm here, after all. What other story do you need? That's reality."

Ruseria's sarcastic and mocking tone wasn't directed at Herscherik, but at

himself. Hearing this, Herscherik knew he had to respond.

“I came because I want to hear what you have to say in your own words, Count. No matter what anyone else says, I want to hear from you.”

Reality was always singular, a manifestation of the events that actually took place. Truth, on the other hand, was as numerous and varied as there were people in this world. Truth could take different forms depending on each person’s thoughts and relationship to an event, changing the shape of their truths. Herscherik did not want to become the kind of person that simply took what one person said as the one and only truth. He had requested this of the count without looking away from him... Herscherik’s mature syntax and unclouded eyes made the count hold his breath for a moment.

Has anyone spoken to me this way in the past few years...? Ruseria thought. No. For several years, the count had never heard someone speak to him like that. If someone ever had, the count had paid it no mind, deeming it superfluous noise. The words the prince had just uttered, though, sunk deep into his heart like a drop of water in dry soil. So, Ruseria followed Herscherik’s request.

“...I fell into their trap.”

After a few moments, Ruseria began speaking with gravitas.

It had all begun three years prior when the count took notice of a particular noble’s illegal activities. When he discovered that a viscount was behind it all, Ruseria notified Legal Affairs with his discovery. It would not have been unreasonable for the viscount to be stripped of his title, but he remained unpunished. Suspicious of this, Ruseria investigated the wrongdoings on his own in pursuit of justice. In the end, he’d discovered that Minister Barbosse’s political group sponsored those activities and had all gotten rich in the process.

“If I didn’t take action now, our nation would be starved, then destroyed... That’s what I thought.”

Just to enrich the nobility, taxes would be raised. Impoverished citizens who couldn’t pay the tax would end up on the streets, then turn to crime and make the country more dangerous. To combat crime, taxes would be raised again. This negative spiral was sure to weaken the country.

“I had gathered some compatriots... When we were right on the verge of reforming our political scene, I lost my wife and son to an accident... My son had just turned three, Your Highness, like you.”

As the count was in mourning over what he thought to be an accident, an unsigned letter was delivered, warning him not to investigate any closer.

“I have no proof. But I know they killed my son and wife. Made it look like an accident. Just to make an example of them to me and my compatriots. Then, misfortune befell one associate of mine after another, until we could no longer remain united.”

Still, Ruseria could not give it up, overcome with the need for vengeance for his beloved family. Without it, in fact, he was sure that he would not have had the will to survive until now.

Ruseria held his pocket watch tighter as he continued.

“I was resolved to fight, all alone. Over the past three years, I collected as much evidence as I could and presented it to His Majesty... Well, you saw what happened.”

The unfamiliar letter must have been forged, seal and all. By close inspection of a sample of Ruseria’s genuine letters, his handwriting had been copied and a letter forged with incredible ease. On top of that, the count was now certain that all of the evidence he had collected was merely bait fed to him by Barbosse, after seeing the marquis’s attitude the previous night. Ruseria would now pay the price for losing himself in anger and falling right into Barbosse’s trap.

“Our country has been prosperous and strong for a long time. Our expansive territory and our military, as well as our foreign diplomacy, have forged a lasting peace.”

That’s how the enormous kingdom of Gracis had been protected, at least on the surface. Within its borders, the peace of Gracis had begun to rot. In recent years, some nations had been growing to become nearly as strong as Gracis was. If any of those nations were to find out the state of this kingdom’s internal affairs, they might use it as an opening to attack.

“Before you were even born, the period between His Highness’s birth and coronation was when the royal family and the nobles were most divided.”

Ruseria had been still young at the time and had only figured this out by piecing it together from various bits of information. The king at the time, Herscherik’s grandfather, had a keen eye for spotting corrupt nobles. Still, those nobles had cleverly concealed all of their evidence, preventing the king from stripping their titles or exiling them.

“Just then, our country was met with a series of tragedies. An illness befell one royal family member after another.”

In hindsight, Ruseria was doubtful that they were natural ailments. The perceptive king succumbed first, followed by the First and Second Princes at the time, leaving the throne to the Third Prince without any powerful supporters. Since the prince was only ten years old at the time, Barbosse became his patron and regent. By the time the king turned eighteen and Barbosse returned the regency to him, most of the minister’s opposition and powerful nobles loyal to the crown had been nearly wiped out, albeit not entirely. Before anyone realized, the minister and his forces had taken control of the political scene in Gracis.

“As a young boy living in the countryside, uninterested in politics, I didn’t notice it in time... I beg of your forgiveness, Your Highness.”

Lips pursed, Ruseria drooped his head. He appeared beaten down by his powerlessness, as though he was about to disappear. Despite being taller than average, the count now seemed much too small—a man robbed of everything. Now that his last hope turned out to be a false one all along, Ruseria had nothing left in this world.

“...I’m sorry.”

What came out of Herscherik was an apology. Ruseria slowly looked up at the surprising reaction to find Herscherik holding back tears as they formed in his light blue eyes.

“I’m sorry I didn’t realize. You were fighting so hard, and I didn’t notice anything. I’m sorry...” His words came out choppy from the effort of controlling his sobs.

After all that was taken from him, he kept fighting... He lost everything, and still fought on, alone...

Robbed of his family and having lost his compatriots... Even as he found himself completely isolated, the count never abandoned the fight. Herscherik had lost his family from his previous life. Even now, he nearly came to tears every time he remembered them. How were his father, mother, and sisters doing back in Japan? He thought Ruseria must have felt much like he did now, and Herscherik could no longer contain his tears. He missed Japan. He wanted to go home, to see his old family. The emotions that he'd kept locked down for his own protection now came flooding out.

I was lying to myself all this time.

Even subconsciously, Herscherik must have known that it was the only way to protect himself from the pain. Ruseria took a different path, though. He had accepted all the rage and vengeance, and fought against the hand he was dealt. That was his truth. Herscherik was sure of it.

"...You believe me? What if I'm trying to trick you by telling you lies that make me look good?"

"No one trying to trick someone would ever suggest that," Herscherik declared and stood up. "I'll tell Father to have you released right away. With the rest of the evidence you have, we should be able to topple the minister's scheme. Wait for me!" Herscherik ran off without waiting for a reply.

I can't let him be executed... We can't lose him!

Herscherik returned the way he came, avoiding all the patrolling eyes along the way. It was almost time for the castle staff to begin getting up. With a few close calls, he made it back to the royal quarters and headed to his father's chamber.

While his father had told him of its location before, this was his first time actually visiting it. Herscherik wondered if his father was in someone else's room, but light illuminated from under the door to the king's chamber. Without even knocking, Herscherik opened it.

"Father!"

“...Hersch?”

His father was sitting alone on the couch in front of the fireplace. Although the fire was nearly out, the lamp nearby was casting a warm glow over the room.

“What are you doing up so early? I thought you hated mornings. And look at your clothes...”

Herschik looked down at his own clothes to find that his coat, pants, and shoes were all covered in dirt, with a few leaves sticking to them. It was painfully obvious that he had been outside. But Herscherik paid it no mind and approached his father, who had stood up from the couch, and tugged on his father’s clothes with his dirtied little hands.

“Father, please listen to me!” Herscherik demanded with the intensity unbecoming of a three-year-old. He had been acting his age most of the time up until this point, but he couldn’t afford to keep up the ruse right now. A man’s life was on the line—perhaps even more than one. With that in mind, Herscherik couldn’t be bothered with acting like a proper three-year-old.

“Count Ruseria is not a traitor! He’s not... the bad... guy. He... was... set up...!”

Herschik would not have understood himself with his words being squeezed out from his lips in between sobs. As he looked up at his father with a desperate expression, his flooded tears blurred the handsome face of his father. Frustration, heartache, sorrow... All sorts of emotions were whirling inside Herscherik. For the first time since his rebirth, these feelings flooded him before pouring out of him in the form of tears and sobs.

“You...can’t...kill him...”

Herschik knew that he had to explain things from beginning to end, logically. Still, all he could muster were monosyllabic words. While he kept himself up by holding onto his father’s clothes, his eyes had dropped from looking up at his father to down at the carpet.

“...Herschik.”

His father gently stroked his head then picked him up. Today, the prince seemed heavier to Solye than he had all the other times he’d picked him up

before. More because of his increased presence than any gain in physical weight, Solye thought.

The king glanced at his butler, who had appeared without a sound. "I'm going out. I'll be back by breakfast."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The king acknowledged his butler's curt response and turned to Herscherik. His youngest prince had shown more emotion than ever before, turning his cheeks bright red as well as his eyes.

"Let's go for a little walk."

With that, King Solye walked out of his room with his son in his arms. In the royal quarters, workers were already bustling to prepare for the day. Their mornings were especially early because they kept the house of the most important people in the country. Anyone who worked here couldn't afford anything less than perfection at any given moment.

With those hard-working people in the corner of his eye, the king carried on. No one stopped him, of course. The only one who could ever stop the king in the royal quarters had been his most beloved late wife, Herscherik's mother. "Oh? Does my dear husband dare ignore his wife?" she used to say with a smile. It was well known in the royal quarters that this was how she convinced the king, who overworked himself day in and day out, to take a break. What at first appeared to be the queen begging for attention happened exclusively when the king looked particularly restless. As a result, no one dared to intervene. In fact, the workers in the royal quarters had often praised the queen in secret. Remembering this, Solye let out a chuckle.

What a funny thing to remember... Maybe because I'm walking down these halls with Hersch.

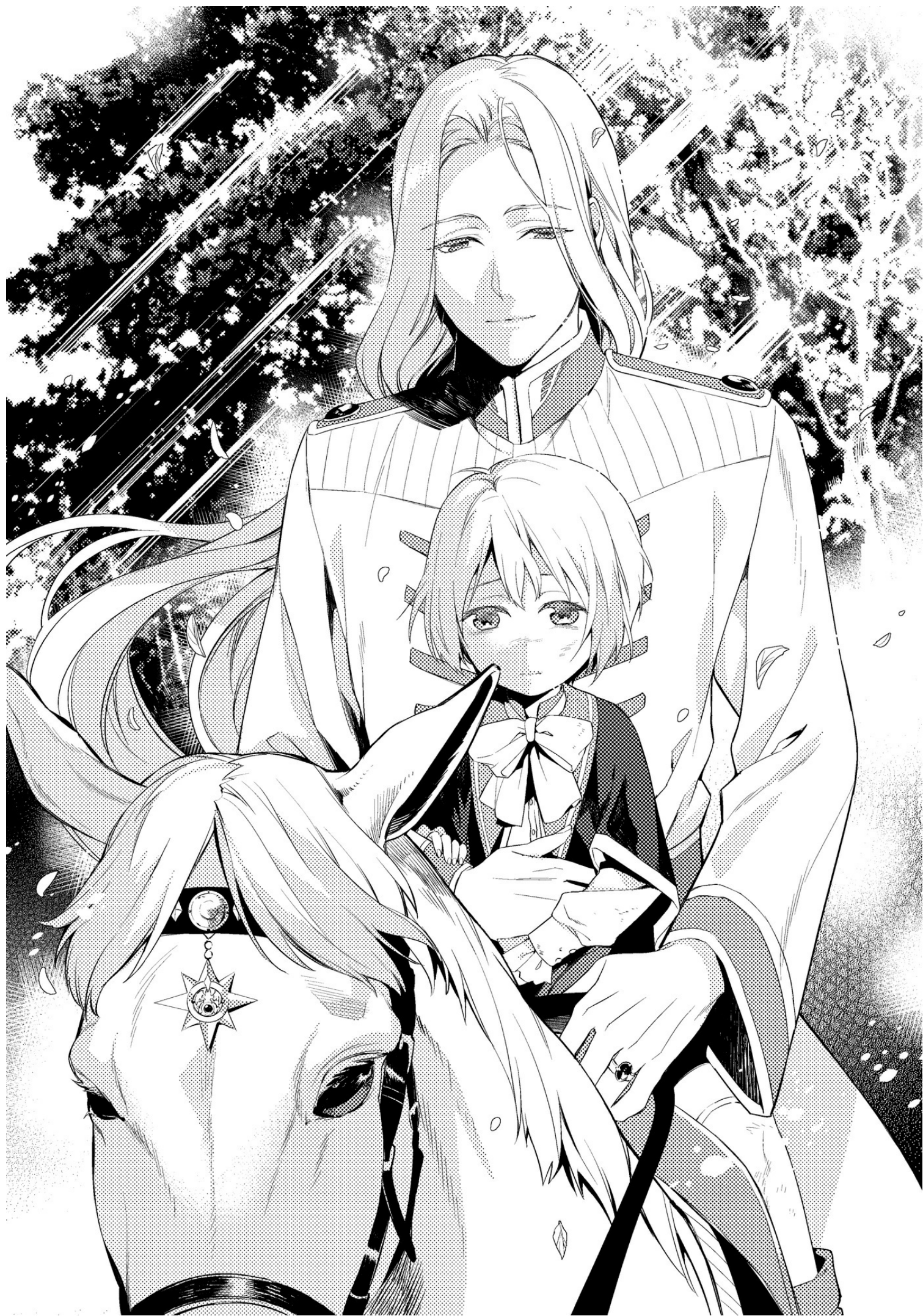
Solye looked at his son in his arms, who still had his face buried in his father's shoulder, holding back sobs. As he petted the prince's tiny head to calm him down, Solye hastened his step and headed straight to the stable out of the royal quarters.

When he arrived there, a stable hand was already standing by a saddled

walnut-colored mare. The king's experienced butler must have made arrangements ahead of them. As usual, Solye was impressed by his butler's thoroughness. Putting his son, who had finally stopped crying, onto the saddle first, Solye leapt onto his horse with a flourish and took the reins.

"Hersch. Hold on tight so you don't fall off."

Seeing that Herscherik had nodded and placed his hands on the saddle, Solye wrapped one arm around his son, holding up the reins with the other.



His mare, who had served the king almost as long as the butler, trotted slowly out of the back gate as soon as her riders were ready.

“We’re going to go a little faster.” The king held his son a little tighter and spurred his mare onwards.

When leaving by the castle’s rear entrance, there were no other buildings in sight. The capital was located in the southern part of the country, and further south past the capital was an expansive nature preserve, owned by the royal family and comprised of vast grassy fields, deep forests, and steep mountains that had towered over Gracis since its inception. It was a special land reserved for the royal family and those who were granted the king’s permission.

Solye had run his mare up a grassy hill that overlooked the castle and the entire capital behind it. The sun had already risen, and they could see the chimneys on houses down below puffing out smoke from what must have been the fires that cooked their breakfast.

“This is my favorite spot, you know. You’re only the second person I’ve ever brought up here, Herscherik.”

Solye climbed down from the horse and held up Herscherik, who had been immobilized on the saddle. His first horseback ride was bumpier than expected, and it had taken a toll on his rear end. Another ten minutes of that and Herscherik would have started crying for an entirely different reason. With her riders dismounted, the mare trotted some distance away and began munching on grass. Glancing at his horse, Solye sat on the ground, still holding Herscherik, and placed him on his lap.

“Hold on,” Solye said, then he uttered a string of words, as if he was singing. While those words were unintelligible to Herscherik, a gust of wind blew as if to answer a call, whirled around them to shake the grass, and swept off into the distance as Solye finished reciting them. Herscherik didn’t understand what had happened, but he at least understood that something *had* happened.

“...The first person I ever brought here was your mother, Hersch. What do you think she said on our first outing? ‘I’m starving! I should have brought lunch!’”

Herscherik didn’t understand why his father had suddenly started telling a

story about his mother. On the other hand, Solye smiled in remembrance. To Herscherik, his father seemed different from his usual self, somehow, who had always had a gentle smile shaded with sorrow. Now, though, his smile was as clear as the cloudless sky. As Herscherik remained speechless, his father chuckled and looked over the castle illuminated by the morning light before beginning to tell a story in the same tone one might use for reading from a children's storybook.

“...Let me tell you about a king...who's just a puppet. It may seem like everyone admires and serves him, but he's really nothing more than a marionette pulled by unseen strings.”

Herscherik didn't ask who that king was, because he could easily tell that his father was talking about himself.

“That king was never supposed to be a king at all. He was studying things like farming and only wanted to help his father, the king at the time, and his older brothers. He studied hard, too. But one day, his father and brothers fell ill. And that left no one else to be king.

“At the tender age of ten, the king didn't know a single thing about politics. That's when a villain used the young king to take control of the country. Even after the young king became an adult, that villain tried to control the king as he pleased.

“At first, the king tried to fight the villains around him. For his country, for his family, and for his people... But the villains bested him.”

In contrast to his smile in remembrance of Herscherik's mother, Solye was now expressionless. It was as if he was trying to prevent the pain of the past from hurting him again.

“Your oldest sibling, Hersch, was actually a sister. But she left us when her brother was still in their mother's belly. The same illness that befell the king's father and brothers had taken her to the Garden Above.”

“The same...?”

“Yes, the very illness. It only afflicts royalty. No one knows why. There had been no cases until a member of the royal family showed symptoms, and they

never found a cure. We didn't even have time to try and save her..." Solye tightly gripped the fist he wasn't using to hold up Herscherik. "After she passed, he said to the king, 'How unfortunate. Let's hope the same fate doesn't befall your next child.'"

His expression had flashed from tense neutrality to somewhere between anger and pain. Herscherik was already surprised by his father, who had only ever shown his gentle side so far, displaying any kind of negative emotion, but the story itself was astonishing in its own right. On the surface, the villain's statement was a show of sympathy. Reading between the lines, though, one could see the suggestion that the same thing could happen again. Anyone with a little perception would have realized who it was that had pulled the strings to kill the king's father, brothers, and firstborn. When Herscherik realized this, he could feel the blood drain from his face and chill in his veins.

How could anyone do such a thing...?

There was no proof. But Herscherik couldn't entertain the possibility of his father lying to him. It helped that he had heard Ruseria's story before this, too—not to mention Barbosse's mocking, condescending expression. Herscherik's intuition was right to judge the minister as a scoundrel on his first impression.

This is too cruel...

How could anyone be so cruel? Herscherik didn't understand. He'd had a niece in his previous life. When Ryoko first met her, she immediately adored her and wanted to protect her unconditionally. Ryoko would have done the same for any other baby, too. Why would this man ever kill an infant? Herscherik didn't know, and he didn't want to know.

"...So, the king stopped fighting. He chose his family over his country and his people," his father concluded, with a weak laugh. To Herscherik, it seemed like he was crying instead. "I resigned myself to being a marionette."

Solye had no other choice. In order to protect his family and those dear to him, he had to do as Barbosse told him.

Barbosse was cunning. He had brought in wife after wife for Solye, to increase the number of hostages that chained him to the castle. The ladies knew nothing about any of this. They had no secret agenda or jaded outlook on their lives;

they only came in hopes of supporting the king. That's why Solye couldn't reject them, and the villains seemed to have chosen those women specifically with those criteria in mind. If Solye had refused, they might have been killed, deemed useless as a hostage. Even though Solye knew he was only tightening his noose each time, he couldn't refuse them. These women were no fools, either. Once they were in the royal quarters and understood their positions, they couldn't do anything about it, for the same reason as Solye. Just as he wanted to protect his family, so did they. In order to protect each other, no one could fight back... Except for one queen.

"Herscherik, to tell you the truth, I didn't think I'd marry your mother."

She had been different. She alone laughed off her predicament and said to the dejected Solye, "Why would I need any other reason to be with the man I love? I'll beat those cheap schemers back into the world of bad melodramas where they belong!" With that declaration, she fit right in to the royal quarters, cheered up the other wives, and loved their children like her own. Never bothered by the insults of the minister or other nobles, she often shut them down with her own words. She was a proud and kind woman undaunted by anything. But even she couldn't contend with the power of nature. Leaving her child behind, she departed for the Garden Above. The only silver lining was that at least she didn't fall to Barbosse's schemes.

"So, Hersch, I will protect you. I've known I would since the moment you were born."

...I didn't realize.

Drawing on his memories of reading novels and playing video games in the fantasy genre during his previous life, Herscherik had always felt strange about his situation. Despite being a prince, Meria was the only one who ever took care of him. In any of those fantasy stories, a prince was always surrounded by various servants, workers, and men-and women-in-waiting. At first, he thought that they were trying to keep the expenses for their Seventh Prince low by only having Meria tend to him. Now, Herscherik understood that he had Meria alone by his side so it was easier for the king to keep an eye on any unwanted interactions. Moreover, his father had come to see him at various times of the day to make sure he was all right. Even if a nefarious figure were to bribe the

workers of the royal quarters, they couldn't so easily sneak in if they didn't know when the king would be with Herscherik. If Solye was this thorough, Herscherik thought, he had probably restricted visitors, too. Unlike his brothers, Herscherik had no family on his mother's side to protect him. If someone was going to use a prince to threaten the king, it was more likely that they would come for Herscherik, who posed the least risk.

Solye spoke to the speechless Herscherik, controlling his tone as if to suppress his emotions. "When he came up to us at the party last night, I thought maybe he could be the one to defeat that evil man... I had hope." A short-lived hope. Even he was just another marionette dancing to the pull of Barbosse's strings. "...I'm sure you're disappointed that your father's such a selfish king, Herscherik."

After a moment, Herscherik shook his head.

If I was in your shoes, I think I would have done the same.

He would have protected his precious family before faceless strangers, too. Herscherik did understand that it was selfish for a king to do so. A king had to be devoid of self, the lonely top of the social pyramid. A king had the duty and responsibility to prioritize the country and its people over his beloved wife or his own children. He should take advantage of his family members in any way he could, then cut them off when they were no longer useful. In that sense, Solye did fail as a king. But as an individual, could anyone have accused him of being selfish? Sealing away his own emotions, suffering through humiliation all this time... If he was the patriarch of any other family, no one would have blamed him for his choices.

But Solye was the king. The throne he never wanted still weighed him down with responsibilities he had never asked for. Herscherik could easily imagine his father, being far too kind, tormented endlessly by those responsibilities. He saw Solye as a very gentle and kind man. The people of his country, though, must have only seen their king as a bumbling fool. Herscherik finally realized that his father had not changed out of his clothes from the party yesterday and figured that he must have stayed up by his fireplace all night, troubled by the event. Looking, perhaps, for some way to save Ruseria.

“...Then why doesn't the king get rid of the bad guy?”

Have him executed without a trial. A king, a man with that kind of power, could do it. Even though Herscherik knew that it was the wrong thing to do, he had to ask.

With a sad smile, his father stroked the head of his youngest son.

“Because then, the king would be a dictator. Not a king. I would rather be a fool of a king than a dictator... I don't want to become what he is.” Drawing a line of morality—that was the only thing Solye could be proud of in his life and in his reign. “I really am the worst king there is...” Defeated, Solye confessed how he truly felt.

Even as he resigned himself to taking orders from his puppeteer, he couldn't afford to follow *every* order. No matter how he was disrespected, Solye was still the king. Though it took a heavy toll on his mind, the king had always played a delicate game of parley with the minister and his men. For the most part, all of the nobles that opposed the minister had been dispatched from their positions or exiled from the capital and the political scene. Some had fallen to illness or accidents. This led to Solye facing the minister's gang alone, with no hope of anyone backing him up. Whenever they proposed policies only designed for their personal gains, for example, the king did everything he could to minimize the damage to his people. Still, the kingdom was gradually rotting from the inside and sinking into the mud. On his own, Solye couldn't stop his country from crumbling away.

“But I still...” *Wanted to protect the people I love.* Solye's drained and painful expression finished his sentence for him.

A king and a dictator may appear similar in nature, but they were separated by an uncrossable line. Even if Solye made himself a dictator and took out the puppeteer in the shadows without just cause, it would only create another abscess that ate away at the country. When a similar situation would inevitably arise again, Solye would be forced to use his power again, this time without justice. As a result, his unchecked power would only deteriorate the country further and bring about its doom. There were many countries that had ended this way in the world Herscherik inhabited in his previous life. He did

understand the state of his nation and his father's predicament. Still, he couldn't let it go.

"But...! But!"

What about Count Ruseria!?

Herscherik's eyes were flooded again with tears that he thought had dried up. Faced with the fact that he was his father's heaviest shackle and the reality that he could do nothing about it, a sense of powerlessness overtook Herscherik. He dove into his father's arms. He hated himself for not being able to do anything but cry... which made even more tears streak down his cheeks.

The mare simply watched the father and son from afar.

When his master returned to the room, the butler with the deeper-than-emerald steel-colored hair, Rook, greeted them with a perfect bow.

"Welcome back, Your Majesty."

He looked up with his nearly black eyes to find Solye carrying the Seventh Prince Herscherik, who had cried himself to sleep.

"Thank you. Can you make my bed, please? And let Meria know. She must be worried."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

With a short reply, Rook immediately headed into the bedroom to make the bed. That being said, Solye hadn't slept a wink the previous night, so he practically just had to run his hand over the comforter.

After Rook left his quarters, Solye gently lowered his son down onto his bed and tucked him in. With one finger, the king wiped away the tear streaks on Herscherik's cheeks and stroked his hair. Each and every movement Solye made overflowed with his love for his son. He silently stepped out of the bedroom and closed the door before letting out a long sigh.

Perhaps it was too early to tell him.

He knew that he had to tell Herscherik the truth sooner or later... He *thought* he knew that, but he didn't realize how soon that day would come. Solye

trudged to the sofa and sat down, letting out another long sigh. After silence had ruled the room for a few moments, Rook returned.

“How was Meria?” Solye asked, recalling how the brunette and small-statured Meria had served as the only lady-in-waiting to Herscherik’s mother.

She wasn’t of noble birth but a commoner from the countryside who began working at the castle after graduating from the academy with excellent grades. A woman of her status would not have had a chance of working in the royal quarters if it hadn’t been for the insistence of the king’s favorite wife, who wanted her to serve as her lady-in-waiting. This meant that Meria had no connections to the nobility nor any influence from the minister’s allies. She was someone Solye could trust, and she had even volunteered to serve as Herscherik’s nanny.

“She was worried, but I let her know that the prince is here.” After a beat, Rook continued in the tone of a concerned friend, “...Did you tell him everything, Solye?” Rook was, in fact, concerned for the king who now wore a morose expression. Rook was the king’s only confidant, his childhood friend, and one of the very few men he could trust. “Did you mind your surroundings?”

Solye nodded at his confidant who had given him a sharp glare. “Just to be safe, I searched the area and set up a barrier before telling him... Besides, they wouldn’t expect me to have such a weighty conversation with a three-year-old.”

“Right... I never expected your youngest prince to be the first one to ask you.”

Rook had also expected the princes and princesses to realize the state of their country and come demanding their father of some answers. But neither Rook nor Solye had expected the youngest to beat everyone else to the punch. They would have bet that the First Prince would have been the one to come to him first, within the next few years or so. Their expectations about the timing of it aside, Solye had always been determined to tell his children the complete truth when they asked for it. That was his responsibility as a king and father. The rest he would leave up to each child to decide—whether to remain a member of the royal family or forsake their position to live free... or to join the minister, even.

Come to think of it, Hersch was always a little different than his brothers.

Until he was one year old, he had grown up similarly to the rest of Solye's children. After that point, though, he seldom cried. Instead, Solye had noticed that Herscherik often followed people with his eyes, as if to observe their temperament. As soon as he could stand, he started changing and eating on his own, too. Herscherik did occasionally show some childish stubbornness, but he mostly behaved very well. He never threw a tantrum; he kept his emotion in check like an adult. Come to think of it, Herscherik had grown up so fast that even his childish demands seemed like an act at times.

Now, Solye recalled that Herscherik had always seemed timid or embarrassed when he saw him. For a while he was concerned that his son disliked him, but when he'd asked Meria about it and discovered that the prince acted the same way toward her, Solye was quite relieved. It seemed as though Herscherik somehow did not know how to be a child. Still, Herscherik was the one that came to him this morning, showing his emotions practically for the first time, begging him to save Ruseria.

"But the prince is only three. Didn't you think to play it off?" *You should have*, Rook thought, criticizing Solye with his eyes. Herscherik was so young that Rook couldn't help but give his master such a glance.

"Not after he looked at me like he did," Solye shook his head.

He had considered for a moment how to dodge the question, thinking Herscherik was much too young. At first, he did consider postponing the conversation. But, as soon as he saw Herscherik's unwavering, teary eyes, Solye knew that his son wouldn't be satisfied with a cheap excuse. Besides, he could easily imagine that Herscherik would never back down unless he explained the cruel reality of how the marionette king could not save the count.

"What's on the docket today?"

"...After breakfast, you have a meeting with Minister Barbosse. Regarding Count Ruseria."

"All right." Solye let out another long sigh.

The true ruler of the castle struck while the iron was hot. Solye suspected that Barbosse intended to finish the job before the king had any time to react. In fact, the minister must have orchestrated this outcome. More than anybody,

Solye knew what kind of man he was dealing with.

And I couldn't do anything about it...

The sense of powerlessness that had become so familiar since his coronation overwhelmed Solye once again. All through the night, he had tried to find a way out for the count, to no avail. That's how thoroughly Barbosse had prepared to frame Ruseria. Solye imagined that he must have gotten hold of some incredibly damning evidence to make Barbosse pull out all the stops like this. Barbosse was going to make sure Ruseria was disposed of, and the king knew that the minister would force him to dig the count's grave alongside him.

All because I'm powerless...

Putting all of his weight onto the couch, Solye gazed up at the ceiling. Torn up by his feeling of powerlessness, the king sighed heavily. As he lay there in silence, Rook proposed, "...Solye. If you wish, I can take the count and..."

"No," Solye interrupted his old friend in a stoic tone he rarely employed.

"But..."

"If you do, he'll come after you... I should be the only one who lives with this guilt."

As his friend tried to argue, Solye turned his eyes to him, stopping him with the shake of the head. Rook could feasibly help Ruseria escape. He could get the count out of prison and hide him in his family home far from the capital. If he went through with that, though, Rook and his family would be Barbosse's next target. The Febvres, Rook's family, had already been forced out of the capital by the minister. They were lucky to be alive. Some nobles that opposed Barbosse had ended up dying or losing their titles as their land or business mysteriously failed.

On the surface, Barbosse was never involved with any of those cases, and despite how suspicious it seemed, no one had ever confronted him about it. No one could. That's how much control Volf Barbosse held over this country. The most Solye could do was hold the reins back a little to keep the minister and his men from going too far. More often than not, the king couldn't even do that.

Solye looked down at his powerless hands. Even though he hadn't taken any

direct action to hurt all of those people, he saw his hands soaked in blood. When he faced the minister after losing his first daughter, he was forced to acknowledge the fact that he was the only one who could protect his family from this beast wearing the skin of a man.

“...Feel free to be disgusted with me, Rook.”

For the first time in a while, Solye addressed his friend by his name. They had known each other since Solye was born. They were raised by the same nanny and brought up in the same way. To this man, whom Solye had spent more of this life with than anybody else, he could show his honest weakness.

His friend answered the feeble suggestion with a chuckle.

“On the day you fall to the Darkness Below, Solye, I will be by your side.”

Rook didn't say this because he was the king's butler but because he was Solye's friend.

A nostalgic view spread out before Herscherik... returned to the body of Ryoko Hayakawa. She could tell that she was in a dream. Her body felt weightless, and the view before her was monochrome like a film from a bygone era. Ryoko recalled reading in some magazine column once that dreams were, by nature, generated so that people could organize their memories and that they were always colorless; it was only her mind colorizing them as she processed the dream upon waking.

She stood before her parents' home. The house was 25 years old at the time; they had moved into it when Ryoko was still in grade school. Soon after that, her youngest sister was born. Ryoko recalled taking care of her first younger sister while her mother worked hard to pack up their old house with her father. 25 years had taken its toll on the once brand-new house, but it was her home, filled with precious memories, nonetheless.

Under the darkened sky, she could see that the front door was adorned with a ceremonial decoration indicating a wake, and next to that stood a sign that read “Hayakawa.” People dressed in mourning were coming and going through this door.

A funeral...? Or a wake?

As if she was being drawn by an unseen force, Ryoko walked into her home with faltering steps. Although she passed by some black-clad family members she hardly recognized, no one seemed to notice or talk to her.

The front door opened onto the living room where she found her niece sitting on the couch. Her eyes were swollen red, and she had a handkerchief clutched in her hands. Next to her, her niece's father watched over his daughter, concerned. Ryoko found it surprising that her rebellious niece was sitting quietly by her father.

Through the living room, Ryoko arrived at the traditional Japanese room. Years ago, since it was the sunniest room in the house, it had been occupied by her grandmother until she was consumed by dementia. The people in mourning seemed to be going in and out of this room in particular. Ryoko peeked inside. Her eyes widened.

Oh, that's what's going on.

Albeit slightly shocking, Ryoko made sense of what was happening. The room was filled with the smell of incense, as well as her family and bosses and numerous bouquets and gifts of sympathy. Ryoko found the funeral photo of herself, and her own body lying motionless on her bed.

This is my wake.

It seemed too vivid to be a dream. In fact, she recalled how dreams were supposed to be a simple reorganization of memories. Ryoko wondered why she was imagining such a scene when it obviously was not one of her actual memories. More than anything else, it felt bizarre to see herself dead.

Taking advantage of the fact that no one seemed to see her, Ryoko approached her body on the bed and observed it up close, from head to toe. For one thing, she was relieved that her body wasn't torn to bits in the accident. She had heard once before that terribly damaged bodies were wrapped in bandages like mummies or put in a closed casket for their wake. She had never been to any event like that, though. Now that the mortician had done up her face, Ryoko thought her corpse looked prettier than she did when she was alive. She didn't know how to feel about that.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you for coming.”

Ryoko turned toward a pair of voices to find her direct supervisor from work speaking to her mother. In the place of her father, who sat there staring at the funeral photo with an empty expression, Ryoko’s sisters had been greeting the extended family and acquaintances.

“Thank you for giving us the picture. She wasn’t good with photos... I was looking all over for a recent one when you brought us that picture from your company retreat.”

...I just don’t like being in pictures, mom.

Ryoko never hated her face, per se, but she never particularly liked it, either. Ever since grade school, she had been bullied and called ugly for it, and whenever she took a photo with someone else in it, her face always seemed too big in comparison. So, even when *Purikura* photo booths were all the rage among her peers, Ryoko had always refused, no matter who was asking or what meal they offered to buy in exchange.

For the past few years, I always ended up with a double chin if I was looking downward at all...

Said photo from the company retreat was a mandatory group photo, which explained the slight discomfort she showed in the funeral photo.

“Miss Hayakawa was a great asset to our company. When things were tough, everyone was lifted up by her dedication, her smile, and the cheerful sound of her voice,” her supervisor said.

A particularly successful area manager chimed in. “Absolutely. At every branch, we all knew to call Miss Hayakawa at headquarters whenever we were in a pickle.”

Ryoko was surprised that a man with such a busy schedule had come to the wake of a no-name office worker like her.

“Miss Hayakawa was brilliant and caring. She also had a tough side, but she never turned her back on anyone in trouble. Many of our local employees

would have loved to come. I'm here on the behalf of everyone at the company, so as to not intrude."

That's why I'd get calls every day...

Ryoko recalled a particular day in the office. In addition to her normal tasks, she would often receive calls asking specifically for her. The caller would range from a branch employee or managers all the way up to a district manager. They would ask about all sorts of things that Ryoko, for the life of her, couldn't see how they related to her job description.

"Hey, Ryo Baby, how's it going? I got something to ask you, by the way..." That was just one example. Ryoko couldn't exactly tell someone above her pay grade to stop calling her "Ryo Baby." Looking back on it now, it was definitely inappropriate conduct, but Ryoko was just too busy at work to think about it at the time. Besides, once they got her on the phone, Ryoko was hooked by curiosity. She would look into anything she needed to, no matter if the question should have been directed to a different department in the first place, so she could make any reports and suggestions. Thanks to that, she ended up in a vicious cycle where she kept learning more and more about various departments within the company, which only led to more and more calls requesting her help.

I mean it wasn't like I didn't like being relied on.

Working at headquarters, Ryoko sometimes felt like she never really saw the fruits of her labor. Unlike jobs at the branch locations, she never interacted with customers directly or saw tangible results like boosted sales that could be plotted on a chart. But when someone came to her for advice and thanked her, she felt fulfilled. Like she had a purpose. She wanted to learn things she didn't know yet. She wanted to feel needed. While it sounded like her boss and the district manager thought of those qualities in a positive light, Ryoko only ever saw them as self-gratifying.

Looking back on it, I was such a petty person. My bosses are painting me to be this... Wow, this is embarrassing.

Knowing that no one could see her, Ryoko clasped her temples in her palms where she stood. In contrast, her mother's eyes thinned into a remnant of a

smile.

“Really...” Her mother seemed exhausted, her cheeks sunken. She seemed to have aged an entire decade since Ryoko last saw her. Like her body had shrunk. “Ryoko didn’t tell us much about her work... I’m glad she was able to help the people of her company,” she said and turned to Ryoko’s funeral photo. “She was our oldest, so I relied on her for a lot of things, too. I was worried that I was preventing her from finding a husband by doing so, but it sounds like she was very fulfilled at work.”

Ryoko reminisced. Her work in her previous life hadn’t been easy. There were plenty of unpleasant experiences, even to the point where she had considered quitting on a few occasions. In hindsight, she would credit her family, as well as her bosses and coworkers, for her ability to tough it out.

How her boss and her mother had described her felt like an answer to the equation that was Ryoko’s life. She worked hard, delved into her hobbies, and spent time with the family she loved. All of it had come to an instant, irreversible conclusion in that accident, but Ryoko now believed that she had lived each ordinary day in her previous life as best she could. Even if no one else saw beauty in the life she lived, Ryoko wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Herscherik opened his eyes to see an unfamiliar ceiling. He was confused for a moment because of the dream he just had but concluded that he must have fallen asleep after listening to his father’s story, and he was now lying in his father’s bedroom. The bed he was on was made of the highest quality materials. A set of thick curtains blocked out the sunlight from the windows beside it.

“It’s not right...” Herscherik mumbled and sat up.

He clenched both of his fists. They were much smaller than they had been in his previous life. Maybe it was just a self-gratifying dream his subconscious had conjured up. Still, he knew that Ryoko’s life was the best she could have had. An ordinary life where her hard work was rewarded. But in this world, the ones who strove for justice were punished, while the deceptive ones mocked the weak with impunity.

“The world can’t be like this.”

Herscherik wondered. In the two years he had spent in vain since his reincarnation, how many people had cried to themselves in the dark? How many had died? Angry at himself for turning his back on reality and thoughtlessly wasting his days for those past two years, Herscherik could still do nothing but wet his cheeks with tears at his powerlessness.

Despite the season being early spring, Ruseria’s cell became rather cold after sundown, making his breath materialize in puffs of white. The count was spending his second night in his cell sitting on the simple cot on the floor and staring up at the small, barred window, his only connection to the outside world.

I wonder if Prince Herscherik is all right.

The sight of the youngest prince, with his blond hair and blue eyes, visiting him all alone in the early morning just to hand him his pocket watch refused to leave Ruseria’s mind. When he had first met the prince at the party, his initial impression was that Herscherik was unassertive, just like the king. His blue eyes had floated nervously around the party, like a faint light parting through a layer of thick, dark clouds. His far-from-flashy, muted blond hair had reinforced the count’s ghostly impression of the prince. When that same prince came to Ruseria’s cell, however, he was practically a different person. While there was still a slight shade of nervousness about him, his eyes shone incomparably brighter than they had at the party. Ruseria couldn’t turn away from Herscherik’s gentle, sapphire-like eyes full of concern for his injury. Ruseria felt more than curiosity about them. The instant he met the prince’s eyes, an emotion akin to awe and respect had overtaken him, and he could not avert his gaze from the prince’s. Instinctively, Ruseria had bowed in a pledge of loyalty and given the prince every answer he’d asked for. In the end, the prince ran off, declaring that he would stop Ruseria’s execution.

I hope he’s all right...

Despite standing on the brink of death, the count’s mind was completely occupied by Herscherik’s well-being. Perhaps because the prince was now the

same age Ruseria's son had been when he had lost him. Although his son wasn't blond or blue-eyed, or as handsome as Herscherik for that matter, the count couldn't help but see a resemblance between them.

Then, Ruseria heard footsteps coming down the hall outside the cell. A single pair of feet, the count deduced. While he also had an easy guess as to the identity of his visitor, Ruseria couldn't be bothered to look away from the window. The footsteps stopped in front of his cell, as expected.

"This suits you well, Count Ruseria."

With a silent sigh, Ruseria turned around to find the man who had been the catalyst of his demise. He had guessed correctly. "What do you want, Viscount Grim?"

"Hmph. I'll be Count Grim before long." The chubby man raised the corner of his lips in a victorious smirk.

Viscount Grim was one of the nobles aligned with Minister Barbosse. It was his embezzlement of national funds that Ruseria had uncovered. The viscount had claimed an exorbitant amount of governmental aid by making falsified reports.

"A soon-to-be count has deigned to come and converse with a lowly criminal like me? Glad to hear you have plenty of free time on your hands," Ruseria answered, revealing a portion of his annoyance.

Grim's expression shifted from triumphant to snarling. "Hand it over, and I'll let you live."

"It? Whatever are you talking about, O noble Count?"

"Enough of your games!" Grim kicked the metal door of the cell. It made a considerably loud clang, but Ruseria didn't hear any guards stir down the hall. He assumed that Grim had already paid them off. "The thing you have!"

"Oh... *It*. Hm."

Now which thing is he talking about...? Ruseria racked his brain without showing it. After spending so long gathering evidence and testimonies, he had accumulated a considerable amount of "things." He regretted, above all, that

what was supposed to be his most surefire and incriminating piece of evidence was nothing more than a bait in the minister's trap. Not that it mattered to Ruseria now that he was imprisoned without possibility of release, but it seemed that one of the pieces of evidence in his possession was very inconvenient for Grim. What else could have riled him up this much?

"Why bother asking me? Go find it yourself." Ruseria dismissed him then answered his own question in his head. *In fact, considering that it took him so long to come to me, I'm sure he's rummaged through my effects already.*

"If I could find it, I wouldn't be talking to you!" Grim kicked the metal door again.

Ruseria frowned at the loud clanging of the door and bars, exasperated by the predictable answer.

"If you tell me where it is, right now, I'll make a case for canceling your execution tomorrow. Hand over the letter!"

"Make a case to no avail, right?" Ruseria was surprised at the lack of emotion in his own words. He opened his pocket watch to see that it had already passed eleven o'clock at night. "I can't imagine that he'd miss this golden opportunity just for the sake of your personal security after going through the trouble of sending an assassin my way."

Barbosse had indeed hired an assassin against Ruseria. That was what had illuminated for Ruseria that he had little time left and that he had already acquired a piece of evidence that the minister wanted to recover at all costs. That's why Ruseria had come to the capital to present it, despite his perilous position.

I was just off the mark on which piece of evidence he was concerned about...

With a note of self-deprecation, the count closed his watch and held it tight in his hand. He had already prepared for the worst when he decided to come to the capital.

"Begone, Viscount Grim. Or *Count* Grim. ...You have my gratitude." Ruseria smirked.

As soon as Grim saw Ruseria's face, a shiver ran down Grim from head to toe,

as if he was doused by a bucket of ice water.

“Thanks to you, I can die serving my country, unashamed of the life I’ve lived. I’ll be waiting for the arrival of you and your whole lot in the Darkness Below, alongside its wardens.”

People in this world believed that all lives became mere souls after death and transcended to the afterlife, where they would find themselves in one of two places. Those deemed by God to have a benevolent soul were invited into the Garden Above, where they spent some time in unbridled exaltation before reincarnating into their next life. On the other hand, those deemed by God to have a malevolent soul were sent to the Darkness Below, where the Dark King judged the crimes of their souls, sentencing them to a torture worthy of their crimes. After serving their punishments, those souls were purified and reborn into a new life. There were wardens that guarded the gate to the Darkness Below, preventing any evil soul from escaping that realm. In this world, parents disciplined their children with the threat that the wardens of the Darkness Below would snatch away any misbehaving children.

All Ruseria had done was bark out a threat like a cornered dog, but Grim still felt like he had somehow lost. In order to shake that feeling, he slammed his clenched fists against the steel door. The uproarious clang echoed through the cells once again.

As the sound faded, Grim growled from the pit of his stomach. “Enough of your yapping... Only the strong and the cunning survive in this world. Those who are neither, the fools, are rewarded with death after a lifetime of servitude, or pay for their insolence with their life! That’s why I will survive, and you will die!” Without waiting for Ruseria to respond, Grim turned around and walked away with large strides.

I have all the time I want to look for it, Grim repeated to himself. *I will rule his land once he’s dead, after all.* Still, he never managed to wipe away that sensation of defeat.

After silently watching Grim’s retreat, Ruseria shrugged and stroked his watch. He pushed the button in firmly to reveal the portrait. It was the only keepsake he had to remind him of his wife and child. The portrait had been

drawn soon after his son's birth. Ruseria had often left in the midst of his duties to visit him, only to be scolded by his wife. Each day, he had found joy in watching his son grow and contentment in his wife smiling beside him. But now Ruseria had lost everything. He would even lose his life before the next sunset. He wondered if Grim was right—if only the strong and the cunning deserved to live in happiness while the weak were left with no choice but to accept injustice. Ruseria couldn't be sure.

“...Count Ruseria.”

“My Prince?” The youngest prince was peering through the barred window just as he had that morning. Bathed in moonlight, his face looked a little reddened. He looked down at the count, clearly on the brink of tears. “I meant to ask you this morning... Isn't anyone with you? It's dangerous to be out on your own.” Youngest or otherwise, it was inconceivable for a prince (a three-year-old, no less) to be out at night without a chaperone. Herscherik shook his head at the question and seemed to be indecisive on whether he should say something or not. “What is it, My Prince? Even though spring has come, it can get cold at night. Please return to your room so you...”

“I'm sorry, Count Ruseria. I spoke with father, but it didn't help.” As soon as Herscherik interrupted Ruseria, large teardrops overflowed from his gem-like eyes. Despite Herscherik's attempts to stop the tears by wiping his eyes with his sleeve over and over and biting his lip, he couldn't keep the droplets from rolling down his cheeks. *Father tried too, but he couldn't do anything.* That sentence sounded too much like he was making an excuse for Herscherik to dare utter it. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry... sorry...” Until he got here, Herscherik was determined not to cry. But when he met Ruseria face to face and uttered the desolate result of his appeal, he was overcome with sobbing. No longer able to meet Ruseria's eyes, Herscherik groveled to the ground, unbothered by his face digging into the dirt. Herscherik hated himself for being so powerless and didn't know how to face Ruseria.

“...Prince Herscherik, please lift your head.” Ruseria's gentle voice reached Herscherik's ear. When the prince timidly looked up, he found Ruseria's face nearly pressed up against the bars of the window and a pocket watch being presented to him. “Take this with you.”

“What...?”

Without giving Herscherik a chance to respond, Ruseria shoved the watch at him.



“Count, this is something precious to you, isn’t it? I can’t accept this!”

“I won’t be able to take it with me.” Ruseria stopped Herscherik from hurriedly returning the pocket watch. Then, although he thought it might have been against court etiquette, he wiped the dirt from the prince’s face. Feeling the particular sensation of a child’s skin, Ruseria reminisced about how his son often played in the dirt and muddied his face. His son had chuckled at each wipe of Ruseria’s hand on his cheek. The prince before him now did not smile. Somehow, that fact felt very regrettable to Ruseria. “Thank you, My Prince. Now that I know someone like you has a hand in this country, I can leave this world with a shred of hope.”

When the indictment at the party didn’t go as planned, Ruseria had tossed the watch on purpose, in a split-second gambit that someone would take notice. Ruseria had won his own bet. The seed to save his country had now been sown.

“Live well, My Prince. And please save our nation.” Ruseria was aware of how reckless that sounded. What could the Seventh Prince, a three-year-old, possibly do to that effect? Still, he couldn’t help but hold out hope. Herscherik was the only member of the royal family out of everyone at the party who had come and directly spoken to him. This prince made decisions and acted on his own accord. “You’ll be in danger if someone finds you. Please return to your room.” Ruseria couldn’t afford to lose the only ray of hope he had found at the brink of darkness.

“Count Ruseria!”

“...My Liege.” Pulling his hand away from Herscherik’s soft cheek, Ruseria took a step back and knelt. Then, raising his right hand to his chest, he took a bow. This was the utmost display of respect that a subject could make to his master. “My body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way.” Ruseria lowered his head further. “Even though my body will perish, my soul will remain forever by your side to protect you... Please forgive me.” Even as he faced his own execution the next day, Ruseria couldn’t help but make this plea. He no longer cared to wait for his nemeses in the Darkness Below; he only wanted to be by

the prince's side. If anything, he wished that he had met the prince sooner. If he had, perhaps his life would have come to a different conclusion at a different time.

Herscherik wiped his tears with the sleeve of his coat and stood up. He hadn't learned much about the etiquette of this country, so he didn't know how to respond to Ruseria's oath. So, he simply spoke his mind. "I welcome you, Count Ruseria. Even as your body leaves this world, may your soul be forever by my side. I will not let your words, your thoughts, and your life be in vain."

Ruseria dared not lift his head until Herscherik had concluded. The silver pocket watch in Herscherik's hand shone with the faint reflection of the moonlight.

The extravagant room normally used for guests to hold an audience with the king was now darkened, with all of its windows covered in thick curtains. The faintly illuminating lights seemed to further weigh down the atmosphere of the room. On the tallest throne sat the king, with the minister beside him in a seat almost as tall. By their side stood the adjudicator, reading out Ruseria's charges. They were surrounded by nobles, officers, and knights all standing in formation without a word.

They added some charges... I guess they're making me the scapegoat for those, too, Ruseria noted in self-defeat. While his hands were cuffed, he was still clad in attire becoming of his nobility. Combined with his neatly combed hair, his appearance was unmistakably that of a gentleman, in contrast to the treatment he had received when he was arrested.

"In consideration of your rank as a noble of the kingdom and by the mercy of His Majesty, you are hereby granted the privilege of self execution."

A golden chalice embedded with jewels was presented to Ruseria. Self execution, in this case, meant suicide by poison. Ruseria glanced up to find Grim smirking behind the minister, who wore a solemn expression. The king, on the other hand, stared down at Ruseria with an expression that was utterly devoid of color. He was still none other than Solye Gracis, the father of Herscherik, to whom Ruseria had sworn his loyalty to the previous night.

...I used to think they were much alike. Perhaps Ruseria was biased. Still, it seemed that the prince he saw under that moonlight had not given up hope like the king before him now clearly had. The prince sincerely wanted to help Ruseria, whom he had only ever met the night of his birthday party. Furthermore, the prince lamented and suffered from the realization of his own powerlessness. *Even still, my liege is not without hope.* Ruseria could see hope in Herscherik's jewel-like eyes, unlike in the king's.

Ruseria was uncuffed and given the golden chalice filled with wine. He wasn't afraid to die. He did feel some apprehension, if he was being honest with himself, but his newfound ray of hope overruled it.

Dear Creator... Dear gods... May your blessings be upon my liege. Long live Prince Herscherik, and...

"Glory and prosperity be to Gracis!" Ruseria swallowed the contents of the chalice.

The cathedral bells could be heard from the open window. The bells were rung to show the dead their way out and to serve as a guide for any and all departing spirits, good or evil. That's what Meria had taught Herscherik. Now, the bells tolled to announce Ruseria's departure from this world. Sitting on a chair by the window as his silky blond locks fluttered in the spring breeze, Herscherik tightened his grip on the pocket watch in his hand when the sound of the first bell reached him.

Only the strong and the cunning survive in this world. Those who are neither, the fools, are rewarded with death after a lifetime of servitude or pay for their insolence with their life!

He recalled what Viscount Grim had said to Ruseria the night before. After watching the scene unfold from the other side of the barred window, Herscherik couldn't get Grim's face out of his head.

In a way, that philosophy could apply to Japan, too.

He recalled his previous life. Whenever political corruption came to light, the media had swarmed the culprit, demanding a resignation or some other form of retribution. Ryoko had been infuriated at the news, too, that someone would

abuse tax money gathered from the people. Still, it wasn't a world where one powerful figure could squash such scandals. Of course, no one responsible for such a thing would be sentenced to death, either.

But this world is different.

The one who tried to do right was eliminated by the powerful and cunning evil. This world was crueler than the world of any video game or novel Ryoko had experienced. Herscherik, having enjoyed fantasy genre stories in his previous life, had been living in this world with the same thoughtlessness as someone living in a world on the other side of a screen.

"What will you do, Hersch?" his father had asked him after he finished telling the entire story on that hill, as his youngest son failed to contain his stream of tears. *"If you wish, you can leave the royal family. Or you can marry a princess in some safer country. If there's something you're passionate about, you can pursue a career in it, too."* It was the best expression of love his father could muster. Even if Herscherik remained in the royal family, Solye could only imagine him being fashioned into another marionette or simply killed off by the minister. Unlike the other princes, Herscherik had no protection.

Herscherik thought the minister might even try to kill his father and make Herscherik their second-generation marionette. If the people were to revolt, the royal family would be slaughtered. Barbosse kept the king alive while maintaining himself as the true ruling power as a contingency for such an event. If Herscherik pursued one of the options his father had presented to him, he would most likely live out his life in safety. If he left the royal family and never looked back, he would probably find happiness, too.

But what about Father? What about the count, who departed this world after trusting me with everything? What about all the people who are neither powerful nor cunning?

"Just and honest people made to suffer simply for being weaker than the rest of the world... It's not right." The spring breeze rushed through the room, and it felt like Ruseria had heard Herscherik's declaration. He jumped off of his chair and tightened his grip on the watch again before gazing up at the sky. "You're by my side, aren't you, Count Ruseria?" The bells had tolled to guide the dead.

The count's soul should have been on its way to the next world. But the count had sworn to remain by Herscherik's side forever, even after his soul left his body. "I won't run away."

When he was born as a prince, his starting point in life had been set. That was a fact that he couldn't change and a position he only maintained through the sacrifices made by his father. Even if he had remained ignorant about the scheming behind the curtains, none of that would have changed. Now that he knew everything, he was in a position where he could change this world. He couldn't do it through tears, though.

Herscherik was determined not to cry again. "I will change this world. I will protect them." He swore to protect his father, his family, his country, and everyone the puppeteers had deemed powerless.

For the first time since Ryoko Hayakawa's reincarnation as Herscherik, he swore an oath.

Chapter Four: The Alphabet, Magic, and the Intruder

For real...?

Herscherik was hit with an unexpected wall he was unsure how to climb. The day after Ruseria's departure from this world, Herscherik had requested his father to commence his education. *Knowledge is power*, he thought. His father hadn't questioned his request and had appointed him a tutor by the very next day.

First, Herscherik studied language arts. The alphabet of this world was similar to that of English, which Herscherik could get used to. English was one of Ryoko's worst subjects during her school days, but practice made perfect. His language tutor had thoroughly complimented Herscherik for being such a quick learner despite his age.

I'm sorry, I'm actually square in the middle of my thirties. Herscherik silently apologized, experiencing some bizarre sensation of guilt.

Next, he studied math. While the numbers themselves looked different than those in his previous world, they also used a decimal system. Herscherik learned it with ease. Since he was an office worker in his previous life, he could do a lot of basic calculations in his head. After another round of incessant compliments, Herscherik began to internally apologize again. For some reason, he just couldn't get used to it.

Herscherik recalled how bizarre it was to have gained consciousness at only one year of age and theorized that it was because he had been subconsciously listening in to the conversations around him before that point.

I bet I just hear the words of this world as Japanese.

Just as Ryoko had learned Japanese without a conscious effort, learning a language didn't feel much like learning when it was your first. Herscherik theorized that the words he had been hearing since entering this world had seeped into him as his native language. Since he didn't remember when he

uttered his first words in his previous life, Herscherik felt confident in this conclusion.

I remember wishing I was American during English classes.

As he recalled his previous life and a series of nearly failed foreign language classes, Herscherik carried on with his studies in this life. He didn't have any trouble with math, either. On the inside, he was a 35-year-old woman who had lived her fair share in the real world and had even spent some time obtaining various licenses and qualifications as a hobby. Herscherik knew how to study. Besides, he was only learning this world's equivalent of first-grade material.

However, his streak wouldn't last for long.

"Unfortunately..." the tutor said, apologetically. It wasn't his fault, though. The issue lay with Herscherik. "Your Highness does not seem to have any Magic Within... the building block of casting spells."

Herscherik froze for a moment in disbelief before screaming in his mind. *No magic!?* He was defeated. Not that he made the mistake of showing any of it, but he was secretly freaking out. Herscherik had been a little (well, to be honest, *very*) excited to learn magic, a fantastical element that didn't exist in his previous world. More excited by this than any woman in her mid-thirties should have been about something relegated to the realm of fantasy... of course, he was only three in this new world. But this new life of his had showered him with cruelty once more. Herscherik had tried and failed one of the most basic spells, one that created a ray of light. He tried it over and over again only to produce precisely nothing.

"It is very, very rare..." According to his magic tutor, most people contained some amount of Magic Within. The spell that cast a ray of light was a spell that anyone with Magic Within could use. Apparently, his tutor had never seen someone like Herscherik before. He couldn't conceal his dismay. "His Majesty had originally intended to become a scholar, but he was talented in magic, too..." *Any real son of the king should be able to use magic*, the tutor seemed to insinuate. Furthermore, he explained that the other princes and princesses were all extremely talented in magic. Herscherik would have guessed as much.

Fearing that the king was not his real father after all, the dejected Herscherik

called to his busy father that night.

“Yes, your mother happened to be without magic, too. Look how much we look alike, Hersch. Of course we’re father and son,” his father said nonchalantly, albeit a bit indulgently. He stroked Herscherik’s hair while he was at it.

I’m sorry I ever doubted your fidelity. Herscherik profusely apologized in his mind to the mother he had never met. *But a lot of the reincarnated protagonists in novels and comics had incredible magical powers.* In the fiction that Ryoko had enjoyed, it was just par for the course if the protagonist had powerful magic and incinerated every bad guy in their path with raging fire spells. *I mean, not like I’d do that if I could.* Regrettably, he wasn’t facing enemies that could simply be burned away. Herscherik knew that there was no real solution that could be reached through violence in this situation.

Still, Herscherik grumbled in his sleep that night, utterly disappointed that he couldn’t use any magic.

Then, a shocking revelation followed, trampling all over the fantastical premises of the fictional genre Herscherik was accustomed to.

“I would call you *ordinary*, Your Highness...” the instructor of the Knights’ Order said, just as apologetically as the magic tutor had. He was the man that currently led all of the military’s training after retiring from the Knights’ Order, very skilled in discerning the strengths of his students. After some hesitation, the instructor looked directly at Herscherik, determined. Herscherik already had a bad feeling at this point. “I am sorry, Your Highness. But I will be honest. Your Highness has no talent whatsoever in either swordsmanship or horseback riding.”

Those with a keen eye for talent knew that the kindest thing to do for their pupils was to keep them from holding onto any unrealistic hope. According to his instructor, Herscherik could learn to wield a sword or ride a horse as much as the average man after putting in dedicated work. Becoming one of the best, however, was impossible.

“His Majesty is skilled with the sword as well as with magic...”

Herscherik felt like he was getting déjà vu. This time, he didn’t run to his father’s room at night, though.

...My softhearted father sure has some good stats. He pictured his father with his usual, gentle smile. Herscherik couldn't imagine his father fighting with a sword or firing off magic spells.

It was then settled that Herscherik would learn the minimum swordsmanship and horseback riding required of his status. But even that, the instructor had warned him, would be difficult.

I wasn't much for exercise in my previous life, but...

Herscherik slumped onto the couch in his room. He hadn't expected *all* of his possible protagonist perks to be ruled out right off the bat. He'd had an inkling that this was the case, but now Herscherik was surer than ever that he was the runt of the royal family. If all the princes were characters in one of the romance games Ryoko used to play, she would have only gone for Herscherik to complete the set.

But I don't have time to mope around.

There was nothing he could do about the things he wasn't capable of. So, Herscherik was determined to do the things he could. Herscherik sat at the sofa by the well-lit window and opened the book he had borrowed from the library located within the royal quarters. It was definitely a children's book, with many pictures and a large print that made for an easy read.

First things first, I have to learn to read.

While English wasn't Ryoko's forte, she always enjoyed reading. There had been several occasions when a foreign novel she had her eye on never got translated into Japanese, and she could do nothing but feel frustrated about it.

It was hard to make time when I had a job, but there's plenty of that now that I'm a child.

He decided to read all the books it took to learn the language. Then he would do the same for math. From Ryoko's experience, Herscherik knew that diving right into a subject would be the quickest way to improve.

From that day on, Herscherik spent most of the time outside of his tutoring sessions reading books on the couch by the window. Whenever there was something he didn't know, he immediately asked Meria or his tutor, or he

looked it up on his own. After dedicating himself to this for half a year, Herscherik could now at least read the words of a complex specialized book and knew what they meant.

Welcome to tonight's episode of Midnight Investigative Journalism!

Herscherik silently narrated through the empty castle corridors at night like a TV journalist on a program Ryoko used to watch, holding the pocket watch up to his mouth in lieu of a microphone. After studying for half a year and having learned to read the language of this world, Herscherik was ready to make his next move.

Tonight, we're diving into the Treasury Head Office, a cornerstone of our nation! Let's go investigate!

Herscherik didn't resort to narrating his way through the castle corridors like a TV host because he was afraid of the castle at night, or because he had discovered through his reading that evil spirits were a thing in this world... *Not afraid at all*, Herscherik kept telling himself.

It is pretty dark, though...

Herscherik timidly glanced to and fro. He couldn't help but squeeze the pocket watch harder. Because of his urgent need to see Ruseria, he hadn't realized the last time he was out that the castle corridors were not illuminated by anything but the moonlight pouring in through the windows.

In his previous life, the night was never too dark thanks to electric lights. In this world, though, there was no electricity. Only Floating Magic. Even though Herscherik couldn't perform any magic himself, he did study the basics of it. One of the lessons was on Floating Magic. He had learned that two forms of magical power existed in this world: one stored within people and the other drifting through the air. The Magic Within was the equivalent of MP in video games. People expended this energy when they cast spells, and they recovered the energy by resting. The amount of Magic Within depended from person to person, and one could expand one's maximum capacity through training.

Not me, though. Not the little magic-less prince.

Just as zero times one hundred was still zero, this wasn't an option for Herscherik, who was born with no Magic Within whatsoever. In turn, the magical power in the air was called Floating Magic. This included all the magical fuel generated by the earth, sea, rivers, trees, *etc.* Just as trees generated oxygen through photosynthesis, all these things created magic. Floating Magic was then converted into various forms of energy: light to illuminate the streets or room, heat to boil water, cold air to cool a refrigerator, energy to move the water supply... In short, Floating Magic was like electricity that existed in the air.

It's an incredibly eco-friendly energy source. Nature itself creates it, so there's no pollution. There were no environmental issues in this world like the ones in Ryoko's world. Although, Herscherik wondered if technology in this world just hadn't evolved enough to be destructive to the planet.

He carried on down the corridor.

I finally made it... Herscherik looked up at the wooden door that looked exceedingly heavy. A sign on it read "First Treasury Office." Herscherik pushed on the door with his tiny body. Since most doors in the castle were push-to-open, his short stature wasn't a problem when it came to opening doors. There was a lock on the door, but it must have been left unlocked either by negligence or to allow access for the patrolling soldiers—fortunately for Herscherik. He made it into the room without an issue.

"Urgh..." As soon as he stepped into the room, Herscherik couldn't help but groan. It was absurdly disorganized. What looked to be about ten desks put together were all stacked high with mountains of paper, all the piles converging with each other. At the other end of the room, he could see doors labeled "Storage," "Head Treasurer," and "Meeting Room."

"How can you work with the place like this...?" Herscherik muttered out loud, Ryoko's office-worker nature coming to the surface. Back at her job, Ryoko had kept every file in her computer meticulously organized, not to mention the top of her desk. She knew that organization led to efficient work. Not only was efficiency out of the window in this travesty of an office, but no one would even notice if some papers went missing. Herscherik braced his temples. This was the treasury of his nation at work.

“...Convenient for me, though.” With an office like this, no one would notice if some papers moved around or even disappeared. That would be to Herscherik’s advantage. “Time for some internal investigation.”

Ryoko had worked in finance for a time. While she’d worked in that department, she had assisted in inspecting branch locations. She looked into things like whether they were making any decisions that ought to be made by headquarters instead, whether they kept all of their books correctly, whether they made enough sales, and whether they were making all their payments on time, for example. Ryoko inspected those branches with the thoroughness of a mother-in-law inspecting a new bride’s handiwork in the kitchen. On account of her tendency for thorough investigation, refusal to accept any excuses, and the terror she rained upon certain particular branches, Ryoko was nicknamed “Ryo, the MIL from Hellquarters.” Even after leaving the finance department, her nickname and everyone’s fear of her remained. “Mother-in-law” was the more offensive part of the nickname to Ryoko, who had never had a boyfriend, much less a daughter-in-law. In her opinion, she was never mean about the results of her investigation. She knew that any discrepancy she found in those locations would only tighten the noose around that branch in the end. For their sake, she purposefully made herself stoic and thorough. Unbeknownst to her, Ryoko’s honest inspections and subsequent advice had earned her great trust from branch employees, managers, regional managers, and even from people within headquarters.

As he recalled such things, Herscherik plucked a piece of paper from one of the desktop mountains.

“Mm. It’s still too dark...” He tried reading the paper but then gave up. He walked up to a window so he could read it under moonlight.

Let’s see... These are foods, I think.

The paper appeared to be the list of foods the castle purchased on a regular basis. Next to each food, the paper listed their source, prime season, and price.

“...Uh oh. I can’t tell if these prices are fair or not.” Herscherik groaned. He didn’t have the knowledge necessary to tell if any of those prices were above or below market price.

He had learned about the currency in this world through one of his classes. All the countries in the continent shared a unified currency consisting of only coins: bronze, silver, gold, and white gold. One hundred bronze coins equaled one silver coin, one hundred silver coins to one gold coin, and one hundred gold coins to one white gold coin. Since a large amount of money would become cumbersome, people used certificates when dealing with a large transaction. Certificates worked mostly like a personal check, except that it required government permission to use.

Even though Herscherik knew the units of currency, he didn't know how much anything cost in this world. "...I better keep looking." Numbers didn't lie. When people tried to force numbers to lie, there would always be a crack in the facade somewhere. The only question was how subtle the crack was. Herscherik kept pulling papers out of the mountains and read them by the window.

The night was thickening, and Herscherik rubbed his eyes as his eyelids became heavier and heavier. Wondering how many hours he had been in the office, he checked his pocket watch to find that it was past midnight. He closed the watch and opened it again from sheer disbelief. Herscherik sighed, realizing that he couldn't stay up late in this body like Ryoko used to. His eyes seemed to tire much more quickly when reading under moonlight, too. He massaged his eyes with his fingers.

"...I'll need some sort of light in here." As he considered borrowing a lantern from somewhere on his next trip, Herscherik played with the watch. "If only I could use that illumination spell." If that were an option, he wouldn't have to go through the trouble of reading under the dim moonlight.

Recalling his magic lesson, he uttered the incantation. Incantations of magic were different from the spoken language of this world. Like Japanese to English or French, both the syllables and the spelling were completely foreign to one another. Herscherik had learned that magic spells were cast by uttering incantations and using one's Magic Within. Those who used magic were called Spellcasters. A high-ranking Spellcaster, accordingly, could cast simple spells without incantations.

Even when Herscherik concluded the incantation, nothing happened.

“...Just kidding.”

There was nothing out of the ordinary about that result since he had no Magic Within. Still, Herscherik couldn't help but feel a little disappointed.

When he stood up, ready to return to his room, he felt a sensation in his body. It was something akin to a shiver running through his right hand. In that instant, a white ball of light appeared before him. Herscherik nearly screamed at the sight of it and hurriedly covered his mouth. He was in the middle of a stealth mission, after all. Everything would be for naught if he ratted himself out like this. As he covered his mouth, he let go of the watch. The instant the pocket watch hit the floor and made a little *clank*, the ball of light was gone.

“...Huh?”

Confused, Herscherik picked up the watch. He thought that the silver pocket watch had been faintly illuminated while the ball of light was floating before him. He uttered the incantation again. After the shiver, the ball of light reappeared. Herscherik took a few steps while holding the watch, and the ball of light followed him by floating through the air, keeping a set distance between them. When Herscherik imagined putting out the light, the ball of light vanished without a sound. He set the watch down and tried the incantation again. No shiver nor ball of light. There was only one explanation Herscherik could think of. The pocket watch was collecting Floating Magic and had activated the illuminating spell at his incantation.

What an awesome item! That spell had done no more than create a small ball of light, but it was actual magic nonetheless. Herscherik was elated, realizing that the little shiver was the sensation of using magic. *And it uses Floating Magic. It won't wear me down!* It felt like tearing open the seal of a freshly-purchased video game. *Now this is fantasy!* Herscherik silently cheered.

Herscherik returned to his room as jolly as could be.

The next day, he tried using a different spell, but the watch only stared back at him in silence. Of course, a watch couldn't speak to him if it wanted to. After some consideration, Herscherik concluded that the watch only collected a miniscule amount of Floating Magic around it, allowing Herscherik to only use minor spells like creating a ball of light or igniting a candle.

It feels like a game I pre-ordered months in advance was a pile of garbage...
Herscherik sulked. For the time being, though, he no longer had to strain his eyes by reading papers in the dark of night.

The moon was hidden behind the clouds that night, the lack of moonlight making room for darkness to seep throughout the castle grounds and completely conceal the existence of an intruder. He bypassed the patrolling soldiers with ease, making it to his destination without a sound.

This intruder was an operative of an underground guild. This agent served no particular master but made a living by contracting out his services, making him particularly valuable to those with their fingers in less-than-reputable businesses. He offered services that ranged from espionage and finding lost articles of an unscrupulous nature to outright assassination. While most of this agent's achievements would never be made public, he was reliable in his work. Those who knew this man called him Shadow Fang. The moniker was derived from his signature style: approaching his targets as quiet as a shadow, never once being detected until the very moment his fangs dug into their neck. The moniker was a sign of respect for the underground agent who never had another name.

Not just anyone could afford to hire Shadow Fang. Underground guilds priced their offerings strictly based on the talent of their agents. Quite a large sum was required for the services of Shadow Fang, who was infamous enough to earn himself a moniker. Furthermore, it was up to his own discretion whether or not he would accept the job.

Tonight, he was tasked with retrieving a written report presented by a particular noble to the royal family. In his opinion, he was there to clean up the most amateurish mess imaginable. The noble had turned in the incriminating report he meant to keep hidden instead of the report he had forged specifically for the purpose of submitting it. The location he had to break into, however, was more than a little tricky. It was none other than the royal castle of the formidable nation that was Gracis. Security was tight, unlike most noble manors he had infiltrated before, and the magical barrier around its perimeters was top-notch. While Shadow Fang knew he would be able to make it inside, the

castle was quite far down the list of places he would have chosen to break into.

Tsk. I slipped up, the intruder had to admit.

He had known that the task itself was nothing difficult when he heard the job description presented to him by his underground guild. He had accepted the job because the money was good for this kind of work, and he needed to fill his coffers after an unexpected expense. Only after signing the contract did his client disclose that he had to break into the royal castle itself.

That's why no one jumped on such a high reward.

When it's too good to be true... the intruder repeated internally. He spoke to the underground guild's bookkeeper after accepting the gig to find out that his client was a noble disliked by those in the underground for his reputation of pulling similar tricks in the past. When he asked the bookkeeper why they had accepted a gig from someone like that in the first place, the response was typical. "The higher the reward, the better our cut." It didn't help that Shadow Fang was a lone wolf. Perhaps an ally would have cautioned him against taking the job... But there was no use crying over that now. No matter what trick his client had pulled, breaking the contract without just cause could negatively affect the prospects of future work. Underground or not, the livelihood of "independent contractors" like him was built on trust.

Now, he observed the particular room in the castle he had sneaked into, still frustrated for having fallen for his client's trick.

The report's supposed to be somewhere in this room... What is this mess?

Shadow Fang observed a large room that could seat twenty or so. Most every desk was piled high with stacks of paper, making the room feel smaller than it was. He suspected that finding one particular sheet of paper in this room would take some serious time and effort.

The intruder first walked up to the desk farthest from the door, assuming that it belonged to the department head. Hopefully, he might even find out which desks in the room were whose. That would considerably shorten his search time. The desk in the back of the room was relatively better organized and definitely of better make than the others. The intruder began efficiently rifling through the papers on the desk when he heard a sound from somewhere within

the room. The intruder halted his rifling and drew his dagger before closely observing the room, end to end. He saw no one else—only the desktop mountain range of papers.

...Just my mind playing tricks on me, I guess, the intruder concluded, and sheathed his knife.

He reached for the next pile of papers on the desk before him, and froze. He was staring down at a face that had emerged from the under the desk.

“Um... Good evening?” A languid, childish voice greeted him.



With a confused look, the figure from under the desk stared back up at the intruder, forming a tableau of opposing symmetry in the dark office. The figure was none other than Herscherik, who was spending another night dauntlessly scaling the mountains of papers, reading one sheet at a time using his faint magical light under a desk in pursuit of his research. He was a month into this nocturnal investigation and had only just begun to understand the vague outlines of governmental entities and workflow. He was so enthralled with his reading that night that he didn't even notice the intruder until he heard papers rustling on the desk above his head. Of course, Herscherik hadn't expected anyone else to come here at this time of the night, and the intruder had not made a single sound until he touched those papers.

I don't think he lives in the castle. He's wearing all black...

Herscherik was looking up at the figure clad entirely in black as if he were trying to blend into the night, right down to a black cloth covering his mouth and a black hood drawn over his head. Only the intruder's eyes peeked through. Those eyes were dimly lit by the cloud-shrouded moonlight coming through the window, but his irises almost seemed blood-red upon close inspection. Herscherik could easily tell by the intruder's eyes that he was stiffened with surprise.

I wouldn't know what to do if some random kid crawled out like this, either, Herscherik thought, chuckling in his mind.

Neither of their situations were going to improve by spending more time staring at each other.

"Um, you're going to get in trouble."

Herscherik opened his pocket watch. The night patrol would have almost reached the office by now. Just as he checked the time, Herscherik could hear footsteps coming down the hallway. The intruder was clearly unnerved. After a moment's hesitation, Herscherik leaped into action. He swiftly placed the papers he was reading back where he had found them, slipped by the mysterious man, and exited out to the hallway. The intruder snapped out of his surprise—he would have been able to react quicker if he hadn't been so taken aback by the completely unexpected encounter. By the time he tried to restrain

Herscherik for fear of the child notifying a castle guard, Herscherik was already out in the hallway.

...I could take care of the night patrol, along with the kid.

He preferred not to kill children, but now that the child had seen him, Shadow Fang was left with no choice. With a quick flick of his wrists, a pair of daggers appeared in his hands. Trying to approach them from behind, he peeked out into the hallway to find a soldier and the child in conversation. More accurately, the soldier was scolding the child.

“Prince Herscherik, how many times must I ask you to refrain from your nighttime adventures!?”

“I-I’m sorry...!”

The intruder was frozen once more at the bizarre sight of the child (a prince!) apologizing as a soldier, the prince’s subject, scolded him as if the prince was his own son.

“I’ll walk you back to your room. If I find you out at night again, I *will* notify His Majesty.”

“Okay! I’ll make sure you won’t find me next time!”

“Prince Herscherik...” The soldier sighed and began leading the prince down the hall.

His tone was still that of a father talking to his son. Shadow Fang could easily imagine the resigned chuckle on the soldier’s face. Herscherik let the soldier take a few steps before turning around and giving the intruder a smile and a wave. Then, the prince caught up with the soldier and engaged in a bit of small talk. The guard’s full attention was now on the child.

After that chain of unexpected events, the intruder could only watch motionless as the child and the guard walked away. He couldn’t get those events out of his mind as he searched for the prized piece of paper all through the night. Dawn came before the intruder could find what he was looking for, forcing him to retreat for the time being.

Herscherik, the Seventh Prince of Gracis, was the king's youngest and most beloved son. Back during his third birthday ball in early spring, a certain count's acts of treason had come to light, which became the talk of the nation for a while. That incident and his birth were the only times Herscherik's name ever entered the public consciousness. Even at his birth, the people of the kingdom didn't pay him much mind. He was the Seventh Prince, after all. By that time, the people had celebrated more than two dozen royal events under the current king. The nation was plagued with enough corruption that the people were more concerned about putting food on their tables than any one act of treason, too.

This was the gist of the information Shadow Fang had obtained in his underground guild's headquarters.

"Was he seriously a prince?"

Sneaking into an office at night to look something up?

That night, the intruder's curiosity would get a few more answers.

"Good evening... Mister Intruder?"

When he infiltrated the same office again that night, the very same child was waiting for him by the window. Unlike the previous night, the room was illuminated by ample moonlight. The child's blond locks shone with mystique, further accentuated by his glimmering blue eyes. Shadow Fang detected no animosity from those eyes, but the young prince standing there at this time of the night was an inexplicable sight. The intruder instinctively drew his dagger.

Herscherik quickly waved his hands in show of non-resistance. "W-Wait a minute! No one else is here. And the guards won't come by for another hour. Don't worry."

"...What do you want from me?" the intruder growled, not dropping his guard.

However, Herscherik seemed relieved that the intruder was willing to hear him out. "I want to ask you something." He then produced a piece of paper. The intruder looked it over without sheathing his dagger. It was an order for military supplies, a cornerstone of their national defense. The intruder looked at the

prince, perplexed. Herscherik added with a serious expression, “Are these prices more or less than market price?”

Shadow Fang’s thought process ground to a halt, as he couldn’t discern why the prince could possibly be asking him this. He answered honestly. “More than double.”

Depends on the quality, but these prices are an absolute rip-off, he silently added.

Shadow Fang lived among ordinary citizens by day, so he frequented the market like everyone else. Every single item on that paper had been absurdly marked up.

Herscherik, having somewhat expected this answer, sighed and scratched his head. “I thought so... I expected a bit of markup, but...” Herscherik mumbled on to himself for a while before letting out another loud sigh and turning to the intruder. “Thank you. No one in the castle would give me a straight answer. Oh, I’m Herscherik, by the way. What’s your name?”

“...I don’t have one,” the intruder answered. He didn’t know why he had answered so honestly. It just seemed ridiculous to be on guard around Herscherik, who carried neither fear nor malevolence about him as he smiled at the intruder like they were old friends.

“Then... I think I’ll call you Kuro.”

That was the name of Ryoko’s big black dog she’d had while living at her parents’ house. The neighborhood children were intimidated by the dog and cried at the sight of him, but Kuro was a gentle and friendly dog who seldom even barked. Ryoko’s trusty hound was the first thing that came to mind when Herscherik initially saw the intruder clad in black from head to toe.

“What are you doing here, Kuro? I would like to thank you in some way.”

“You know I broke in here, right?” The intruder, Kuro, could not understand how the prince could speak to him without a shred of caution.

After seeing the look in Kuro’s eyes, Herscherik looked up to the ceiling with a little *uh huh*. “I know how good you are at that from the fact that you’ve made it into the castle. If you wanted to kill me, you would have done it the first time

we met. Since I'm still alive, I figured that you have some other objective."

I'm sure you could chop my head off in the blink of an eye.

Herscherik was well aware that he had no chance in a fight. Still, he needed someone with information on the outside world. Meria didn't answer any of his questions, he couldn't bother his overworked father, and he dared not ask any of the ridiculously prim-and-proper queens. As for his siblings, they attended the academy during the day and Herscherik rarely saw them. In any case, he thoroughly doubted that any of them would sincerely answer a three-year-old.

"We're accomplices now. I mean, I don't want to die. To be honest, I'll give you whatever you want if it'll get you out of here sooner." Herscherik formed a smile.

Herscherik had simply spilled his guts, but Kuro saw his smile as somehow dauntless. Still, as an inhabitant of the underworld, Kuro had a policy of taking advantage of everything he could. Without sharing any information relating to his client, he told the prince what kind of report he was looking for and when it must have been turned in.

Herscherik pondered for a few moments before pointing to a particular pile of papers. "Probably somewhere in all those unprocessed papers, then."

Dubious, Kuro rummaged through the pile to quickly find the paper he was looking for.

"That's the one, isn't it? I thought some of the details and numbers were off... That's fixed in the *new* report, I'm sure." Herscherik's knowing response was met with a sharp glance from Kuro, but the prince only shrugged in response.

Later on, Kuro would conclude that the prince only gave up the paper because he had already read through it. If Kuro had been after a paper the prince hadn't yet seen, he would have bought time before giving it up, and if the paper contained something important to the little prince, he would have tried to saddle Kuro with an inconsequential paper instead. Kuro would later become certain that this was how the prince would have acted, had circumstances been different.

As Kuro continued giving him an inquisitive look, Herscherik grinned and

added, "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. No one would believe a little kid like me if I did... Not yet, anyway." The smile on his face was unbecoming of a child his age.

After making it out of the castle, Kuro went and shoved the paper he'd retrieved into his client's face in exchange for his reward. This incident would only bolster his reputation and result in a huge influx of castle-infiltration gigs coming his way. Kuro had no intention of stepping foot in the castle again, but he still couldn't get the little prince out of his mind. He would continue to take these quests now and again and run into the same prince in the most unexpected of places.

Chapter Five: Kuro, the Secret Passage, and the Castle Town

“Oh. Good evening, Kuro.” Herscherik greeted the intruder, whom he could safely call an acquaintance at this point. The prince was newly turned four that spring. Despite the casual tone of the greeting, as if they were just two old friends that had run into each other on the street, the pair were standing in the armory of the Knights’ Order, nearly past midnight. “Working the night shift, again?” Herscherik remarked before returning to his own work.

The intruder, clad in all black to hide in the shadow of night, continued staring at the prince. A look of exasperation and bewilderment was discernible through the hood and long bangs that covered his brow. The prince had continued to address him as “Kuro” without once asking for permission.

This is the last place I expected to see this little prince...

Half a year had passed since their first encounter. While all children surely grew up quickly, Kuro had noticed that the prince was already a little taller and his face looked a little older in comparison to when they had first met. He had infiltrated the castle enough times for him to see the difference. Kuro would receive all sorts of missions through his underground guild—like reconnaissance, recovering evidence of corruption, etc.—to the point where he was practically sneaking into the castle every other night.

This time, the job was to deliver a letter to the lover of a certain noble’s wife. That lover happened to be a knight, so Kuro had snuck into this particular building that served as the knights’ quarters and equipment storage. After making his way into the building without a hitch, Kuro sensed a presence in the armory. He poked his head through the door to find a small silhouette scuttling about the room—and he knew that the little figure could be none other than the Seventh Prince. Kuro first went to the knight’s room to slip the letter under the door. He could imagine the color draining from the knight’s face upon reading the letter come morning, but ultimately that was none of his concern.

Then, Kuro returned to the armory to find Herscherik scowling at a piece of paper.

I wouldn't be surprised to find him anywhere, at this point...

Some locations of their previous encounters included the treasury records room, the office of the chief of castle security, and the royal pantry... Kuro would have demanded to know what the prince was doing in all those places if he hadn't ironically been illegally infiltrating the castle himself. Despite always encountering the prince late at night and outside the exploration range of any ordinary child, Kuro was beginning to get used to these encounters.

Kuro guessed that the prince was researching the armory's inventory. Herscherik continued to check things off on his handwritten list, but there seemed to be some discrepancies.

"They still don't match... Are they just late, or are the orders inflated?"

"What's wrong?" Kuro called to the muttering prince from behind.

Herscherik looked back up at Kuro. "Are you all done with your work, Kuro? Nothing bad for our country, right?" Through the course of their acquaintance over the past half year, Herscherik's tone toward Kuro had become much more frank.

Kuro shrugged. "I wouldn't say so. Just delivering bad news for a young man down the hall."

To the young knight, there must have been no worse news than the object of his affair urging for a proposal. He had crawled into bed with a married woman, after all. Unless he could bring their affair to a discreet and agreeable conclusion, he wouldn't remain a knight for long.

"Okay." Herscherik didn't particularly care as long as Kuro's work didn't jeopardize his country or his family. He also didn't believe for a moment that Kuro would give up any more information even if he had asked. Kuro's work had not caused any major effects within the castle so far, and Herscherik couldn't ask Kuro to abandon his livelihood for him. So, Herscherik had put aside his curiosity for the details of the man's mission and shifted his focus to solving the mysterious discrepancy. "Kuro... Say you're running an ordinary business. Do

weapons and combat equipment take a long time to make and deliver?”

“Depends on the goods. I’m sure the Knights’ Order and the military uses decent-quality stuff. That could take a while.”

“A while as in...half a year behind?”

Kuro fell silent. It was plain to see that he found that much of a delay to be suspicious.

Herscherik took his silence as confirmation. “Payments were made, but the products aren’t here, and there’s no evidence of them ever being actually used...”

That’s a fraudulent order if I’ve seen one. One-hundo percent. Herscherik rolled his eyes. The more he looked around the castle, the more unaccounted-for invoices and suspicious orders he found. *If this was a corporation, we would have gone bankrupt already...*

Since taxes and the national reserve still covered for the discrepancies, the treasurers hadn’t seen this as a problem. In fact, Herscherik would not have been surprised if the treasury was turning a blind eye altogether. Perhaps they simply planned to raise taxes when the reserve ran out.

Over the past half a year, Herscherik had been delving deep into the offices of every single governmental department and had found some suspicious things in each of them, although he only found them suspicious because of the intuition he had acquired from his life as Ryoko.

I just don’t have enough information or experience in this world.

He couldn’t help but wonder if some of the things he found suspicious were completely normal in this world. No matter where, any government was bound to have people with the sole duty of doubting the necessity of any taxpayer-funded expense.

What I need now is common, everyday knowledge about this world. Maybe it’s time to take the next step. Herscherik needed to fill that gap in his knowledge as quickly as possible. He turned to Kuro, who had been giving him a suspicious look.

“Can I ask you a favor, Kuro?”

“Huh?”

Herscherik was looking up at Kuro and craning his neck. He gave an innocent-as-can-be smile, fully utilizing his unequivocally adorable appearance.

On Herscherik’s first venture down into the castle town, the streets were bustling. Shops and stalls aligned the streets, all filled with products for sale, and workers were energetically calling people into their shops, left and right.

So, this is what our castle town is like!

Herscherik couldn’t stop looking all around him like a country boy on his first day in the city. His outfit for the day was considerably less extravagant than what he normally wore. Herscherik had asked Meria for a pair of clothes that he could get dirty; on top of the outfit, the prince wore a poncho-like layer with the hood drawn over his face. While his disguise didn’t quite make him look like one of the street children, Herscherik would have been happy with everyone thinking that he was some nondescript rich kid.

The other night, Herscherik had asked Kuro to show him a secret passageway from the castle out into the nearby town. Herscherik was sure that Kuro knew a hidden but safe passage in and out of the castle. No matter how good a spy Kuro was, there was no way that he could so easily come and go from the castle protected by a magical barrier without something like that. In fact, Kuro had stumbled in an attempt to deflect the question.

“I saved you when we first met,” Herscherik reminded him.

“...Well, I gave you some intel after that. We’re even.”

“And *after that*, I showed you where the paper was. That would have taken you a lot longer to find.”

After some back and forth, Kuro surrendered. He had figured out that Herscherik wasn’t going to take no for an answer. He pointed out one of the several rifts in the barrier where Herscherik could pass through.

The passage was behind a building that housed laboratories and archive

rooms. Under the shade of a tree, there was an old underground aqueduct that had fallen out of use. The entire thing was neither noticed nor maintained by anyone, and this little tunnel was tall and wide enough for a child to walk through without crouching down. The end of the aqueduct was obstructed by metal bars, which easily came off on a hinge when Herscherik turned the specific mechanism Kuro had mentioned. Herscherik slipped through the barred gate with ease. The water in the tunnel seemed to have dried up decades ago, so Herscherik didn't notice any moisture or odor. He turned the same mechanism on the metal barred gate on the other end of the tunnel, which was also shaded by a tree. Just like that, he'd made it out of the castle.

No afternoon classes today, and I told Meria I was going to the library. I'm in the clear.

If Meria decided to look for him, he would tell her that he had been playing hide and seek or had been holed up in his secret lair or something.

He had made his way into the castle town for the first time.

Are these prices lower than they were in Japan...?

Herscherik compared the prices on the items for sale with those from his previous life. The cabbage-like vegetable before him, for example, was sold for ten bronze coins a head. The pile of clothes labeled "clearance" at the front of the apparel store were 50 bronze coins a piece. Under the theory that a bronze coin equated to about ten yen, a hundred yen for a head of cabbage would have been a pretty good price in Japan.

But the castle buys them for two silver coins a head. There might be some markup for delivering them to the castle, but twenty times the market price is too much.

It was easy to imagine that the exorbitant profit was ending up in someone's pocket. Just as Herscherik was sinking deep into his thoughts, a ruckus erupted from within the crowd a short distance away.

"Again?" the shopkeeper of a nearby general store asked a passerby.

"Yeah, looks like some constables are making up another ridiculous charge." The passerby frowned. "The constabulary and the commerce guild have been

butting heads, lately. That poor lady at the fruit stand... Her husband's not there today, so they're ganging up on her..."

Without waiting for the passerby to finish his sentence, Herscherik began to jog toward the center of the commotion. After squeezing his tiny body through the crowd with much effort, Herscherik emerged on the other side just in time to see a basket of apple-like fruit spilling onto the ground.

"Stop! Please!" a woman cried.

Herscherik turned to the voice to find a woman arguing with a few men in front of a tent that housed various fruits. She was a very healthy-looking and attractive woman who appeared to be in her late twenties. Her reddish-brown hair was tied in a braid, and the tan arms peeking out of her sleeves looked well-worked and ready for heavy lifting. Even so, her figure still sported feminine curves, giving the woman a particular allure that was in complete contrast with the queens Herscherik had met in the royal quarters. The woman looked flustered, surrounded by three constables.

"You know you can't display merchandise outside of the designated areas, miss."

"I haven't!"

"We saw you doing it."

"That's what you keep saying! Where's your proof!?" the woman shouted.

The three men snickered amongst themselves. "Where's *your* proof that you haven't? It's best to ask for a witness in cases like this. Is anyone here willing to testify that none of her merchandise was displayed outside her allocated space?"

The constables surveyed the crowd. Everyone just averted their eyes and fell silent. No one wanted any part of this.

How clichéd...

Herscherik let out a quiet, exasperated sigh. He didn't expect to encounter such a two-dimensional yet still repellent melodrama.

The constabulary was the governmental department tasked with keeping the

peace within the country. As Herscherik understood it, they were the equivalent of a police force. Anyone in the crowd would have let out a sigh at the corruption on display from these constables if they could have. They were supposed to protect the citizens, after all. Still, no one in the crowd spoke up. Most seemed to feel sorry for the woman, but they didn't want to put themselves in danger.

"We wouldn't mind talking this over at headquarters, you know. Now, if you show us a little remorse..." With a vile grin, one of the constables gave his comrades a look before sticking his hand out. It was clear to see what form of "remorse" he was looking for.

Making a threat and demanding a bribe...?

Herscherik couldn't take it anymore. He shuddered to imagine what the people thought of their royal family when the constables, who interacted with the commoners more than any other group of government employees, acted like this. "Each of you are the face of the company," Ryoko had often been told at her job. A good interaction between a single employee and the company's customers and vendors could build trust and generate profit. The opposite was also true; the attitude of a single employee could drag a company down. These constables were representatives of the government. How could the country earn the people's trust when their agents acted this way? Moreover, people like this had always made Ryoko's blood boil.

"Hello, Miss! I'm back!" Herscherik jumped out of the crowd as he threw back his hood, revealing a well-mannered and friendly smile.

The sudden outburst of a child's voice halted the murmuring of the crowd. They were all staring at the little kid who looked as picturesque as a fairy straight out of a storybook. They noticed his blond hair that shone like a ray of sunshine, and his gentle, sky blue, gem-like eyes. He really did look exactly like some sort of fairy who had come to announce the arrival of a blooming spring. Everyone in the crowd noticed his clothes and concluded that the child was of noble birth. Most would have believed if someone had told them that the child was a girl, if it wasn't for the hem of Herscherik's trousers sticking out from under his poncho. No noble's daughter would have been caught wearing pants. Still, some in the crowd might have mistaken him for an adorable girl just

judging by Herscherik's sheer beauty.

"What?" The woman looked down at Herscherik.

Before she could say anymore, Herscherik rushed to add, "Father won't eat fruit from anywhere else! So he sent me out to... What's wrong, Miss?" He looked around with a confused expression. He turned to the fruit strewn on the ground and immediately looked like he was going to cry, as if a perfectly blooming flower was starting to wilt. "All those delicious fruits dumped on the ground... What happened? I can talk to Father. He has friends in the military, so I'm sure he can help you!" Herscherik innocently proposed, as if it was a brilliant idea. He saw the constables all jolt, but he only looked up at them with a curious expression. "Are you constables? Father loves fruit. He's going to be really sad." Herscherik sulked dramatically.

Now, the constables were facing an obviously noble child, upset that his father's favorite store had been vandalized. Not to mention that his father apparently knew people high up in the military.

I mean, I'm not lying, Herscherik silently disclaimed, keeping up his act.

His father was the king, after all. He knew (and commanded) *everyone* in the military. And he did like fruit. Herscherik hadn't claimed that his father was with him, either. In his opinion, he didn't tell the whole truth, but neither did he lie. Besides, he didn't think the flustered constables would see through him.

"Well, we're... Um..." Mumbling, the constables retreated back into the crowd.

Herscherik was relieved to see that the situation played out just like he'd hoped it would. The military and the constabulary had always butted heads. The military, composed of the national army and the Knights' Order, was more in the forefront of the country's image and diplomatic presence while the constabulary focused on keeping the peace within the country. Both institutions proudly believed that they were the most vital to the protection of their country.

Herscherik couldn't believe how immature this conflict was. They were on the same side, after all, just with different job descriptions. Because of this conflict, there were communication issues between the departments now and again.

This time, though, Herscherik had been able to use the conflict to his advantage.

“Are you all right?” Herscherik asked as he began to gather the fruit off of the ground.

The woman had been blankly watching the scene unfold before. She snapped out of it. “Please, sir. I can’t let you... And I would never want to disappoint your father...”

“I was just bluffing. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry about your beautiful fruit...” Wasting food had always been a strict taboo in Ryoko’s upbringing. Herscherik frowned at the damaged apple in his hand. “What a waste...”

Someone in the crowd laughed. That wasn’t something some noble’s son would have been concerned about. The laughter spread like a wave through the crowd. The crowd wasn’t mocking Herscherik, but rather they seemed charmed by him. They had come to realize that Herscherik had simply pulled a stunt to help this stranger.

“Good job, kiddo!”

“Wait, isn’t that a girl? Well, he did such a good job, anyway!”

A middle-aged man came and ruffled Herscherik’s hair as a woman of about the same age applauded him. A flood of compliments poured out from the crowd and made Herscherik blush.

It took a considerable time for the crowd to disperse and for all of the fruit to be collected. Most of the fruits that had been spilled were now too damaged to sell.

“It really is a waste...” Herscherik repeated, looking into the box full of unsellable fruit.

How much time and effort do they think it takes to grow all these fruits? Not to mention money! Herscherik could feel his gut boil, as if the fruit was his own merchandise. He immediately calculated the amount of loss in his head, out of force of habit from his previous life, only to find himself even more enraged.

“I can’t thank you enough.” The lady of the fruit stand, Louise, handed

Herscherik a piece of fruit, as if losing all this merchandise didn't bother her at all. "A token of my thanks. I can't sell these because they're a little bruised, but you can still eat it just fine. They're still delicious, too. I promise." With a bright smile, she continued. "Those constables are the worst. They've been accusing people all over the market with nonsense charges so they can take our money. Boy, the look on their faces today!" Louise seemed genuinely relieved.

"I didn't know..." Herscherik took the fruit from her. "Is it true that the constabulary and the commerce guild are fighting?" he asked, recalling the comment he had overheard.

Louise's expression clouded. "Yes. Apparently, the higher-ups in the guild skimmed on the peacekeeping fees we pay the constabulary. So, they come out to pick on the shopkeepers. It was starting to get really bad."

Herscherik's eyes widened. He couldn't believe the phrase he had heard. *Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. "Peacekeeping fees"? What is the constabulary doing here, running a protection racket!?* He silently groaned. Peacekeeping was the whole purpose of the constabulary, so naturally, all of their expenses were paid for by tax money. *What do they mean, "peacekeeping fees"!?* Sure, *they may make some under-the-table deals, but why would the guild even pay something like that!?* It was also possible that this was just the result of a few of the constables working the field pocketing the money. In that case, Herscherik believed it would be their supervisors' fault for letting such a scheme run amok under their watch.

If Louise was telling the truth, and Herscherik had no reason to doubt her, the constabulary and the commerce guild were in cahoots. The commerce guild organized the market workers, merchants, and artisans. Their main duties were to develop production and secure import and export routes, as well as regulate their members. One of their jobs was to tax their guild members and deliver that to the government. In regions outside of the capital, the lord or lady of the land taxed their people.

They had been paying the "fee," but they must have cut back because of the recent recession and tax hike.

Some things were made easier by the existence of this kind of bribe.

Herscherik couldn't say that such a system offered no benefits at all, but it was outrageous that the constables refused to do their jobs just because they weren't getting their side income anymore.

"We're being taxed more and more as it is..." Louise let out a long sigh. "In any case, I better let the guild know. I'm closing up for the day so I can head over to the guild for a second, but can you wait for me here for a little bit? I really haven't thanked you enough!"

After watching Louis leave, Herscherik sat on a wooden box that was lying around and took a bite out of the fruit that was given to him. It was slightly smaller than an apple from Japan, but it was very sweet with just the right amount of tang. Herscherik was too distressed to truly enjoy the fruit, though.

Things are really bad here.

Herscherik frowned as he nibbled at his fruit. Corruption had been found around nearly every corner he'd investigated so far. At this rate, some kind of catastrophe was imminent. When corruption was this bad in the capital under the nose of the king, Herscherik could only imagine how rotten things were in the countryside. If the people were to reach their limit and revolt, their anger would be directed at the royal family first and foremost. In all the fictional examples that Herscherik could recall, any king who made his people suffer was dethroned by violence.

That's why the nobles... I mean, that's why Barbosse doesn't want to be king himself. Herscherik's father endured all of this on that lonely throne just so he could take the fall for the crimes of his puppeteers in the case of a revolution. Knowing how wise his father was, Herscherik was sure that he understood all of that. Still, he knew that his father remained the king to protect his family and to repent for what he ultimately believed to be his own sins, when it finally came to that. *I won't let you do that, Father.* Herscherik swore that he wouldn't let his kind-hearted father be killed without a fight. His fingers tightened around the fruit in his hand.

"Anyone here?" a voice called from the front of the shop.

Herscherik paused his contemplation and stood up from his box. "Can I help you?" He peeked around the tall stack of boxes to find a middle-aged man

whose head was already lacking some hair at the top.

“Are you Louise’s kid? I didn’t know she had one...”

“She went over to the commerce guild.”

“Oh, I see. Ah, what to do?” the man mumbled to himself as he rubbed the top of his bald head. “Had a little fruit emergency, so I ran over...”

“If you give me the money, I’ll give it to her when she comes back. What would you like?” Herscherik proposed.

“That would be great, little lady!”

“...I’m not a girl.”

As Herscherik continued to sell fruit to male customers, the crowd at the shop only grew. While it was easy for Herscherik to forget it while constantly comparing himself to his father and brothers, he was quite beautiful himself by any standard. He had Ryoko’s knack for customer service, too. To male customers of any age, Herscherik said things like, “This batch is really good. You look like the adventurous type. Won’t you try one?” while tilting his neck, and he said things like, “See, this one’s as pretty as you,” to female customers, adjusting the compliments depending on the person so it would never sound sarcastic.

From Ryoko’s experience of playing romance games aimed at male and female audiences, Herscherik managed to charm all men and women that came his way. He was pleasantly surprised to find an application for Ryoko’s knowledge. *Maybe love really does make the world... go round*, he jested to himself, as he kept pushing those fruits.

Seeing that an adorable child was working the fruit stand, many customers couldn’t help but buy a few extra items they didn’t actually need. It was only natural that the stand would do tons of business that day.

On the other hand, there were some that tried to pull a fast one on the little kid manning the stand by himself. For those that tried to shortchange him, Herscherik threatened, “You know it’s theft to take less than the agreed-on price, right? Who should I call, legislature, the military, or the constabulary?”

and made them pay a marked-up price.

For those that purposefully tried to confuse him by making an order like, “Two of those and three of these. Oh, never mind the first ones, but I’ll take four of those. No, I won’t need the other ones but I’ll take...” Herscherik mentally kept up and charged them every last bronze coin with a smile. At the end of the day, he had even sold off the damaged fruit at a markdown.

By the time Louise returned, half of her merchandise was gone.

“Welcome back!” Herscherik greeted her with a smile and gave her the bag full of his sales and a piece of paper. “People came to buy fruit, so I handled all the sales while you were gone. I sold everything at the listed prices...” He pointed at the paper, nervously.

Louise looked amazed. For each fruit, Herscherik had detailed the number of items sold, their price, and total sales, with the grand total at the bottom. As far as Louise could recall, this was now her highest selling day of that month.

“I sold the bruised fruit at a markdown to a chef who said he’ll cook them into dishes, anyway. I did ask for his address, just in case.” He pointed to a margin on the paper where he had written the address. Herscherik took Louise’s amazed silence the wrong way. “...I’m sorry.” His face twisted in disappointment.

“Don’t be sorry! I was just amazed at how good you were, when you’re so young!” Louise rushed to clarify. “You helped me out of that jam *and* watched my store... I have to thank you somehow.” Louise contemplated. It wasn’t easy to think of a worthy gesture of thanks for a noble’s son.

“Then...” Herscherik spoke up with glimmering eyes. “Can I come over and help you with the shop again some time?”

Louise wasn’t expecting any suggestion like that. “Well, yes. I mean, of course...!”

“Yay!” Herscherik cheered with excitement becoming of his age.

Louise gave up on talking him out of it. It was his idea, after all. Far be it from her to tell this eccentric noble’s heir he couldn’t come by to boost her sales again. However, Louise still didn’t get the same condescending impression from

Herscherik that she did from most nobles.

Herscherik took out his pocket watch. “Oh, I better head home.” He had left the castle shortly after noon, and it was already past four. The sky was beginning to turn orange above them. If he stayed out any longer, he might risk Meria finding out. “I’ll see you again, Miss Louise!” Herscherik began to run off.

“I’ll look forward to it! ...Kid!” Louise called. “Your name!?”

“My name’s Her...” Herscherik nearly told her his real name, but swallowed the remaining syllables. He didn’t think she would buy that he just happened to share a name with a prince. So, he decided to use an old name he had spent so much time with. “It’s Ryoko!” Herscherik called back and hurried on his way home.

Watching him leave, Louise repeated the name. “Ryoko... Ryoko... What a strange name.”

From then on, Herscherik sneaked out of the castle time and time again to help Louise with her shop and gather intel on the town. At first, the people of the castle town would take curious notice of the noble-looking child helping run a store on the streets. But once they got used to seeing Herscherik there, it seemed like the old fruit stand was incomplete on any day he wasn’t there.

As Herscherik was happily working the stand on one of his return visits, Kuro happened to spot him during a rare day off. Once he spotted the prince, the underground agent struggled to breathe from laughter for a while as he walked by unnoticed.

Chapter Six: The Smile, the Lament, and the Black Dog

The season had changed from spring to summer, then from summer to autumn. Herscherik had grown with the season, too. For half a year after he began sneaking out into the castle town, Herscherik had taken to the outside world through his secret passage on any afternoon when he wasn't studying or practicing swordsmanship or riding.

"Thank you! Please come again!" Herscherik smiled, handing his customer their bag of fruit. His smile was infectious.

After watching the customer leave, Herscherik stretched and took a deep breath. The autumn climate here was not too hot nor too cold, but just right. Herscherik gazed up at the endlessly expansive, blue sky. Amidst his busy days of study, training, and research, the vast canvas of blue made him forget about the minister and the perils of his country for just a moment... Well, he *wished* it would. At the very least, it was still refreshing.

"It's a huge help when you come around, Ryoko. You really bring in the customers... and sell the fruit!" Louise happily reminded Herscherik. They had already made considerably more sales than the fruit stand made the previous day. "Right, honey?"

Louise had called out to a large man, easily twice as tall as Herscherik and four times as wide. He looked much more like a lumberjack than a fruit stand owner. Louise's prompt caused the man to give Herscherik a quick glance before he returned to silently hauling boxes of fruit.

Beauty and the Beast...

Herscherik couldn't help but compare the kind and energetic Louise and her intimidatingly quiet husband to a certain movie from his previous life.

"Ryoko's talking up the customers enough for both of you! You better kiss the ground he walks on!" Louise said.

“Please. I really enjoy being here,” Herscherik interjected. He didn’t want them to get into a fight for his sake. “I’m always worried that I’m only getting in the way...”

Louise’s husband remained silent and gave Louise and Herscherik another glance. Then, he began delicately wrapping the fruit with some fabric. Somehow, his broad back seemed more approachable.

“He’s embarrassed.” Louise gave a shrug.

Herscherik had no idea how she could tell but concluded that it must have been the power of love.

“Are you sure this is okay with you, Ryoko? You’re helping us out a lot, but what do your parents say about it?” Louise could imagine that her young shopkeeper’s parents might keel over if they knew their precious son was out in the castle town alone helping run a fruit stand.

Herscherik shook his head. “My father’s very busy, so I don’t see him too often. My mother died when she had me... You don’t need to worry about my parents.” Herscherik had only meant to tell the truth, but he noticed that both adults looked a little uncomfortable. Not that he could read the ever-so-subtle shifts in the stoic expression of Louise’s husband, but he read the awkward air and rushed to add, “So my father told me that I should go out and do the things I enjoy! Don’t worry!” He held his fists out in front of him for emphasis.

This comment, however, triggered the opposite reaction from what he had hoped for.

They’re looking at me with even more pity...

Despite only telling some of the truth, Herscherik seemed to have dug his own grave somewhere along the way. As he stumbled in an attempt to clear the air, a fruit appeared before him. Herscherik looked up to find Louise’s husband looking back down at him, fruit in hand. After Herscherik timidly took the fruit, he returned to his work.

“I’m sorry if I was being insensitive,” Louise apologized.

Herscherik shook his head again. “Thank you for the fruit, Sir.”

Herscherik saw that Louise's husband had given a faint nod while his back was still turned, and took a bite out of the fruit.

The prince spent the rest of the day servicing customers, polishing fruit alongside Louise's husband, and discreetly gathering some information.

Before he knew it, the sky had turned from blue to sunset orange. While time did seem to fly while he was helping run the fruit stand, Herscherik also noted that the days were growing shorter as they approached winter, just like it did in Japan.

Come to think of it, we have a similar climate to Japan, too.

Herscherik glanced at his pocket watch to find that he stayed later than usual. Especially for the past few visits, he couldn't help but stay as long as he could.

"I'm sorry. I kept you longer than usual," Louise apologized, seeing that Herscherik had checked his watch.

"It's not your fault, Miss Louise. I was having so much fun that I lost the track of time," Herscherik reassured her as he hurriedly began packing... Well, he just had to put on his jacket.

"You're coming to hang out again tomorrow?" Louise asked.

"Yes, I'd love to."

Louise smiled in response. "Oh, right." She clapped her hands together. "I've seen more strangers on the streets, lately... I think they're from the country. The constables are on edge, too. It's not as safe out there right now. Be careful on your way home... You want my hubby to walk you home?"

Her husband rose to his feet at the mention. While Herscherik was grateful for the offer, he couldn't possibly accept.

"I'm okay. I'll be careful! See you tomorrow!" Herscherik said to the couple and ran off.

Louise watched the child leave until he turned a corner. "Another fun day," she muttered.

Louise and her husband did not have children of their own. They had decided to hold off because of financial concerns. But ever since "Ryoko" started coming

to help their fruit stand, their days seemed more lively—enough to consider trying for a baby. They both understood the decrepit state of their country. The king served the nobles above his people, and the nobles and government officials acted solely for their own gain. Even the officials at the bottom of the pyramid, like the constables, neglected the people they were supposed to protect. This country was a harsh environment for anyone outside of the aristocracy.

Still, Louise and her husband chose to remain in their country that was relatively safe and regarded as a world power rather than starting from scratch in a foreign nation. Besides, living in the capital made things a little easier than living in the country. People's lives only got worse the farther they were from the capital. Both Louise and her husband disliked nobles and any government officials. It seemed like taxes were being raised every day to diminish their already meager earnings, while they had to lower their prices to sell any product, driving their profits down further. Diligently paying their taxes all these years had never once improved their lives. They, and most commoners of this country, blamed this on the incompetence of their political leaders. As though to drive the point home, any noble that occasionally walked through the streets of the castle town was clad in expensive outfits, paying no mind to the suffering of the working class.

But he's different, somehow. Louise recalled the appearance of her little helper. He was a child beautiful enough to be mistaken for a girl, with silky light blond locks, fair but healthy skin, and blue eyes that made her think of a gentle spring breeze. He was smart and energetic. One moment, he would say something far wiser than his age would suggest, then the next he would be overcome with joy at some childish insignificance. He charged head-on into anything he didn't understand.

His clothes and manners are too good for him not to be some noble's kid...

Louise's heart ached at the thought of him growing up just to be like any other noble, walking down this street like he owned it. On the other hand, she didn't think this particular noble would turn out that way. Much to her own surprise, she was hoping that he could change this world for the better by using his status.

“Hey, let’s close up,” her husband called.

“Okay,” she absent-mindedly answered, emerging from her thoughts.

Even her man of few words seemed to have taken a liking to this child. Louise knew that her husband had secretly bought a stuffed bear to give to “Ryoko,” before realizing that he was a boy. He was still contemplating whether or not to give him the bear, wondering if the boy would take offense to the gift of a stuffed animal. She married him for the adorable contrast between his stoic expression and genuine actions.

Maybe I’ll bake some pastries for tomorrow. Imagining the overjoyed reaction of their little helper, Louise couldn’t help but smile, too.

When her husband gave her an inquisitive look, Louise rushed to pack up the rest of the store.

The couple returned the next day to open their fruit stand as usual, but “Ryoko” never showed.

Louise kept glancing in the direction Herscherik would usually come from. “I’m telling you, hon. Something’s up.” She could hardly concentrate on running the stand. Louise turned to the back of the stand where they had prepared some pastries to surprise Herscherik. She let out a sigh. “He’s never not shown up when he said he would.” She kept mumbling out of nervousness.

Herscherik had always told the couple beforehand when there were days that he couldn’t make it. When he wasn’t sure if he could come the next day, he would make that clear. He had never once pulled a no-show after making a definitive promise the day before. Even Louise’s husband wore a very subtle frown out of concern, not anger.

“Maybe I should talk to a constable...?” *But what should I say?* Louise contemplated. *“The noble’s son who always helps out at our fruit stand didn’t show today”?* After a few moments, Louise sighed again. *Not a chance. They wouldn’t take me seriously.*

Louise heard a *clunk* and looked up to find her husband walking away from the fruit stand, looking like he was about to kill someone. “Where do you think

you're going!?"

"...Constabulary."

"You'll get arrested with a face like that!" *You look like a murderer or kidnapper!* Louise silently added a detail that might have made her husband cry and clung to his muscled arms. She desperately tried to pull her husband back with all of her might, to not much of an effect.

"Is something wrong?" a voice suddenly called to Louise.

Her husband stopped, and they both turned to find a young man. He stood slightly shorter than Louise's husband but had a slender build of about half the width. He had shimmering black hair and eyes like a deep ruby. His unique sensuality would have made most girls his age swoon.

He took a quick look around the fruit stand. "That blond-haired little boy isn't in today... Something about him?"

"Yes, we're a little worried..." Louise poured out, seeing the concerned look on the young man's face. "He said he'd come today, but he's never been this late... With all the crime lately..."

"...I hope he's all right."

"Me too. I just hope that nothing's happened to him..."

The young man nodded along and purchased a few pieces of fruit before disappearing around the corner.

When Louise rested her head on her husband's shoulder, a thought came to her mind.

I'm surprised he could tell that Ryoko was a boy.

Herscherik was adorable enough to be mistaken for a girl, especially from afar. Still, the young man had called him a "blond-haired little boy." At first, Louise had just thought that the man had shopped at their stand before, but she was sure she would have remembered such an attractive young man. As far as she remembered, she had never seen that man before. Her conundrum, however, slipped her mind as she had to focus on stopping her husband when he decided to go to the constabulary again.

After leaving the fruit stand, the young man vanished into the crowd and inconspicuously and silently disappeared into an alley. If anyone had been watching him closely, they might have felt a strange sensation that his movements were *too* natural. Alas, no one was paying attention to this particular man in the crowd.

Once in the alley, he tossed the fruit he had just purchased to a street orphan curled up on the ground. The child looked up to thank the man but instead let out a small cry and ran the other way. The young man's expression had changed from the gentle, kind one he had shown Louise to an ice-cold facade of barely-contained wrath.

Something's wrong.

The young man, the underground agent-for-fire whom Herscherik had called Kuro, recalled the events that took place in the castle after he infiltrated it the previous night. The castle—the royal quarters in particular—was strangely busy. Kuro had not met Herscherik nor completed his task that night because of the heavy traffic of knights and guards tromping through the halls. There was only one plausible theory Kuro could devise from the previous night's commotion at the castle and Herscherik's absence from the fruit stand he had been frequenting in secret.

With a scowl on his face, Kuro made his way to see the Oracle, an infamous information broker of the underground. The Oracle charged more than most others in the business, but anyone who lived in the shadows knew that this broker provided information worthy of the price.

As he hastened through the alleys, Kuro couldn't stop picturing the smile on that blond-haired prince who was always full of surprises. At each of their encounters, Herscherik had shown expressions unbecoming of his age and acted unbecoming of his royal status. Before Kuro knew it, all of his dangerous infiltration missions into the castle had become nothing more than an excuse to see the prince. Kuro used to only view his work as a means to earn money and nobles only as despicable but lucrative prey. He had come face-to-face with the darkness that lurked within the shadows of aristocracy, as most agents of the

underground did. That darkness, with its shadowy specter of greed, tempted people into forsaking their humanity.

But when Kuro first met Herscherik, he couldn't sense a shred of that darkness within the prince. Kuro felt strangely comfortable beside him and never enjoyed leaving him. Whenever Herscherik asked him a question or a favor, Kuro couldn't refuse. Before long, the bewilderment Kuro felt over Herscherik and some other emotion that he had never felt before had turned to a comfortable kind of exhilaration. If teaching Herscherik the gap in the barrier had caused the prince's disappearance somehow, Kuro would never forgive himself for it. His steps hastened one after another, until he was sprinting through the alleyways like a gust of wind. The only thing he longed for now was to see Herscherik smile.

Herscherik was dreaming that he was floating inside a cloud. He felt a distant nagging sensation at the back of his mind, but even that got lost in the fluff. He could not even be bothered to figure out if the fluffiness felt comfortable or revolting.

Whatever. I could float around like this forever... Just as sloth began to overcome him, Herscherik snapped awake from hearing a yelling man and a crying woman.

He was awake but could only see darkness. Herscherik realized that his eyes were closed and tried to open them wide, but he only managed to open them enough to see a blurry crack of light. Sensing he must be in danger, he tried to move his body, which felt exceedingly heavy and disobedient. Worst of all was his headache. Herscherik gave up on moving and focused on assessing his current situation with his still-foggy consciousness. With much effort, he discerned that he wasn't in his own room from the fact that the bed he was on was much inferior in quality to his own.

Did someone... drug me? With sleeping pills?

Herscherik made a guess to explain the unusual state of his body. There was a time when Ryoko's job search had entered a vicious cycle. Her failed attempts had made her anxious about the future and left her unable to sleep at night.

The insomnia wrecked her physical well-being, leading to more failed interviews. At some point, her parents had urged Ryoko to see a psychiatrist. There, she was prescribed some sleeping pills. However, just describing her anxiety to the psychiatrist, after being too scared to open up to her parents, had significantly eased Ryoko's mind. She had been too intimidated to actually take the pills. In fact, once she had switched her mindset and was no longer afraid of rejection, her job search didn't last for much longer before she landed the office job she'd held until her death.

The side effects of the sleeping pills, as the pharmacist had described to Ryoko, matched Herscherik's current state: dizziness, lethargy, and headaches. His thought process was being heavily impeded by these symptoms.

Who drugs a four-year-old? With an internal grumble, Herscherik attempted to retrace his memory through the haze of his headache.

As the sun was going down, he had returned from the fruit stand to his room via his usual route without anyone spotting him. He had been carrying a book he had checked out of the library beforehand, just to solidify his alibi. Then, he lounged on his sofa by the window, reading to pass the time until supper. Just as he began to contemplate which location he would infiltrate for that night's episode of his investigative journalism program, Meria had finished preparing his supper. Herscherik remembered eating it.

The sautéed chicken was delicious. The pumpkin-ish soup, too.

The royal head chef prepared exquisite dishes, day after day. Both in this life and his previous one, Herscherik loved good food. Ryoko, however, never considered herself handy in the kitchen and specialized in eating more than cooking.

But I can't remember anything after that... Not even dessert. He could perfectly recall what he ate for his appetizer, entrée, and soup, as well as how they all tasted. Herscherik could not remember anything after that, try as he did. Therefore, he concluded that one or more of the dishes must have been dosed. *Drugged and kidnapped, then.* Herscherik recalled that the dessert for that night was going to be fruit tarts. *Dangit. I missed out on dessert.* Herscherik liked eating in general but especially loved anything sweet. He imagined the

golden-brown cookie crust, custard, and seasonal fruit on top. Finally, Herscherik gave up on his regrettably missed dessert. *Now, what to do...?* Both his brain and senses felt dulled from the drug, which came with the happy coincidence of keeping Herscherik from panicking.

Gradually, his headache subsided and the haze cleared from his mind. Holding back his dizziness, lingering headache, and nausea, Herscherik observed his surroundings with his eyes barely open. He was in a large room that appeared to be some sort of storage. The ceiling was made of decrepit wood, and the thin walls were riddled with holes. Judging from the lack of noise beyond the walls, Herscherik guessed that he was far from the center of town.

There were several people in the room. Two of them, a man and a woman, were arguing. While Herscherik hadn't seen the man before, he immediately recognized the woman. She was the one who had been by his side since birth, always taking care of him. *Meria?* She had looked more distraught than Herscherik had ever seen.

"You said you wouldn't hurt him! I brought Prince Herscherik here because you said you just wanted to talk to him!"

"I wouldn't have to do any of this if you had gotten through to the king!"

"I *did* speak to the king! But His Majesty..."

"Won't help us! I know! Then what other choice do we have!?"

None of the other occupants of the room interrupted their escalating argument.

I've never seen Meria this flustered before. Herscherik's thoughts kept wandering around the mark, still affected by the drug. He remembered that Meria had always tied her hair in a neat bun to match her meticulous work ethic. Now, her hair was in a mess, and her downturned eyes were wet with tears. *I think she has a few more wrinkles than when we first met...* Meria was much younger than Ryoko's mother, so Herscherik always saw her more as an older sister than a maternal figure. As Ryoko had been the oldest of three sisters, she had always wanted an older sibling. Herscherik was always grateful for Meria and felt much closer to her than the biological mother he had never met. *It sounds like she tried to talk to Father about something... and it didn't go*

well? You could have always talked to me... Herscherik tried to vocalize that but struggled to form the words.

“Please! We have to take Prince Herscherik to a doctor!” Meria cried to the man.

She was nearly losing her mind after realizing the true potency of the drug and watching Herscherik remain unconscious for an entire day. She shuddered to imagine Herscherik never waking up. Meria clung to the man’s arm, begging and pleading. The man shook her off of his arm. Meria, not a particularly strong woman, fell to the ground and let out a small cry.

When Herscherik saw Meria tumble onto the floor with a cloud of dust, he let out an audible sound. At that instant, the wooden door of the room flew off of its hinges and into the room, accompanied by a cacophonous sound and another eruption of dust. A figure, clad in all black, emerged from the dust cloud, holding up a muscular man by the neck in each hand. Herscherik knew this figure very well, too.

I thought you specialized in not being detected... Herscherik couldn’t help but wonder if the spy before him, Kuro, could not have come up with a quieter infiltration route.

He had made quite the entrance, like a comic book hero, but his all-black outfit gave him more of an antihero vibe. He had his black hood drawn over his brows and a black cloth around his mouth, his long bangs concealing the rest of his face. Still, his eyes as deep and as red as a pool of blood peeked through his mask with a dangerous gleam. Herscherik saw an almost unbelievable amount of emotion behind those eyes, which had usually seemed so calm.

Kuro tossed one of the incapacitated men in his hands against another man who had been too astonished to react. He let out a grunt like a squashed frog. Unbothered by the sound, Kuro tossed the man in his other hand aside, who also let out the squashed-frog groan even though he only fell to the floor. With his hands now empty, Kuro slowly approached Herscherik. Having snapped out of the initial shock at the intrusion, the remaining men in the room swung at Kuro with metal bars and pieces of lumber. Kuro dodged them all with the minimum amount of movement, chopping their weapons out of their hands and

clocking them in the gut. It was all done in a seamless series of maneuvers, with not a single motion wasted.

In less than ten seconds, the three men that had swung at Kuro were all eating dust. The rest of the men in the room were hesitant to attack. In fact, they were immobilized like a deer in headlights.

“Next man who moves, dies,” Kuro declared.

His tone was completely foreign to the one Herscherik had grown accustomed to hearing. It was cold enough to freeze over hell. His declaration was utterly irrefutable—a promise more than a threat. Everyone in the room understood the outcome of any attempts to attack Kuro and stood motionless.

Kuro walked by the immobilized group of men and came up to Herscherik. He took a knee and met Herscherik at eye level. His eyes were completely different now. There was no anger in them, but instead they wavered with concern.

“Did they drug you?” Kuro’s hand touched Herscherik’s forehead.

Herscherik closed his eyes at the refreshingly cool touch.



“Kuro...” Herscherik could barely utter those two syllables.

Kuro patted the prince’s head to console him. “Side effects are temporary. You’ll be as good as new once the drugs are out of your system.”

Kuro moved his hand away from Herscherik’s forehead and lifted the prince in his arms. Herscherik was more than a little embarrassed at the gesture, but he had a more pressing question on his mind.

“Kuro... I need... to...”

“The prince stays here!” The man who had been in an argument with Meria interrupted Herscherik as he stepped out before Kuro. He held a dagger in his hand, his eyes bloodshot. “Our livelihood... Our very lives are on the line!” the man declared with anger.

“So?” Kuro coldly countered. His eyes were devoid of emotion, glaring at the man as if he was nothing more than a pebble on the road.

Kuro let out a sigh, as if he couldn’t be bothered with it. He shifted to carry Herscherik with one hand. A knife had suddenly appeared in his other hand.

Noticing the blade in his hand, Herscherik tried to call to him. “Kuro...!” Just as he did, Herscherik’s brain rattled.

Kuro had dodged the man’s attack. He used his knife to knock the dagger out of the man’s hand and swung directly at his neck, aiming for the carotid artery. Kuro was going to do exactly as he’d warned them. In that instant, something snapped within Herscherik—more precisely, his patience.

Why won’t you listen!?

Herscherik’s blood boiled, evaporating all of the drug’s side effects from the headache, to the lethargy, to even the fog on his thoughts. “Kuro, stop!” he sharply ordered, as if he was commanding Ryoko’s loyal dog, as he smacked Kuro’s head which happened to be just within his reach. That caused his hood to fall back, revealing his shimmering black hair and widened red eyes. Kuro stared at Herscherik, unable to say or do anything but blink after that unexpected attack.

“I want... to hear them... out. Why... won’t you listen...?” Herscherik’s plea

faded out as a throttling dizzy spell caught up to him. Herscherik buried his head into Kuro's shoulder. He felt a shiver run all the way down from the tip of his head to his toes, and a powerful urge to vomit. Still, Herscherik held on. If he fell unconscious again, he wouldn't be able to solve anything. He lifted his face from Kuro's shoulders and looked the underground agent square in the eyes. "Let me down... Kuro. I can't see or hear anyone up here."

"But..."

"Then sit down, please. Kuro, sit!" Herscherik commanded, complete with the gesture of pointing to the ground with one hand.

At this point, Herscherik was thinking of Kuro (the underground spy) and Kuro (Ryoko's old dog) on the same level. In fact, he remembered that even Kuro the dog was smarter than how the human Kuro was acting right now.

Eventually, Kuro compromised by setting Herscherik down to sit on the edge of the cot he had been lying in. Kuro remained standing by the cot.

"Tell me what's going on, Meria." Herscherik turned to Meria, who had been frozen on the ground since being knocked down by that man.

"...I cannot begin to tell you how sorry I am, Prince Herscherik." Meria's chin fell.

Her apology seemed genuine to Herscherik, but he wasn't looking for an apology.

"I don't want you to apologize, but tell me why you've drugged me and brought me here. You know these people, right? Someone said that their livelihood and even their lives are at stake?"

Herscherik couldn't perfectly recall the exact words he had heard while his mind was still foggy. The only thing he could make out was that these people were desperate.

Meria looked around the room in hesitation before answering. "We are all from the land Lord Ruseria used to rule."

Herscherik's eyes widened. He hadn't heard that name in a while. Ruseria was the very person that served as a turning point in Herscherik's life. Without him,

Herscherik imagined that he would still be idly living in blissful ignorance.

Meria continued without noticing Herscherik's surprise. "When Lord Ruseria passed away, someone else took over our land. Count Grim."

Herscherik recognized that name, too. He was the direct cause of Ruseria's execution. The one that backed him into a corner.

"He only sees our land as his personal playground." A man spoke up, the one who Kuro had nearly killed.

No one who lived on his land believed that Ruseria had committed treason. Their lord was a just ruler who treasured his people like his own family. During famines, he gave up any food he had and suffered alongside his people. After the accidental death of his wife and child, people began to notice their lord delving into research like he was haunted by something. They witnessed Ruseria urgently coming or going from various places.

Later, the people received the news of Ruseria's treason and execution. Their new lord, Grim, was the polar opposite of Ruseria—the worst ruler they could have imagined. Grim levied far more taxes than was necessary and sold off Ruseria's resources to line his own pockets. In fact, when a weather-driven famine struck the land, not only did the despicable new lord refuse to lower taxes, but he hired some thugs in an attempt to forcibly collect them.

"It hasn't even been two years since he took control, and most of us are already starving. We don't know if some of the sick and elderly will make it through winter... including my parents," Meria muttered, heartbroken. Their land was already built on poor soil under a climate that made it difficult to grow crops. It didn't take long for their community to fall, and fall hard. "I received letters from my parents. As soon as my cousin—that's him, right there—told me of the situation, I immediately spoke up to His Majesty about it. But..."

"Father did nothing." Herscherik finished the sentence that Meria couldn't bear to.

Meria silently bit her lip and nodded. Her disappointment in the king was clear to see. On the other hand, Herscherik fully understood the reason for his father's inaction from his glimpse behind the kingdom's curtains.

Father can't do anything.

Herscherik knew, just as he had with Ruseria, that his father wanted to help these people. The problem was that Grim was clearly under Barbosse's protection. The testimony of these people would not be enough. Without irrefutable evidence, the king could not prosecute Grim because of Barbosse's protection. If he had taken any poorly considered action, there was a good chance that Grim would torment his people even further. Barbosse would turn to retribution, too.

Nothing has changed. I'm still so... Herscherik was completely overcome with his own powerlessness.

He had studied, read, and sneaked his way into nearly every room in the castle for the sole purpose of acquiring irrefutable evidence. With that, his father could prosecute the nobles that acted like they owned the country. However, he had come to suspect that neither the long-reigning puppeteer of the country, nor his allies, had left any evidence lying around in the castle. Either that or they had concealed them too well for Herscherik to discover. He had uncovered numerous trails of corruption, but none of his evidence was airtight. Still, Herscherik had no intention of giving up nor of letting them keep winning this war for long. He, his father, the rest of his family, and all the people of the kingdom were all in danger.

Herscherik knew that he had nothing: no magic, no athletic talents, and no patrons. Precisely because he was born with no weapons in his arsenal, he focused on what actions he *could* take. The only weapons he had were the knowledge and experience he had carried over from his previous life. So, he searched for a way to use them, in order to reform, rebuild, fortify, and protect his country. This resolve had driven all Herscherik's actions up to this day. He understood that he and the people before him were the same. They each took action in an attempt to protect those dear to them... and failed.

"So you abducted me to threaten Father." Herscherik let out a long sigh into the silenced room. "Even if you did, Father can't do anything. It would only make your position worse... You're signing up for your entire families to be executed for treason." That was the consequence for harming royalty. Despite the minister ruling the nation from the shadows, the end result of kidnapping a

prince and blackmailing the king must have been evident to even a child.

“...I understand. Give me some time.” Herscherik looked around the room. He met the eyes of each and every person there, all immobilized and speechless. He nodded with conviction. “I’ll take care of it before winter.”

This declaration astonished Meria, the other residents of Ruseria’s land, and even Kuro, who was the only one in the room that noticed the subtle change in Herscherik’s tone. Now, he spoke like the oldest sister of a household rounding up all of her siblings.

“I made a promise to Count Ruseria.” Herscherik produced the antique pocket watch the count had gifted him.

All of his people knew that their beloved count had never allowed himself to be parted from that precious keepsake.

“...Lord Ruseria,” someone in the room whispered.

Tears formed in the eyes of all of Ruseria’s subjects who were present. Their loving count was no longer with them and neither was his family. His land and his people were left behind to be ravaged by tyranny. The gravity of it all was weighing heavy on their hearts.

“I want you to trust me.” Herscherik’s eyes shone with determination, just as they had when he’d accepted Ruseria’s pledge of loyalty.

The Seventh Prince returned to the panic-stricken castle on the evening of the day following his disappearance. It was a guard at the front gate who had first discovered the prince and his nanny. He had received the nanny who was carrying the prince as she walked up to the gate, her hair in disarray and near to fainting. When the king received the news, he pushed past his objecting advisors and ran out to the gate to embrace his faltering son. The king’s pale face was drained of any color it had. It was clear to see that the king had not slept a wink the previous night.

The nanny gave her story to the king. Someone had infiltrated the royal quarters and abducted her along with the Seventh Prince, as they were both in Herscherik’s room. They were taken to the kidnapper’s hideout, but the nanny

had managed to escape with her charge.

A team of knights immediately headed to a cottage far from the castle town that the nanny claimed to have escaped from. While they could see that some people had been in the cottage, they were unable to identify the kidnapper. The abduction of Gracis's youngest prince had concluded with his miraculously safe return.

In the dimly lit room, Herscherik was sitting on the sofa, gazing at the flames dancing in the fireplace. After being away from it for a day, his room felt exceedingly spacious with no one else in it.

I had my own condo. I should be used to being alone, but... maybe I crave attention more than I realized.

Herscherik let out a chuckle, having realized how much he had relied on Meria. He recalled the events that took place after his return to the castle.

Herscherik had kept the truth a secret, despite his father's inquisition. If he had told the truth, everyone who had a part in his kidnapping, and everyone in their families, would have been sentenced to death. Herscherik maintained his story. "All I remember after waking up is that Meria brought me home."

His father drooped his head. "You're as stubborn as your mother..." Solye muttered in defeat.

Herscherik realized from the king's reaction that he knew the abduction was Meria's doing. That wasn't surprising. Considering that she and Herscherik had gone missing right after Solye refused to take action regarding her hometown, it would have been ridiculous for her not to be the prime suspect. No matter what Solye's personal beliefs were, his status as the king demanded that he pursue the case.

"I need to ask you a favor, Father," Herscherik had finally said.

Herscherik returned his focus to the present. He felt a strange sensation, like he was no longer alone in the room.

"Are you all right?" A voice came from directly behind him.

Still, Herscherik remained where he sat and continued to watch the fire and unknowingly stroke the pocket watch in his hand with his thumb.

“I caused you a lot of trouble. I’m sorry, Kuro.”

Herscherik felt like Kuro shrugged but didn’t turn around to see.

“...Nothing for Your Highness to apologize about. You didn’t ask me to do it. No need to be so uptight around me, either.”

“Oh? Then you can call me Hersch, too.” Herscherik tilted his head and let out a chuckle. The image of Kuro the dog wagging his tail crossed his mind, but he kept that to himself. “Thank you, Kuro. Really. Thanks to you, no one will be executed.”

Thanks to Kuro, the case of Herscherik’s kidnapping was coming to a close, at least on the surface. Upon Herscherik’s request, Kuro had spirited Ruseria’s people out of the capital and even set up a space for Meria to describe as the kidnapper’s hideout, separate from the real location where Herscherik had been taken. Since Kuro and everyone else involved in the abduction had thoroughly covered their tracks, Herscherik guessed that the case would be dropped before long for lack of any substantial evidence.

Kuro really is a talented spy...

Herscherik was impressed. The glimpses of Kuro’s stealth and combat skills were enough that even to Herscherik’s untrained eye, he could tell Kuro was the real deal. More evidence of his prowess was the very fact that he was now standing in Herscherik’s room, even after the royal quarters had improved their security.

“I don’t have anything I can give you right now, but I will repay you for this, one day.”

“I won’t hold my breath.” Kuro shrugged. Then, he began to frown and hesitantly added, “...You’re really going?”

Herscherik guessed that Kuro must have gotten wind of the favor he had asked from his father. He held down the button of the pocket watch to reveal the portrait of a family of three that had already departed this world.

The people who were dear to them are in danger. How could I not help them?

Ruseria had entrusted Herscherik with everything he had left unfinished. That's why...

"I'm going. I have to," Herscherik answered with unyielding resolve.

Herscherik had asked his father for a favor. *"Meria's exhausted from all of this. I want her to return to her hometown for a while. And I want to accompany her there, after all she's done for me."* Herscherik had pleaded with the expression of a child concerned for his nanny. Meria's homecoming would serve two purposes: one, to allow Meria to escape from the castle, and two, to let Herscherik go to Meria's hometown in order to obtain evidence of Grim's wrongdoings. That might prove incredibly difficult for someone his age, but Herscherik could no longer back down despite the odds—not after discovering that there would be casualties of poverty in the town over the coming winter. He had made a promise, and he intended to keep it.

In fact, Solye opposed Herscherik leaving the capital for any reason, but Herscherik never relented. Soon, there was a father and son stand-off. Rook, the king's butler who had been quietly standing beside them the whole time, proposed a solution. "Your Majesty. Why don't we appoint a butler of service for Prince Herscherik? There shan't be any problems if he's accompanied by a manservant."

Solye turned a sharp glare to Rook as if to reprimand his unsolicited advice. Rook simply looked the other way.

"Butler of service?" Herscherik tilted his neck.

Even though he had studied as much as he could, he now realized that there was a great deal he still did not know about the customs of his own country. He attributed this to his lack of interest in that area and the fact that his mother was dead and his father was too busy to teach him these things, on top of barely seeing his siblings and queens.

"A butler of service, in short, is a butler who serves not a whole household but only his master... A personal servant of sorts," Rook explained.

A butler of service, it seemed, was a butler specifically dedicated to a single

member of royalty or former royals like dukes and duchesses. The custom had begun with Gracis's founding monarch. When he took the throne, a great many people swore their loyalty to him. That king had chosen the most trustworthy out of all them and given that person the title of "butler of service," to manage all of his underlings.

After some time, those who pledged their life to serve a particular individual began to earn the title "of service." However, the title was only given under the king's supervision. Butlers of service were permitted to choose the will of their master over the king himself. In some cases, a butler of service could spend more time with their master over a lifetime than their master's spouse.

"It is customary for His Highness to choose a butler of service after a few more years, but this may be the perfect timing if Meria is to leave him," Rook added. He also explained that Herscherik could elect to appoint a knight or spellcaster of service as well. But first, Rook clarified that the prince should appoint a butler.

Recalling what Rook had said, Herscherik let out a sigh in front of the fire. In the end, Solye had granted permission for Herscherik's trip with the condition that he chose a butler of service to accompany him. Herscherik couldn't ask the king to compromise any further.

"I wish you could be my butler of service," Herscherik muttered.

We get along, somehow. I feel relaxed around you...

Herscherik concluded that this was because Kuro knew how Herscherik really was. Given their shocking first encounter and the unique situations in which they'd seen each other after that, Herscherik had shown Kuro a side of him that was neither juvenile nor princely. He always made sure to act his age around his own father, so as to not concern the king. As a result, Herscherik felt uniquely at ease around Kuro. Come to think of it, Ryoko could only be herself when she was alone or only with family. She had always played a character around friends and coworkers because that was an easier way for her to live. Herscherik lost himself in thought for a moment, reminiscing about his previous life.

"Because I'm a useful spy?" Kuro asked.

At Kuro's sudden question, Herscherik finally turned around to face him. "Huh?" Kuro's eyes were filled with emotion, just like they were when he had saved Herscherik from the kidnapping. "Why would that matter? It's because you're Kuro. Did *you* only help me because I'm a prince, then?" Herscherik's eyes were widened.

Kuro fell speechless. He didn't say another word as he disappeared into the darkness.

What's up with Kuro...? I mean, I know he could never be my butler of service.

Anyone who served the royal family would have their identity vetted. From what Herscherik could discern from Rook, anyone with the title "of service" worked very closely with the royal family. Traditionally, a non-firstborn noble or an heir of a wealthy merchant would apply for the position, recommendation letter in hand, to increase their reputation. Herscherik doubted that anyone like that would understand what he was trying to do. In fact, who would even choose to apply for a position like that to work for the *Seventh* Prince, the least valuable member of the royal family and someone who didn't even have any noble patrons? Just the thought of it made Herscherik depressed, although he was really upset for another reason entirely. Leaving Meria, the person who had raised him, wasn't going to be easy, even though it was something Herscherik had decided to do on his own.

After ending the discussion with his father, Herscherik spoke to Meria when they were alone. "Meria. I'm sure you're already aware, but you can't work here anymore."

If the fact that she drugged and kidnapped a prince were to come to light, Meria could not avoid prosecution, even with Herscherik's protection and the fact that she had felt like there was no other choice. Herscherik knew he had to get Meria out of here before her crime came to light.

"I am truly, truly sorry..." Meria groveled on her knees and rubbed her forehead into the carpet.

Herscherik helped her to her feet, shaking his head. "I understand how you feel, Meria. I want to help you. I want to change things. But there's something I have to make clear..." Now, all sorts of emotions were entangled within

Herscherik: loneliness, sorrow, anger directed at his own powerlessness... Those emotions wouldn't allow Herscherik to hold back what he was about to say.

"Father trusted you. And you betrayed that trust... You betrayed my trust, too."

If she had come to talk to Herscherik, instead of simply kidnapping him, things might have turned out differently. While Herscherik understood that he could not have expected her to come to a four-year-old about her predicament, Meria was the only person Solye had entrusted with his child. "I know you were in a tough position... but that doesn't justify betraying the people who trusted you."

Meria sobbed. As she left the room with her head hung low, Herscherik didn't stop her.

Once both Meria and Kuro were out of the room, Herscherik let out a self-deprecating scoff. "Doesn't justify betraying their trust, does it...?" Half of what he had said to Meria was directed at himself. He was practically lying to his father right now, too. Herscherik kept all sorts of things hidden from the king, like the knowledge of his previous life and what he did in the middle of the night, in order to play the part of the innocent young prince. "Still..." He was doing it all to protect his father, and everyone else he'd sworn to help. Herscherik tightened his grip on the pocket watch. "I want to protect you..." He understood that it was selfish to feel that way. Even so, Herscherik wished for it. For the wish that Ruseria had entrusted him with.

As those thoughts raced through his mind, Herscherik felt his chest tighten, making it difficult for him to breathe.

The next morning, Rook prepared Herscherik's breakfast instead of Meria. He was the perfect butler, meticulously serving the meal as he assessed Herscherik's physical condition after his abduction.

"Prince Herscherik, Your Highness will be appointed a butler of service this afternoon," Rook declared as Herscherik drank his post-breakfast tea.

"Already?" Herscherik stared at Rook, implying a few other comments like *that was quick* or *don't I get to interview them?*

Rook only returned a gentle smile.

I wonder what kind of person they'll be... I hope we can get along. His emotions were heavily weighted toward nervousness over excitement. Herscherik downed the rest of his tea as if to swallow his anticipation.

That afternoon, a tall and slender young man appeared. He had his shimmering, pitch-black hair slicked back to reveal his deep, ruby eyes. If he were to smile, that would surely make any girl blush.



“Now, I shall take my leave.” Rook left the room with barely an introduction, as if he had just set them up on a blind date.

Silence dominated the room for several moments.

Is that...? “Kuro?”

Kuro the spy had always worn all black, hiding his eyes with his long bangs and hood and even concealing his mouth with a cloth mask. Even though he should have only recognized small parts of Kuro’s face, Herscherik was confident that the man standing before him was the underground agent himself.

“...You’re actually pretty good-looking.”

“What do you mean, ‘actually’?” Kuro the spy-turned-butler grumbled.

Herscherik laughed in response. Ryoko’s nerdy intuition had guessed that Kuro was good-looking, but Herscherik couldn’t help but smile at how handsome he was after seeing Kuro’s whole face. “What happened? Did you switch careers overnight?”

“...Sort of.”

Kuro’s response was less confident than what Herscherik was used to hearing from Kuro.

I can’t very well tell you that I don’t even know how I ended up here, Kuro grumbled in his mind. As an agent of the underground, nobles were nothing but a source of income to him. That’s why he had worked as a spy, which only required a surface-level and short-lived interaction with his clients. But Herscherik was completely different from any of those nobles before him. Kuro had witnessed how Herscherik leaped into action, researching alone in the night and steeling himself to venture outside of the castle if need be. He’d seen the sense of responsibility he felt just because he had been born a royal, and his intense stubbornness. And Kuro saw how Herscherik smiled and showed his true emotions, in contrast to the mask Kuro always wore to conceal his face. As they spent more time together, Kuro noticed a change beginning to occur within him. Before he knew it, Kuro would find himself looking forward to meeting the prince during his next infiltration of the castle. The sense of danger

he felt when Herscherik disappeared, the wrath he felt when he found the prince drugged and abducted, the relief he felt when he finally saved Herscherik... All of those emotions, and Herscherik's sorrowful expression as he pushed his nanny away and continued to deceive his father, had stuck with Kuro. The little prince had done it all to follow through with his resolve of protecting those dear to him. Kuro wanted to help him, and protect him, somehow.

When Herscherik said that he wanted him to be his butler of service, Kuro's heart skipped a beat. However, that joy didn't come without a shadow of insecurity. He wondered if the prince only wanted him for his talents. Kuro wasn't born in this country but had found himself here once upon a time and stuck around. No one had ever wanted him for who he was but only asked for his skills as Shadow Fang. Everyone who had ever asked for his services only did so in pursuit of his abilities; it didn't matter who he was under the dark hood. Rationally, Kuro understood that this was only natural. Still, he had always longed, deep down, for someone to need him for who he was. *"It's because you're Kuro,"* Herscherik had said. *"Did you only help me because I'm a prince, then?"* The answer was no. Kuro would not have stuck his neck out to save anyone else, not his own client or even the king himself. Kuro saved the prince because he was Herscherik, not the other way around. Herscherik wanted Kuro and not Shadow Fang. For the first time, Kuro was truly wanted for who he was.

Instead of spilling his heart about all of that, Kuro simply grinned. "You said this was what you wanted, didn't you?"

"...Thank you!" Herscherik confirmed with a smile becoming of his age. "But don't they have to vet you?"

"Well, I was scouted by the king's butler of service himself."

As Kuro had been contemplating how to infiltrate the role, Rook had appeared before him without a sound. He immediately proposed that Kuro become Herscherik's butler of service. Kuro couldn't tell if Rook was acting on his own or by orders of the king. The only thing he took from the meeting was that the king's butler of service approved of him and that Rook had his own secrets.

“Okay,” Herscherik conceded. “You really don’t have a birth name, Kuro? I feel weird just calling you Kuro.”

“I don’t know my birth name. I do have a name I go by, but you shouldn’t call me that.”

After Kuro began living in the underground and people started calling him Shadow Fang, he no longer needed his real name. He had no one close to him who wanted to know his real name. Whenever he needed a “normal” name during a mission, he invented an alias on the spot. But now, he had grown accustomed to Herscherik calling him Kuro. That being said, he understood that the prince might not want to use that name in public.

“Name me. Whatever you want.”

“Really...?” Herscherik contemplated, his brows pulled together. Soon, he clapped his hands. “How about Schwarz?”

“What does it mean?” Kuro asked, not recognizing the word.

“Um... ‘Black.’ So does Kuro, by the way. Is that too on the nose?” Herscherik timidly tilted his head.

Kuro laughed, and it sounded genuine. “That works. So I’m still your *Kuro*.”

“Yep!”

In this country, a name granted by a noble carried a special significance. It was a display of absolute trust by the granter and of selfless loyalty from the receiver. It would be some time before Herscherik and Kuro discovered the meaning behind a naming in this country, and share an embarrassed chuckle.

Intermission: The King, His Butler, and His Favorite Queen

Once Herscherik, recently returned from a kidnapping scare, had left his room, Solye let out a long sigh and slumped deep into his sofa. Even though he had finally been relieved of the dread that had plagued him all night and day, he now had a different problem to face, and he was exhausted beyond belief.

“He really does take after her...” Solye muttered.

His butler and childhood friend that stood beside him shrugged his shoulders. “Take after? He’s *just like* her, if not even more so...”

Her—the king’s most beloved queen, Herscherik’s mother, was devoid of any frivolity, manlier than most men. That was only describing her personality, of course. In appearance, she was a truly beautiful woman. The contrast of her feminine exterior and her masculine decisiveness and bold statements had often frozen these two men in their tracks.

“Hersch really is her son, all right.” Solye chuckled. Herscherik was just as stubborn as his mother had been, in stark contrast to his beautiful appearance. His tough backbone that never let him give up on anything he’d set his mind to was undoubtedly inherited from his mother. “Putting what do about Hersch aside...” Solye’s tone lowered. “We were complacent, Rook.”

Rook could feel the temperature of the room drop. “I’m sorry. It’s not that I was complacent...” Rook immediately apologized, not out of fear for Solye but because he knew that part of the blame lay with him. “I didn’t think Meria would do something like this.”

“Right... I do feel sympathy for Meria.” Solye understood that he was the ultimate catalyst for Herscherik’s kidnapping.

When Meria had pleaded with him to help free her hometown from the oppression of their new lord, Solye had failed to answer her plea. There was no incriminating evidence against Grim, only Meria’s claims. Solye had been

searching for a move he could make, but there wasn't enough time. Anguished by the current state of her hometown, Meria had reached for her last resort. Solye did feel sympathy for Meria, but her action was inexcusable more for the precedent she had set than the simple crime of abducting royalty. For the threat that precedent posed to the very foundation of their nation, Meria would be charged more harshly than she deserved if her crimes were to come to light.

She hasn't done anything worse than he has... Solye snarled to himself. In fact, her crime was not so different from Barbosse's, who had taken away his family and first daughter. In fact, Solye could forgive Meria's crime in light of her dire predicament. *None of this would have had to happen if only I had one solid piece of evidence...* In Solye's eyes, this was just another tragedy that he could have prevented by making better choices, somehow. The king grit his teeth from the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and self-condemnation coiling in his heart. *Thanks to Hersch, I don't have to charge Meria with a crime... That's a silver lining, at least.*

Since Herscherik had never admitted to who the perpetrator was, the case had been closed, unsolved. If details of the abductions were ever made public, part of the blame would fall upon Herscherik, too. With that at the forefront of his mind, Solye had thoroughly questioned his son to no avail. Herscherik's resolve never wavered.

"I have to be honest, Solye... Prince Herscherik is no ordinary child." Rook called to the king who was stooped over in silent rage.

Rook had reached this conclusion through secretly guarding and observing Herscherik over the past two years or so. The first indication had come shortly after Herscherik's third birthday party. At Herscherik's request to begin his studies, Rook appointed the appropriate tutors under Solye's command. While Herscherik was exceptional in both language arts and mathematics, he had no knack for physical activity nor a drop of Magic Within. His tutors' disappointment was plain to see. Still, Herscherik had delved into studies as if to compensate for those shortcomings until he could read literature too complex for most adults. Rook always found the prince with his nose in a book, whenever he had spare time—unthinkable behavior for a three-year-old. Rook

found the sight of Herscherik reading the day away, buried in a mountain of books on his window seat, to be completely bizarre. He wasn't the only one who took notice, either. Some of the tutors were so completely astounded by Herscherik's unbelievably quick learning that they believed there must be some kind of supernatural element at work. Herscherik, on the other hand, paid no mind to such trivialities. He read book after book, soaking in every piece of knowledge along the way.

After some months, just as Rook had gotten accustomed to seeing Herscherik reading a thick book by the window, the prince had disappeared in the middle of the night. Once Meria had come to him in tears to inform him of this fact, Rook rushed to notify Solye, and they had immediately searched every nook and cranny in the royal palace. After a few hours with no sign of Herscherik, the dejected Rook had found the prince peacefully sleeping in his bed.

Rook spent another night secretly watching Herscherik when the prince slipped out of his room in the dark of night and into the castle, digging through all sorts of paperwork in the various offices. Rook had investigated the piece of paper Herscherik had spent the most time with that night to find that it was an invoice with a suspect detail. He could not figure out why a young child would show interest in such a thing. As he watched Herscherik sneak into one department after another only to return to his room after midnight, Rook noticed that all the papers the prince had paid close attention to showed some sort of discrepancy. Considering how Herscherik had been acting, it didn't seem like Herscherik's interest in those particular pieces was mere coincidence.

When Rook had reported Herscherik's strange behavior to Solye, the king pondered for a moment before instructing Rook to continue to guard Herscherik from the shadows without interrupting him. Unbeknownst to Herscherik, Rook watched him night after night as the little prince plunged himself into danger. On one particular night, Herscherik ran into an intruder. Rook was about to emerge from the shadows to protect the prince when the little boy easily defused the situation. Even more impressively, Herscherik had *befriended* the intruder.

Rook had later discovered that the intruder was Shadow Fang, an infamous agent of the underground guild. He suggested to the king to let him stop

Herscherik's nightly adventures, but Solye never agreed.

Just as Rook was beginning to get used to the double life of serving as the king's advisor by day and Herscherik's bodyguard by night, the prince learned about a secret passage out of the castle grounds and began frequenting the town.

I might just work myself to death... Rook had contemplated, gazing out in the distance. And who could have blamed him?

Herscherik, through his cleverness, had gained the trust of a couple who ran a fruit stand, where he began helping out. But the couple weren't the only ones who had accepted Herscherik. With each visit, Herscherik began to blend in with the castle town, and more and more townsfolk accepted him. Still, Rook noticed that Herscherik wasn't going out into town simply for his own entertainment. The prince acted like an investigator when out in the town, to verify the information he had researched in the castle.

On that fateful day, Rook was reporting Herscherik's ordinary outing into the castle town to the king when the prince was kidnapped by Meria. His complete faith in Meria had betrayed him.

Solye smiled at Rook's statement. "Yes, I know. Hersch isn't normal. He's *her* son, after all, as well as mine... He was never going to be an ordinary boy, if I do say so myself."

"I agree with that, of course," Rook had to admit. "But that's not what I mean..."

Solye understood the intentions behind the statement of his childhood friend. Herscherik had no magic, no physical talents... To boot, while he was the apple of Solye's eye, his appearance was unremarkable, relative to the other princes. Still, Solye saw in Herscherik's gem-like eyes, as blue as his, some boundless light that seemed to see through everything, all the way to some distant land that not even Solye could see.

"I told Hersch that he could make his own choices now." Solye recalled the day Herscherik had asked to begin his studies.

It seemed like Herscherik had chosen a path of his volition. It was clear that the little prince had a goal in mind. Solye guessed that the path would not be an easy one to traverse. As a father, he wanted to keep Herscherik from following it, and perhaps he should have. It seemed like the most dangerous path he could take, one that was most likely to prematurely end his life. Even so, Solye couldn't bring himself to stop him. He knew that *her* son would never back down, once he set his mind to it. The best this heartsick father could do was appoint Rook as Herscherik's bodyguard.

Maybe it's time to end even that, Solye considered.

Herscherik had begun taking his own steps down the path he chose. Solye was aware that his youngest son was already walking out of his protection. Just as he had told him to, Herscherik chose his own path.

"But who do we make his butler of service?" Solye asked with a frown.

He couldn't very well trust any noble here. Any trustworthy men and women of status had been relocated away from the castle—all according to the minister's plan, of course. Solye refused to call any of them back, lest they would be plunged into some terrible jeopardy.

"We have a great candidate, right here." Rook grinned. "A cunning man. A potent fighter. He knows how corrupt the nobles are, so they can't take him by surprise... Besides, he's completely charmed by the prince. You know the poor black dog I'm talking about?"

Rook was talking about Shadow Fang, the intruder Herscherik had called Kuro. When guarding Herscherik from the shadows, Rook had seen the man countless times. While he seemed to always remain emotionless, Rook had sensed a shift in his attitude when he spoke with Herscherik. When doing so, Kuro almost seemed like a loyal dog speaking to his master. Rook had imagined that if Kuro had a tail, it would be vigorously wagging back and forth each time he spoke with the prince.

Solye's frown reappeared. "That's my son you're talking about like he's some kind of siren."

"No, the prince is much worse," Rook said, grinning. Herscherik had pulled Kuro in by just being himself. "That lone-wolf-looking Shadow Fang fell for him

in no time. Oh, the hearts your son will break...”

Rook was aware of how perilous the kidnapping had been. While he had held himself back from his sense of responsibility as Solye’s butler of service, he had felt his world turn black for a moment when he’d learned that Herscherik was kidnapped. An overwhelming sense of urgency followed the initial shock, but Rook had held himself back from going berserk like Kuro had, drawing on his years of experience among royalty. Every member of the royal family possessed an appearance that was simply on a different level from that of ordinary citizens. In fact, the best artists in the nation had always struggled to paint them. It certainly wasn’t impossible for them to charm someone solely based on their appearance. However, Herscherik had something more than mere surface beauty—a certain charisma that drew people to him. His full-fledged charm was always active, unbeknownst to Herscherik himself.

“The prince should be safe for the time being with him around. I’ll take care of it. Just leave it to me.”

“All right,” Solye conceded.

With a bow, Rook turned to exit the room. Before he opened the door, he turned back to Solye with concern in his eyes. “Are you doing okay?”

“I’m fine,” Solye feebly answered.

Nevertheless, Rook acknowledged the king’s reassurance and left the room. As he walked through the dim hallway, he recalled the words of a particular friend.

“Please, Rook. Don’t let him lose his mind.” The king’s favorite queen and Rook’s friend, nicknamed the Sunshine of the Royal Quarters, had left Rook those words on her deathbed. At the time, Rook didn’t understand half of what she meant. “Solye is so kind...” she continued, as Rook listened in confusion. “To everyone. He puts everyone else before himself... Always sacrificing... He’s always destroying himself for others.” The light in her eyes was nearly fading after giving life to Solye’s child. Still, she spoke with powerful conviction. “Solye’s kind... because he’s afraid. He has endured so much pain. That’s what’s so dangerous...”

A chill had run down Rook’s spine. Solye, the gentle king. To protect his

family, he endured the disrespect and terrible reputation the nobles ascribed to him without a word of complaint. Solye was enslaved by fear that grew from having his entire family taken away when he was ten and then solidified by losing his firstborn.

Solye never intended to be king. He had brothers above him—a wise ruler and a fearless conqueror. While Solye was a competent ruler and fighter, he knew that his brothers surpassed him in both departments and had no intention of contesting that fact.

“When I grow up, I want to be a researcher so I can help my father and brother,” young Solye had confessed to Rook when he first entered the academy.

That Solye was gone. Having been thrust upon the throne through the loss of his father and brothers, Solye had, at first, fought the nobles that ruled the politics of the country with impunity. With Rook as his butler of service, along with a knight and a spellcaster, Solye had fought against the nobles both in the light of day and in the shadows, on any field necessary. Meanwhile, his First Queen, whom he had been arranged to marry for an alliance, gave birth to his First Princess. Although they hadn’t married out of any romantic feelings, Solye treated his First Queen and princess with love. When his First Queen became pregnant with his next child, tragedy struck. The mysterious diseases that had exclusively plagued royalty had taken the life of the First Princess.

After having a one-on-one conversation with the minister who came to give his condolences, Solye’s attitude completely changed. He no longer fought back against the nobles. Despite the repeated pleas of his knight and spellcaster of service, Solye remained subservient. Having lost faith in their king, both the knight and spellcaster left Solye. They had come seeking a gentle yet strong king, not a weak and feeble puppet. As Rook contemplated leaving his friend, Solye suggested to Rook that he do exactly that. This was the moment when Rook understood that Solye had chosen to try and protect the people he cared for by isolating himself and sitting on the throne all alone.

Rook resolved to never leave Solye’s side after that. Ever since that day, Rook had stood by and watched Solye rule. Just as his favorite queen had requested, he had watched Solye suffer through it all. Rook’s expression tightened at the

realization.

“If Solye loses someone dear to him again...” the queen continued, “he’ll lose his mind from fear. That will break him... He’ll lose faith in everything and try to destroy this country with him... That’s how I feel.” Her words seemed like a prophecy—one that may actually be realized. “My child will keep him strong... Or torment him further. I don’t know.” The queen wore a faint smile, to ease Rook’s mind. “You’re the only one who can do it. Protect Solye for me... Stop him, if the time comes. Don’t let my beloved fall from his path...”

Entrusting her husband to his childhood friend, the queen departed this world.

Now, Rook turned back into the dark hallway, knowing that his friend was still fighting off his own fear beyond that door. The person most precious to Solye in the whole world could disappear in a single moment. That’s why Solye never let go and never crossed that final line, no matter how much torment and anguish befell him. All he could do was endure.

What if Solye crossed that line? Rook contemplated. If that were to happen, Rook would risk his life to stop his friend. That was the promise he made. For now, though, there were other things he could do. *Prince Herscherik... I think you will become someone vital to the future of our country.* Rook felt that Herscherik was the ray of hope his mother had left behind, at the cost of her life. That’s why he had to ensure that the prince survived. That’s why Rook had to do everything he could, before the minister caught on. Rook carried on through the darkened hallway without a sound, ready to make the first move.

After sending Rook off, Solye looked down at his hands. Irritated at the fact that they were slightly trembling, the king held his hands up to the fire. When Solye was told that Herscherik was kidnapped, he felt like he had been frozen solid. If Herscherik never returned, if the unthinkable had happened, Solye might have finally let go of his sanity.

“He’ll be with you, even when I’m gone.” Solye still vividly remembered the words his queen had said a few days after Herscherik’s birth. She had

whispered them to him like a hypnotic verse. *"He'll be by your side whenever you miss me. He'll help you."* She had smiled ever so slightly. A fleeting smile, completely in contrast from her usual vibrancy. *"It'll be all right, even after I'm gone... You'll have him. I love you, Sol. More than anything in this world. My sweet, gentle king..."* With those words, she had departed for the Garden Above. The child she had left behind grew more and more like her with age. Solye loved all of his children, but he especially adored Herscherik... perhaps from the sorrow of losing his mother.

"All children must grow up..." Solye muttered to himself.

The youngest prince, at least in mind, had already grown beyond his older siblings. Solye couldn't help but feel a sense of bittersweet pride. *In trying to protect him, maybe I didn't realize how he was protecting me.* He recalled his youngest son from earlier in the day. Herscherik had refused to give up any names, staring back at him with eyes gleaming with resolve. He was no longer a babe who could barely stand but a prince who had begun walking down the path he chose with his own steps. The only thing a parent could do now was watch and hope.

"He's your son, after all. What am I worried about?" Solye kept telling himself. His favorite queen was a powerful woman who never succumbed to fear nor bent her will. She had always kept him on his feet when he could barely stand on his own from the fear and pressure. Her one and only child was departing on his own journey. "But..." Solye whispered, seeing that his hands had stopped trembling, "if I lose Herscherik, too..."

Solye was proud of Herscherik's growth and wanted to support him. On the other hand, he felt the urge to lock Herscherik away so no one could hurt him. His conflicting emotions battled each other within the king. As if he was reaching for a helping hand, Solye whispered the name of the queen he loved more than anyone.

Chapter Seven: The Prince, the Butler, and the Trap

A week had passed since the incident where Herscherik had left the capital to travel to Meria's home town. During that week, Herscherik packed by day and gathered all sorts of documentation on Grim's rule from the various departments in the castle with Kuro in tow. It was a busy week for the little prince, but he even managed to sneak out into the castle town after hearing from Kuro that the fruit stand couple was worried about him.

The couple had welcomed him like Herscherik was their own. Of course, Louise's husband remained outwardly stoic, but he ruffled Herscherik's hair with his large hand as Louise embraced him. When they asked him why he hadn't been showing up, Herscherik only said that he had been struck with a headache, fever, and dizziness (not mentioning the kidnapping, of course). This led to Louise worrying even more about his health. As a token of her well-wishes, Louise gave him some pastries, while her husband, for some unknown reason, gave him a stuffed bear. On another note, when Herscherik saw this stoic man's ears redden as he handed over the bear, Herscherik realized why Louise had fallen for him.

On the day of his departure, the formation of Herscherik's travel party was as follows: the carriage carrying Meria and their belongings trailed Herscherik's carriage, which were both surrounded by 25 guards in all, including a captain of the Knights' Order and the coachmen of the carriages themselves.

After a week on the road, the prince's angelic face twisted in discomfort atop his secured carriage.

"Are we there yet, Kuro?" he exhaustedly asked his butler of service Schwarz, aka Kuro.

Kuro sighed at his master's question, not even trying to hide his annoyance. "Nothing's changed in the past ten minutes, Hersch. You know we're still a week away."

They had planned for a leisurely two-week's ride to Meria's home town.

Reminded of the hard truth that they were only halfway through it, Herscherik's face turned even greener.

"You're so mean, Kuro... And I feel sick." The prince groaned and buried himself in the pile of cushions, prepared by the very butler he had just criticized. The young prince, however, was too worse for wear to even thank Kuro for his display of loyalty. "Why is it so bumpy...?" he managed to squeeze out before fighting back a wave of nausea rising up in his throat.

"We're in a carriage." Kuro shut him down.

Herscherik, the highest-ranking individual on the entire travel party, had fallen victim to carriage-sickness.

I always got sick in my last life, too. Ryoko had always gotten carsick every time she wasn't driving and even on trains. Roller coasters were out of the question. Whenever she had to travel, her only defense tactic was to set an alarm on her phone and drift off into dreamland. Even that tried-and-true method of defense was impossible while sitting in a carriage rolling down an unpaved road. Just as Herscherik began to entertain the idea of asking Kuro to forcibly knock him out, his butler of service held out a canteen.

"Water. It should refresh you somewhat."

"Thank you..." Herscherik accepted it, grateful to Kuro for taking care of him despite his dismissive tone. Taking a sip from the canteen, he gave Kuro a stealthy glance. *He's a bona-fide butler, now. No one would believe that he used to be a spy.* Kuro, who now donned a well-tailored black uniform, looked far from being an ex-spy with a dubious background and more like a member of the nobility.

Since assuming the role of butler of service, Kuro had adopted the pseudonym of Schwarz Zweig and the background of being a son of the Viscount Zweig. There was no truth in that, of course, but after Rook pulled some strings and the king accepted Kuro's role, there was no room for opposition. Naturally, Herscherik kept his mouth shut, too. Kuro seemed to have a natural talent for every skill required of a butler, from table and speaking etiquette to paperwork and self-defense. "Infiltration's not the only trick in my bag," he had said when Herscherik couldn't help but ask him about how Kuro

had so easily taken on his new role. Sneaking into places in the dead of night wasn't his only tactic as a spy. He had disguised himself as a servant in a noble's manor, a waiter in a café, and even a prostitute in a brothel to collect the information he needed. His job was to blend into any environment so he could manipulate conversations so that people revealed the information he needed. Of course, his job often ended up requiring more violent measures as well, so he could definitely handle a handful of street thugs. Herscherik even guessed that Kuro was stronger than the royal guards who rode with them. Kuro's job had always been to accomplish the mission by utilizing any and all techniques that best served his agenda. In fact, his successful career had brought him to where he was today.

Those are some high stats... Herscherik thought as he returned the canteen to Kuro and buried himself back into the pile of cushions. He couldn't help but feel the same sense of defeat he had felt countless times in this world. Why did everyone around him seem so perfect while he had no talent for anything?

After another week of wallowing in his sense of defeat, powerlessness, and carriage sickness, Herscherik finally arrived at Meria's hometown, formerly ruled by the late Ruseria.

"Welcome, Prince Herscherik!"

When Herscherik's party arrived in town as the sky was painted sunset orange, they were greeted by Count Grim, who had entrapped Ruseria in the first place, and all of his servants. The sight of all of his servants lined up in a uniform bow was an impressive sight. Moreover, Grim knew how to draw attention to himself. He wore what must have been a top-shelf fur over his shoulder and at least one ring on each finger, every single one made with either gold or silver and jewels. His gut had grown since Herscherik had last encountered him. The count's skin seemed to glisten more, too, as well as the top of his balding head.

Keep going bald... Keep going bald... Herscherik silently cursed, though he let none of it crack through his flawless, princely smile. "Count Grim, thank you for welcoming us on such a short notice."

Both the female and male servants let out a sigh at Herscherik's adorable

smile.

“It must have been an arduous journey. I hope Your Highness didn’t encounter any monsters,” Grim asked, with a smile and audible concern.

Herscherik’s dropped his smile and replaced it with an uneasy look. “We did, a few times. I’ve never seen them before.”

Over the course of the two-week journey, they had been attacked by monsters, which were essentially animals that gained magic and grew feral. The monsters that Herscherik saw through the window of the carriage were terrifying and reminded him of a particular horror game. The first horde of monsters they had encountered were wolf-like beings with black fur and eerily glimmering blood-colored eyes. These monsters were easily taller than Herscherik. Kuro had explained to him, as the prince curiously watched through the window, that monsters grow in both size and physical capabilities compared to other animals. Monsters had the instinct to seek out prey with as much inner magic as possible in order to bolster their own magic and physical strength. Naturally, many monsters set their eyes on humans, since almost all people had Magic Within. The Knights’ Order of Gracis regularly deployed monster-hunting teams to various locations, and some regional lords hired mercenaries to deal with them. That being said, the intelligence of monsters was not too different from that of wild animals, which limited how threatening they could be even in packs. While exceptionally powerful monsters would appear occasionally, people dealt with monsters like they were especially troublesome animals for the most part. The monsters that attacked Herscherik’s party were no match for the royal guards and were dealt with in a manner of minutes.

Herscherik didn’t enjoy recalling that scene, though. *They don’t just vanish like they do in video games...* He felt a little sick thinking about it, in fact. The knights had tossed the monster carcasses to the side of the road or into the woods, which was a gruesome sight that reminded him again of that particular horror game.

While Ryoko was a serious gamer, horror games were the only genre she had steered clear of. Once, she tried a horror game that was recommended to her only to have a dream that night that was scary in more ways than one—a skeleton soldier chasing her down with its weapon in one hand and an invoice

in another. The number on the invoice was so realistic that Ryoko double checked her papers at the office the following day to find that she had nearly forgotten to process a payment. Despite that silver lining, she had never felt thankful for the existence of either horror games or sentient skeletons.

“I’ve never seen them in the capital, so I was really surprised.” Herscherik shuddered at the recurring imagery of the monsters in his head.

“Of course, of course. I am relieved to see that Your Highness has arrived safely. It is late in the day, and Your Highness must be tired. Please, enjoy some rest at the annex I’ve prepared until dinner is prepared.” Grim pointed to a building atop a hill on the other side of a patch of woods. “There is plenty of room for the royal guards, of course. I’ve prepared a humble feast for tonight, which should be ready at six o’clock. I hope to see you at the main hall at that time.”

“Six o’clock,” Herscherik repeated as he checked the time on his watch that he produced from his pocket. It was a few minutes past four. “I will escort my nanny to her home, then. I’ll be back in time to... Count Grim?” Herscherik turned to the quiet Grim. The count’s all-too-obvious smile was nowhere to be found, replaced by a colorless and frozen expression. Herscherik cocked his head at the sudden change in Grim the instant he had looked away. “Is something the matter, Count Grim?”

“N-No! Nothing is the matter, Your Highness. I look forward to seeing you tonight!” Grim rushed to cover up the shift in his attitude.

Herscherik, curious of Grim’s reaction, gave Kuro a look. With an understanding smile and elegant bow, he spoke with the leader of the royal guards. They sent the carriage with the prince’s belongings and half of the knights aboard to the annex, followed by the other half of the knights. Then, Kuro put Herscherik and Meria on the other carriage and borrowed one of the knight’s horses. Kuro’s riding style was just as elegant as everything else he did, causing some murmurs among Grim’s servants for a different reason than Herscherik did. Of course, the female servants were the only ones who were stirred by Kuro.

Once the carriage started on its way, Herscherik began seeing houses and

fields outside of the window but less foot traffic than he had expected. The fields were mostly barren, too, despite it being mid-autumn.

“Did they already harvest these fields, Meria?” Herscherik asked his nanny, as familiar as he had always been, although Meria had been acting awkwardly around the prince since the kidnapping incident.

Meria jerked her shoulders at the question before timidly looking up at the window to observe the scenery. She slowly shook her head. “No... There would usually be more crops like wheat in the field. My parents told me that the weather was particularly harsh this year, limiting their yield.”

In short, they had already harvested anything they could. Herscherik further learned that a storm had flooded the river and farms in early summer, and there was a long drought in mid-summer. Proper irrigation would have drastically mitigated this damage. Herscherik could easily assume that Grim could not be bothered to do even that. Their soil was not rich to begin with by any means, and their yield was always lacking compared to neighboring lands. When they neglected maintenance on top of that, these results could have been expected.

Herscherik recalled the documents he had read on this land back at the castle. Because of their historically poor yield, they had been receiving financial aid to make up for the lack of tax revenue. Seeing how extravagant Grim’s personal spending seemed to be, Herscherik couldn’t imagine that aid was being used for its intended purpose. Moreover, the lord of the land was supposed to have a reserve of savings to deal with things like the occasional poor yield. Financial aid was supposed to be reserved for regions affected by a catastrophe too devastating for even their lord’s savings to cover.

“Prince Herscherik?” Meria timidly called to Herscherik, whose expression had grown sterner with every thought.

The prince rushed to give Meria a reassuring smile.

Meria’s family acted as the leader of their neighboring farmsteads. While not as extravagant as the lord’s manor, their house was a good bit larger than most others. News seemed to precede Herscherik’s arrival, as Meria’s parents were already standing outside the front door by the time the carriage arrived. Just as

Meria had said, her parents seemed emaciated, in stark contrast to the count.

As soon as Herscherik stepped off of the carriage, with barely any introductions, they bowed so sharply in apology that Herscherik thought they might snap in half. “Your Highness, we beg your forgiveness for the despicable actions of our daughter and family members.” They already seemed to know the events that had transpired and believed that the prince was responsible for their daughter making it home alive after what she had done. Herscherik rushed to look around him after the sudden apology, but Kuro had sent the royal guards to patrol the surroundings before the apology came out, preventing them from hearing that part of it.

Herscherik turned back to Meria’s parents, relieved. “Um... It’s chilly out here. May I come in?” He added a dramatic shiver.

It was against etiquette for Herscherik, the guest, to ask without being offered, but he was concerned for the health of Meria’s parents. He was worried that they would go to extreme lengths to apologize for their daughter.

The group settled into the living room with a fireplace, where Herscherik asked Meria’s parents to tell their story. Accordingly, Meria’s cousins had told Meria’s parents about what they did, what they intended to do, and what kind of person Herscherik was, as soon as they’d made it out of the capital. The cousins apologized to her parents.

“Your Highness, if anyone must be punished, all responsibilities for their actions fall on me as their patriarch. I beg you, please forgive those young ones,” Meria’s father said, bowing deeply again.

Meria’s parents seemed to think that Herscherik had come all this way to pass judgment and mete out punishment.

Instead, Herscherik shook his head. “I didn’t come here to punish you or anyone involved in the incident. They asked for help, so I came to fulfill my duty as a member of the royal family... Things must have been tough since Ruseria’s passing.” Herscherik showed them the antique silver pocket watch. Upon seeing the watch, Meria’s parents gasped, their eyes tearing up. Herscherik could tell how much Ruseria had meant to the people of this land from that reaction alone. “I’m sorry you’ve had to endure so much. I’m here to make this better. I

promise.” Herscherik smiled.

Meria’s parents nodded over and over again, unable to form any words. The sight of them holding back tears with quivering shoulders reminded Herscherik of the towns he had visited on the trip here.

For consideration of Herscherik’s status and health, they had spent the night in towns along the travel road whenever possible. In fact, Herscherik was worn out by the welcome he received at each stop. Moreover, he was distressed by the eyes of the people that welcomed him. Herscherik had seen fear and disdain in their cold eyes amidst the superficially warm welcome. The looks given to him seemed like the people’s evaluation of the royalty and the nation as a whole.

At this rate, we’re doomed, Herscherik thought.

Meria, her parents, and every single one of those people who had given him those looks along his journey deserved to be protected by their government. Every single one of their cries for help were intercepted by someone before they reached the castle. The interceptor could be a lord, a government official, a noble... anyone under the thumb of the marquis Barbosse. They were cunning at concealing crime and protecting the contents of their pockets. There was no country without its people. Nations that protected their people prospered, and nations that neglected their people only fell. Rebuilding the people’s trust in Gracis might take more trials and tribulations than Herscherik could imagine. That realization had weighed heavy on the prince’s chest. Even so, Herscherik had renewed resolve to change his nation. He gripped his fists tighter.

The “humble” feast Grim had prepared turned out to be an extremely exorbitant affair by the standards of any of its invitees. Dishes made from expensive foods filled the table before them, in massive quantities. There were three different appetizers and entrées mostly made of meat: stew, a white roasted bird, something that resembled roast beef, and sausage platters. Various breads were prepared by the basketful, and desserts ranged from bowls of fruit to pies and cakes. Herscherik could not even finish his share of the mountain of food that filled the dining table, which was not small by any means. At any other time, he might have decently enjoyed a dinner like this. But

after being rocked by a carriage for two weeks straight for the first time in his life, his exhaustion crushed his appetite. Even worse, watching Grim guzzling his food down as he chewed with his mouth open completely killed what little appetite Herscherik had left. Herscherik was very thankful for being seated on the other end of the dining table from Grim. Herscherik had sampled a few dishes, after Kuro had tasted them for poison, but his stomach revolted at the greasy food, so he quickly gave up on the meal.

After dinner, Herscherik and his party headed to the three-story annex that was prepared for them. Herscherik's room was the most extravagant one on the third floor. The royal guards would sleep on the first and second floors, leaving the third floor reserved for Herscherik and his butler. The guards had set up a night watch schedule.

It was almost too cold to be mid-autumn, but the pre-lit fireplace was keeping the room warm. Herscherik checked his watch to see that it was past eleven o'clock. He could see the lord's manor from the window, most of its windows darkened. Seeing that, Herscherik leaped from the sofa in front of the fireplace.

"I'm headed out," Herscherik declared as he nonchalantly threw on his coat.

"Where do you think you're going?" Kuro demanded without a pause.

"Huh? To gather evidence...?" Herscherik crooked his neck, trying his best to look adorable.

Kuro couldn't help but gaze up at the ceiling. Why would the prince ever even *think* of taking on the task himself when Kuro was standing right there? Kuro would have demanded his master for some answers, if he could have.

"What do you think I'm here for?" Kuro pointed. "Just stay here and stay out of trouble."

"Aww..." Herscherik groaned, obviously disappointed. Kuro didn't ask why but only patted Herscherik's head and then squeezed down.

"Owow ow ow ow ow ow!"

"Do *not* leave this room. Under *any* circumstances. Just go to bed," Kuro stated, emphasizing one word at a time.

Once Kuro released him, Herscherik clasped his head as he crouched to the ground. “I thought I was your boss.” He looked up at his butler, tears in his eyes.

With a mocking grin, Kuro gave an immaculate bow and left the room. Neither his steps nor him closing the door made the slightest sound.

It’s Kuro. What’s there to worry about...? Herscherik tried to convince himself. He had been an infamous spy, after all. No matter how many times he reminded himself of that, though, Herscherik couldn’t help but worry. Despite being told to go to bed, Herscherik decided to stay up until Kuro’s return. He brought the blanket over from the bed since the room was still a little chilly, even with the fireplace lit. *Don’t want to catch a cold.* He curled up in the blanket on the sofa and stared into the flickering orange flames... which turned out to be to his detriment. Partially from the exhaustion of the trip, Herscherik began nodding off in a matter of minutes.

“Ryoko, you’ll catch a cold if you sleep at the kotatsu!”

Ryoko woke up from her dream, starting violently. Apparently, she had fallen asleep at the kotatsu at her parents’ house playing a video game. Her mother gave her head a light pat and left the room grumbling. Since Ryoko was there for her own birthday celebration, she wasn’t asked to help with anything. Even her mother, who often nagged her about this and that, left Ryoko to spend a lazy afternoon lounging about the house. Ryoko turned her portable video game console on from sleep mode. A character appeared on the screen—the hottie she was working on scoring in her dating sim.

“Hm-hm-hm...” A muffled, creepy laugh escaped her lips. Anyone would have given her the side eye if they’d heard.

This one’s a huge hit! Yes, oh, yes! Ryoko silently applauded the game, pulling up the stats of the game’s player-character. Alongside the stats, the screen showed her progress in winning over the object of her affection. Lately, many of the female-led dating sims consisted of simply choosing dialog options. Ryoko, a seasoned gamer, wasn’t too happy about that trend. *I guess it works for people who just want to look at cute boys.*

This new title, however, was perfectly challenging. The player chose from a

selection of three potential female protagonists before improving their stats and growing closer to their target hottie. Some events didn't trigger if the protagonist's stats were lacking or if the player made the wrong choice. Some events triggered entirely by chance. To boot, the game provided a fruitful selection of twelve sexy men to choose and conquer. In addition to masterful artwork, the game boasted a diverse voice cast, from established industry stars to up-and-coming talent. With an incredible *three* possible endings per hottie, Ryoko couldn't help but be impressed by the full potential of the developers. She could nearly hear the joyous cries of other gamers imagining the money and effort that had gone into the game's creation. To top it all off, there was one love interest that only became available after conquering all twelve hotties and acquiring all the skills available in the game.

Lately, Ryoko had been playing this game nonstop, even cutting into her sleep schedule. Just as she was starting to enjoy her game and creepily chuckling, a voice and a sound came from the front door, though Ryoko was too deeply enthralled to realize.

"...That's gross, Sis." The middle sister of the family had peeked into the room from the hallway, looking down at her older sister at the kotatsu.

Ryoko looked up from her console screen. "Welcome home!"

"Aunt Ryoko!" Ryoko's niece poked her head out from behind her mother.

"What's up, kiddo?"

Ryoko's brother-in-law appeared beside them and gave a little nod, at which Ryoko rushed to correct her posture and return a bow.

"We're here for *your* birthday," Ryoko's sister remarked. "What are you being a walrus for?"

"Who're you calling a walrus? Is it time, already?" Ryoko checked the clock on the wall to find that it was half past three. They had decided on an early dinner at four.

The front door could be heard opening again, with a voice saying, "I'm home!"

"Stop saying that every time you come over," Ryoko's mother responded.

"You're married now!"

Ryoko sussed out that the first voice belonged to their youngest sister.

“I’m home, Sis,” she said, turning the corner into the living room. “Ready to celebrate your descent into your forties?”

“Welcome home. Now shut up.” Ryoko gave a little snarl.

Her youngest sister laughed. While her husband seemed a little nervous behind her, a little back-and-forth like this was merely some sisterly bonding. Since the youngest sister had just married the year before last, Ryoko had not had a long relationship with her husband, who was only a year younger than Ryoko. Because of their considerable age difference, Ryoko’s youngest sister had hesitated a while before marrying her now-husband.

When her sister approached her with the topic, Ryoko had declared, “I don’t care if he’s the same age or even older than me. He will respect me as the oldest sister.” Her youngest sister looked dumbfounded. She must have felt silly to even worry about the age difference after that, as she’d gone ahead with the marriage in the blink of an eye.

“Won’t *any* of my daughters come help me?” her mother called from the kitchen. “And you better not make your husbands lift a finger!”

Everyone save for Ryoko moved to their places. Ryoko called her niece to the kotatsu. She climbed right under.

“So,” Ryoko started, “how’s it going between mommy and daddy?”

Her niece answered with silence, which Ryoko met with a chuckle. Despite having no children of her own, Ryoko had been asked for advice regarding this niece. She recalled how, when she was her niece’s age, she had followed her mother around like a puppy dog. The second sister of the family had already been born at the time, but Ryoko had been excited about her mother telling her to “take care of her younger sister.” Ryoko wondered if children nowadays reached their rebellious phase early, since they grew up faster.

“Mom gets mad all the time. Dad’s super annoying.”

“Oh, really?” Ryoko shrugged at her niece’s age-appropriate assessment. “Your mom only tells you to do things because she loves you. If she didn’t like you, she wouldn’t bother with it at all. And don’t you call your father annoying.

Without him working hard, you won't have food to eat, nice clothes to wear, or even be able to go to school. But you know all that already, don't you?"

Her niece frowned. There would be no rebellious teens left in this world if all of them could control their emotions with logic. Ryoko called her over with a gesture and grasped the girl's face with both hands. Ryoko met her niece eye to eye, keeping her from looking away. "Your mommy and daddy are human, too. They'll have some bad days and things that bother them. So, sometimes they might be harsher to you than they should be." No parent was perfect. In fact, parents grew with their children. Ryoko knew that her sister and her husband were figuring things out through their first experience of raising a child, so she tried to take every opportunity to assist in that area as much as she could. "So, I want you to help them a little bit. Promise your auntie that you won't call your mom or dad annoying anymore. It makes me sad, too, when you do that." Her niece tried in vain to escape Ryoko's grasp and turn away. After a few moments, the girl relented and nodded. "Good girl. I'm a proud auntie!" Ryoko released her niece.

The girl muttered, "I wish *you* were my mom."

"Now, now. The only reason I can be this way is *because* I'm your auntie. I have the special privilege to spoil my little niece as much as I want. But parents don't have that same privilege. Parents have to raise their children right. If you were my daughter, I'd be so worried that I'd nag you with things every day." Ryoko understood that she had no real responsibility. How her niece would turn out was entirely on the shoulder of her parents. She considered anything beyond spoiling her niece to be overstepping her boundaries, including the little talking-to she'd just given. Still, she couldn't help but try if her words had a chance of affecting her niece in any capacity so her sister's life would be easier at home. "Try asking your mom how I was when we were kids. I bet she'll tell you that I was a nagging Nancy."

Ryoko had always been the one to scold her sisters at every turn. While her parents had scolded their children too, Ryoko could imagine how annoying it must have been to have an older sister who would scold them for hours on end, repeating the same point over and over until she lost her train of thought and started crying. In fact, she couldn't imagine anyone more annoying than her

younger self. That was a time in her life she wished she could erase from history.

“I’m going to go to the bathroom,” Ryoko declared in embarrassment and left her niece at the kotatsu.

She turned into the hallway to find her two brothers-in-law hiding around the corner. They let out a chuckle as their eyes met Ryoko’s.

“I’m sorry about that,” her niece’s father apologized.

Ryoko shook her head. “You’re raising a child. I know it’s tough. You can talk to me about anything you want. She’s my niece, and you two are my brothers. You can always come to me.” She patted the shoulder of her niece’s father.

“My wife’s pregnant, too,” the husband of the youngest sister said. “We don’t know if it’s a boy or a girl, but, well... we’ll take you up on that.”

“Congratulations!” Ryoko cried. “Why are we bothering with a silly birthday party for me, then?” Ryoko clapped her hands.

Just as she was about to ask what to get them for the baby shower, a voice called out from the dining room. Dinner was ready. Ryoko’s niece turned off the kotatsu and came into the hallway. She made an awkward expression as she made eye contact with her father, but Ryoko patted the girl’s head and sent her along, and her brothers-in-law followed. When Ryoko finally walked into the room, her father was waiting for her, a bottle of wine in hand.

“Wow, I sure am happy.” Ryoko blurted out exactly how she felt. While she didn’t end up married herself, her days were filled with mundane happiness, surrounded by family. Ryoko wished for these days to go on forever and didn’t doubt that they would. Then, she happened to turn her gaze to the yard. Outside the door to the yard, her dog Kuro was wagging his tail as hard as he could.

“Kuro...?” In an instant, Kuro transformed to a tall young man with deep, ruby-like eyes. That’s when Ryoko realized that she was in a dream. A future she had wished for, without her death or reincarnation. “I know, Kuro.” Ryoko looked down at herself to find that she was no longer Ryoko Hayakawa but Herscherik Gracis, the Seventh Prince of the Gracis Kingdom. Herscherik turned

away from the dining room and headed to the front door... where *he* awaited. When Herscherik opened the front door, he welcomed the prince with a smile and an elegant bow.

Herscherik repeated the words that Ryoko had said each time she left. "I'll be home soon." He turned around to find the whole family seeing him off with smiles on their faces.

Herscherik awoke in a muggy heat that resembled mid-summer. Even after opening his eyes he could barely see anything, his vision obscured as if by a cloud of smoke.

In fact, his room literally *was* filled with smoke.

"A fire!?" Herscherik flashed past a state of panic in an instant to reach a "second wind" of calmness. This could have been attributed to the training Ryoko had gone through; her neighborhood was enthusiastic about fire drills. She remembered fondly how her elementary school principal had furiously scolded the students that slacked off during one such drill. "If this was a real fire, half of you would have died. How do you expect to survive a real fire when you can't even manage a drill!?" He'd shouted at the students lined up in the school yard and then ordered a redo of the drill. If the students didn't make it out of the building in time or chatted on the way out, the whole school would have to do all of it over again. After several attempts, the principal welcomed the students with a smile as they emerged from the school buildings with a military-grade march and zero chattering.

"I am very proud of you, students. Even during a real emergency, I am now confident that not a single one of you will be left behind." The last Ryoko had heard, all of the students in her old elementary school still diligently participated in fire drills. If any first-or second-graders talked during the drill, the older students shushed them, and the younger students followed suit as their upperclassmen meticulously lined up and marched out of the building. As the occasion came with respectful glances from their younger students, the older students were eager to show off. The one-for-all style fire drills had been passed down from generation to generation.

Having calmed himself down by remembering that experience, Herscherik immediately dove to the ground. He knew that smoke rose during fires, leaving more breathable air at the bottom. The first thing he had to avoid was inhaling smoke and falling unconscious. After much struggle, Herscherik arrived at the door to his room to find that it had been bolted or barricaded somehow and wouldn't move an inch.

A trap? There was no doubt in Herscherik's mind as to who had set this trap—it was all too easy to guess that it had been Grim. Still crawling on the floor, he checked his watch. It was not yet midnight. *Did they catch on to us trying to gather evidence...? No, this is much too quick of a reaction for that.* Besides, Herscherik doubted that Kuro, who could easily slip into the royal castle, would make such a blunder. *Backed into a corner with nowhere to run.* On top of being trapped inside his room, Herscherik had guessed that the fire had already reached the hallway right outside his room, judging from the heat and smoke. He glanced at the window with no emergency escape routes, unlike the buildings in his previous life. Herscherik, who wasn't even five years old, was out of options. Then, he remembered what Kuro had told him. "Don't leave this room." Those were the words of his butler of service. Herscherik decided to steel himself.

Herscherik grabbed the blanket he had been using to shield himself from the cold and created water from the magic in his pocket watch. While magic-generated water wasn't suitable for drinking, and he couldn't make enough water to put out the fire with just the Floating Magic stored in the watch, he *could* dampen the blanket. Patting himself on the back for memorizing at least a few spells he could use with the magic in his watch, he repeatedly cast the spell until the entire blanket was soaked. Throwing the wet blanket over himself, Herscherik crawled to the corner of the room with the least amount of flammable furniture. *I'm here, Kuro.* Herscherik was determined to wait. He covered his mouth with the corner of the blanket and made himself as small as possible. Still, he could feel the heat of the roaring flames approaching him.

Kuro noticed the fire at the annex only after he had found numerous incriminating documents. He had changed out of his butler's uniform and into

his signature spyware that blended into the night and found piles of evidence for Grim's corruption in an office on the third floor of his manor. Thanks to Grim's arrogance, he believed that he had no need to hide any evidence in his own residence, and as a result Kuro had been able to find all of it with astonishing ease, just as he had been able to sneak into the manor without encountering any barriers nor any real security. Kuro pocketed a selection of evidence that Herscherik had requested and turned to the window as he readied himself to return to the annex—it was then that he saw the hill that hosted the annex glowing red, illuminating its surroundings.

Kuro sprung into action the instant he noticed the fire. He flung the window open and dove out of it without hesitation. In a flash, he grasped the branch of a nearby tree and flipped himself in the air to stand on it. In the same fluid motion, he stabbed a dagger into the trunk of the tree and dove off of the branch. The dagger slowed his fall, allowing Kuro to land on the ground silently. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he sprinted off toward the annex. Despite having to weave through the woods, Kuro showed no sign of slowing down.

When he was nearly at the annex, he heard a subtle *whish*. Kuro instinctively hid behind a tree. Two arrows struck the trunk of that tree, one after another.

"Nice dodge, Shadow Fang. You live up to your reputation."

"Who's there?" Kuro ran his eyes through the woods, searching for the attacker.

How does he know I'm Shadow Fang?

A lanky man with a gloomy aura emerged from behind a tree, as if to mock Kuro's trepidation. Kuro just barely recognized the man, whom he had seen a few times at the underground guild, but only in passing.

"Don't look so surprised," the man continued. "It's already the talk of the underground that Shadow Fang's gone missing. Most of them think you were finally done in. I used to be one of them..." He scoffed. "No one would ever think that *the* Shadow Fang became the Seventh Prince's butler of service. Not without paying a visit to the Oracle, at least. Whose ass did you kiss to make it up there?" He snarled with envy.

A fellow member of the underground, which normally held its residents until

death, had emerged above the surface.

Tsk. Should have kept the Oracle quiet, Kuro thought, but he soon realized that it would have been impossible. The Oracle sold information to anyone who paid, without discrimination. It didn't matter if the client was a noble, commoner, or even a criminal. This was precisely why agents of the underground frequented the Oracle in the first place.

"Been looking for me?"

"As if I have the time. Got a request to bring you in. Had no idea where you were, so I paid up. Well, telling them the truth about where you've weaseled yourself off to wouldn't have boded well for me *or* the client. As far as they know, I never found you."

While Kuro's professionalism was irked by the man's lying, Kuro guessed that his client must have been scheming for something extreme for this agent to back down *that* easily... Although the details of that scheme would never affect Kuro, he was revolted by the thought.

As soon as I'm back at the capital, I've got to wipe away my tracks. Otherwise, he would bring about all sorts of trouble to Herscherik. That much was as clear as day.

"And now we're here 'cuz a new client wanted us to make some noise in this village... You get why I told you all this, right?" The man grinned.

Kuro knew full well. He could sense that he was surrounded by a good number of figures, with no easy escape route in sight.

...15, Kuro counted.

Their weapons gleamed under moonlight in the dark of the woods.

"Our client wants the prince gone. The mansion over there's already a big bonfire. Now all we got to do is keep you busy or whack you right here to get a bonus. Killing the Shadow Fang won't hurt my reputation, either." The man seemed assured of his victory.

Kuro turned his eyes to them, devoid of emotion. He had put his work face on. "Make no mistake..." Why had Kuro, the infamous Shadow Fang, been

simply standing there without a word, letting his assailant prattle on? No other reason than to gather information on who was stupid and incompetent enough to attempt such a thing. Of course, Kuro already had a good guess. “Dead men tell no tales.” Kuro had heard enough, and he no longer had any use for any of them.

Kuro cracked his expressionless face, letting out a cackle. His face twisted into a cruel grimace that he had never shown Herscherik.



Chapter Eight: The Deception, the Deal, and the Potential

“Search for Prince Herscherik immediately!” Grim ordered his minions, staring at the charred annex in the distance. Watching his underlings hurry toward the building, Grim returned to his manor with a saddened expression and heavy steps.

When he reached his manor, his servants shared a look with each other. If something were to happen to the king’s beloved prince on Grim’s land, he would be held partially responsible, even if there was no negligence on his part. Considering that, the servants could understand why their master’s steps faltered. Then, they realized that their master losing status might lead to them losing their jobs in turn, and they let out a collective sigh of anxiety.

Grim trudged all the way to his office and closed the door behind him. The room was barely lit, but Grim wasn’t bothered by that. While the fire raging through the annex had been extinguished, half of the royal guards that had accompanied the prince were killed in the process. Even though the prince wasn’t included in the line of bodies retrieved from the wreckage, Grim was certain of the prince’s demise—which, in turn, signified that Grim had avoided his doom by a narrow margin.

“I did it...! I did it! Ahahahahahaha!” Grim laughed uproariously from the relief of being alone in his room. The count didn’t doubt that he had succeeded in assassinating the prince by hiring those thugs, saving his own skin in the process. The official story would be that robbers broke into the annex while the prince slept and set the building on fire after looting everything that wasn’t nailed down. The royal guards slept soundly, exhausted from their long journey, unable to save the prince as he burned to death. *Drugging the royal guards was a nice touch.* Grim didn’t expect the royal guards, the elite among knights, to simply do nothing while the prince died in the fire. While they’d invalidate his whole scheme if they managed to save the prince, it might have been *too*

suspicious to have the entire travel party die in the fire without any resistance. So, Grim had drugged the guards' meals just enough to make them believe they were merely tired. As expected, the guards mistook their drug-induced lethargy for exhaustion. This made them lackluster night watchers, allowing the thugs to easily deal with them.

His Excellency will deal with the king. Dealing with the nobles will be annoying... Well, the prince had no patrons. I can spin this however I please. Things would not have been so easy if Grim had been forced to eliminate the First Prince, whose mother was the princess of an allied nation, or any of the other princes whose mothers were all from powerful noble families. That being said, it was a serious matter that a person of royal blood, albeit a prince born of a peasant mother whose existence no one acknowledged, had died on his land, even accidentally. All the same, Grim was a member of the minister's faction of nobles. Barbosse had made moves to gain leverage over the other nobles in case of situations like these. Grim only had to request the minister take steps to quell any commotion he expected the assassination to cause, just as he had done for the incident with his predecessor. While there were power struggles within their faction, Grim believed he could easily deal with any other aristocrats who attempted to improve their rank at his expense.

"How surprising that the prince's butler was Shadow Fang..." Everyone in the underground knew that moniker, and Grim had learned of his existence through his occasional dealings with the underground guild but was never able to afford his services. Luckily, one of the thugs he had hired through the underground guild to manage the townsfolk knew about Shadow Fang's career change. "I'm saved!" Grim thrust his fists into the air. He barely kept himself from toasting to his successful endeavor with the best liquor in his cabinet to maintain his cover while the search for the prince was being conducted.

Then, someone interrupted Grim's celebration. "That's good to hear."

Grim froze at the sound of a childlike voice coming from a dark corner of the room. As if to thaw Grim's frozen thought process, the lights came on in the office. In the corner, on the genuine leather sofa that Grim had specially ordered himself, sat the very prince he thought was dead. Herscherik smiled at the count, his legs leisurely crossed.

“H-H-H—”

“I hate to burst your bubble, but I’m still alive.”

“How!?” Grim finally squeezed out.

Herscherik only shrugged and looked up at Kuro standing beside him. “I have a very talented butler, as you well know.”

Kuro accepted the compliment with a smile and turned to Grim with a cold expression.

Upon being surrounded by the hired goons, Kuro had promptly taken them all out. He struck anyone who charged at him with a single blow to a vital organ or artery; the archers he slew with a single thrown dagger right between the eyes. Even the goons that had remained hidden were executed with a slit throat as Kuro silently appeared behind them. In a mere half a minute, Kuro was the only one standing in the woods.

After eliminating them all, Kuro made his way into the burning annex, kicking down the door to Herscherik’s room before picking up the prince, who was curled up in the corner under a blanket, and diving out of the third-story window and into the forest. According to Kuro himself, reaching the third floor of a burning building was much harder than fighting that pack of goons. No one saw Kuro leap from the window amidst the chaos of the fire. Herscherik, however, was forced to endure a roller coaster-like 90-degree drop, which led him to remain limp as a corpse in Kuro’s arms.

“15 was too easy,” Kuro said matter-of-factly. “Double them next time, and you might buy a full minute.” His implied threat was that there wouldn’t *be* a next time.

Hearing this, Grim began shaking as if a bucket of cold water had been dumped onto him in the dead of winter. He crumbled to the ground as he was struck with the realization that there was no way out for him. No one had ever escaped Shadow Fang.

“Now, Count Grim. It’s time for you to answer some questions. I guess you don’t have to answer them if you don’t want to... but then, I’ll just execute you right here and now for the attempted murder of royalty.” To the count, the

prince's smile seemed like the grin of a devil. "First off, why did you do this? I don't remember any animosity between us when I arrived."

When they had first arrived, Grim seemed all ready to charm Herscherik with a lavish welcome. At the end of the night however, he had committed arson and attempted assassination. Herscherik had to know what prompted such a sudden change of heart.

"Because... Your Highness had that pocket watch..." Grim feebly admitted, having given up on the ruse.

"Pocket watch? You mean... this thing?" Herscherik held up the pocket watch that Ruseria had given him. His habit of always carrying it with him had saved his life during the fire.

"That was Count Ruseria's... So I thought that... Your Highness was connected to him..."

"Ah, I see." Herscherik recalled that Grim had met Ruseria at his cell the night before his execution, demanding that Ruseria hand over some piece of evidence. Ruseria had refused. Herscherik figured that Grim must have turned over every stone in this very manor that had once belonged to Ruseria. After months of not finding anything and nothing happening to him, Herscherik must have come knocking at his door just as he was beginning to think he could relax. "So you tried to assassinate me." As his curiosity was now satisfied, Herscherik couldn't help but be impressed.

Grim wasn't entirely wrong, after all. Herscherik and Ruseria *were* allied in a way, except that Herscherik didn't know what evidence Grim wanted so badly. The only thing he'd received from Ruseria was that pocket watch and his loyalty. Herscherik did have to commend Grim for sniffing out a dangerous situation. Ruseria had passed almost two years prior, when Herscherik was still three years old. He hadn't expected anyone to make a connection between him and Ruseria. After witnessing Grim's eye for detail in spotting the pocket watch, as well as his self-preservation instinct in action, Herscherik could understand why Barbosse considered him somewhat valuable.

Then, Herscherik wondered exactly what piece of evidence Grim was looking for. It was something crucial that Barbosse wanted to erase, even going so far

as to frame Ruseria for a crime he didn't commit. Maybe that evidence could become a powerful weapon to Herscherik. However, the prince immediately reconsidered. It didn't seem wise to fixate on that, especially when he didn't even know if he could properly utilize it even if he knew what it was. What was worse, the evidence would have originated from Ruseria, who had already been sentenced to death for treason. Even if he could prove Ruseria's innocence, he wasn't sure how much weight that piece of evidence would carry. Besides, Herscherik wasn't optimistic enough to think that he could find it when the minister's faction had failed to do so over the course of several years. Another concern was for his own safety, in the event that news of him acquiring said evidence reached Barbosse. Herscherik knew better than anyone that he still lacked the power to take him on. It was too risky, considering that he didn't even know if he could acquire the actual evidence. *Not* finding out about this might be safer in the long run.

If it's meant to be, it'll come to me, Herscherik concluded.

"Let's move on. Schwarz?" The prince turned to his butler.

"Right here, Your Highness." Kuro produced a set of papers from his pockets and displayed them so the count could recognize them.

Color drained from Grim's face. "That's—"

"Evidence that you've been smuggling our weapons to the Empire."

To the southwest of the Gracis Kingdom stood the Atrad Empire. While Gracis had a longer history, Atrad had recently expanded their military and had begun to threaten Gracis's dominance. In fact, there had been a few recent clashes at their border, as well as one large scale war in their history together.

The sheaf of papers Kuro had produced was a letter written to Grim from said Atrad Empire. Its content suggested that it was merely one entry in a continued series of communication.

Grim protested. "I was told to—"

"By who? We have a bunch more, by the way."

Kuro pulled out more papers that proved Grim's various wrongdoings. On top of selling weapons to the Empire, the list of Grim's crimes included illegal

taxation and intimidation of his people, falsified requests for national aid, defrauding the national treasury, and much more.

Herscherik was dumbfounded. He had initially noticed the corruption when investigating the armory inventory. Supplies that were supposed to be in the armory were never delivered. Actually, Herscherik had checked with the supplier in the castle town to find that the delivery address had been changed from the castle to a location near the border. He had immediately returned to the castle in order to verify this fact, but he couldn't find a single paper trail that led to the change in delivery address. It didn't help that reports of new shipments had been lacking due to interdepartmental drama, leaving the entire issue to fester unchecked for a long time.

Another thing to consider was that one of the pieces of evidence used to frame Ruseria was a letter from the Empire. Even if the letter itself was forged, Herscherik had thought that they must have needed some sort of reference in order to produce a convincing forgery of a foreign document. So, Herscherik had kept an eye on the person who wanted Ruseria gone the most and had shown his animosity.

Grim's expression became sicklier as his crimes were uncovered, one by one. In the end, his face looked entirely devoid of color.

Grim squeezed out a response. "I'm not the only who—"

"You think you get a free pass just because someone else is committing the same crime?" Herscherik interrupted with audible irritation.

He didn't subscribe to that sort of mindset. In fact, he actively despised it, even in his previous life. It showed an utter lack of responsibility. If *this* was the kind of mindset that had inundated the country, Herscherik thought, he had to change that.

After Herscherik coldly countered, Grim groveled onto the floor. "P-Please, spare my life! Please don't kill me!"

"You think *you* deserve to live?" Herscherik's tone was much too cold for his age. Kuro showed a flicker of surprise at the drastic change in his master's tone and attitude. "Count Ruseria was killed for a crime he didn't commit. You orchestrated that." It would have been more accurate to say that Barbosse had

orchestrated the execution via Count Grim, but that didn't make a difference to Herscherik at the moment. "“Only the strong and the cunning survive in this world. Those who are neither—the fools—are rewarded with death after a lifetime of servitude or pay for their insolence with their life...’ right?” Herscherik remembered every word of Grim's remark, to remind himself of that night.

“Where did you—!?”

Herscherik lifted the corner of his lips. “By your own account, you turned out to be the fool... Do you have anything to say?” Even though he wore a smile, Herscherik's blue eyes that had always glowed with kindness were as cold as ice as they stared down at Grim.

He knew everything, Grim conceded. *The prince saw through it all...* All the wealth and status he had built up so far was crumbling to the ground. His entire family would be executed now.

“Now, Count Grim... Let's make a deal.”

“Huh?” Grim looked up at the unexpected proposal. *A deal?* A ray of hope returned the color to Grim's face. “A-Anything, Your Highness. I'll pledge my eternal loyalty if you'll spare me!”

“Huh? I don't want your loyalty. Flush it down the toilet with the rest of your shit.”

Herscherik decided to ignore what sounded like Kuro holding back laughter. Grim already had no other choice but to agree to his terms. Any defiance against Herscherik would spell death for him and his family.

As a chilly wind brushed against his cheeks with the scent of winter's arrival, Herscherik smiled at the people that had come out to see him off.

“All right, Meria,” Herscherik said. “I'm looking forward to your letters. And if anyone has any trouble here, please let me know.”

The people nodded in acknowledgment. They had all heard how Herscherik miraculously survived the fire. As far as they knew, a gang of thugs had robbed the annex and attacked the royal guards, setting the building on fire on their

way out. The entire gang of thugs were found dead in the woods nearby—killed by some mysterious person for mysterious reasons. In any case, the people had put the incident behind them.

“Please take care, Prince Herscherik... Thank you. For everything.” Meria’s wide, downturned eyes were overflowing with tears.

Herscherik smiled back at her. Her cousin, the one who had instigated Herscherik’s kidnapping, was thanking him so profusely that Herscherik was starting to get concerned. But, there was a good reason why the people were so grateful to Herscherik.

The day after the fire, Grim had announced to his people that he would be reimbursing the amount he had overtaxed them as well as loaning out funds from his private account to those who expected a difficult winter. The “loan” was essentially a grant, though, as he would not be requiring anyone to pay him back.

Just as Herscherik and his party exited the manor to leave for the capital, the townsfolk were waiting for them. Without divulging much detail, Herscherik had reassured the people and told them to contact him if there were any problems.

“Prince Herscherik... I am so glad that I could serve you.”

“I’m glad you were my nanny, too, Meria. I’m sure Father, and Mother in the Garden Above, would both agree.”

With one last hug, Herscherik parted with Meria and climbed into the carriage. He didn’t stop waving his hand at her through the carriage window until he could no longer make her out in the distance. Then, Herscherik slumped down on his seat and took as deep a breath as he could. At that point, he finally realized how tense he had been.

“I can only imagine how trying all this was, Your Highness.”

“Indubitably, Schwarz. But have I not articulated enough how unnecessary the formalities are when we’re alone?”

They shared a laugh. In fact, the previous night had been a long and taxing one for both of them.

“You sure about Count Grim?” Kuro asked, in his usual tone.

“I think... This is for the best.”

It would have been easy for him to publicize Grim’s crimes and strip away his land. But he couldn’t be sure if the next lord would act in his people’s best interest either. So, Herscherik figured that the best course of action was to simply keep Grim under this thumb. He had demanded three conditions from Grim in exchange for sparing him his life and keeping the truth of this incident from getting out. First, he had to rule his land justly, putting the good of his people before his own. Second, he had to cease any and all acts of treason, and cut off any deals he had made with foreign parties. Third, he had to provide any information he had about the minister’s gang to Herscherik.

Herscherik was insistent on making Grim follow through on the first and second condition more than the third. Those were the only reasons he could justify keeping Grim alive. If anything went amiss now, he would hear from the townsfolk. If the scheduled communication from them ceased, Herscherik would know that something was afoot. In addition, Herscherik added one more layer of blackmail to Grim on top of the attempted assassination and corruption.

“You used that kidnapping well to your advantage,” Kuro remarked.

“I mean, they do live on his land. I wasn’t even lying.” Herscherik had threatened to pin Grim for the kidnapping, too. “Father would believe me if I told him that Grim threatened me to keep quiet. It won’t even be a question if we present it with the evidence of him smuggling weapons to the Empire.” Herscherik’s innocent smile contrasted with his scheming.

But Kuro had implied something else by his question. “What about Count Ruseria?” He rephrased the question in a more direct manner.

Grim was responsible for Ruseria’s death, in some capacity. The route that Herscherik took, the one that he had said was “for the best,” wouldn’t clear Ruseria’s name. Kuro wondered how his master, who he thought had greatly respected Ruseria, felt about that.

Herscherik contemplated Kuro’s questions in silence before finally answering. “I think Count Ruseria would be happy with the situation... for now. He always

put our country, and its people, before his own reputation or status.” Otherwise, Ruseria would not have done what he had two years prior. The man who held his head high as a true noble among nobles would agree with him—that’s what Herscherik believed.

“To tell you the truth... I did want to bring what Count Grim did to light, and bring him to judgment. I wanted to tell everyone that Count Ruseria did nothing wrong... But that would ultimately just be selfish.” Herscherik understood that that was the easiest and most cathartic solution. But Grim was on the bottom of Barbosse’s pyramid. If anything happened to Grim that would threaten the minister’s faction as a whole, Grim would become a scapegoat in the blink of an eye. That wouldn’t be a long-term solution. “I will clear Count Ruseria’s name, but now is not the right time,” Herscherik declared with determination. He tightened his grip on the pocket watch. *It went pretty well for my first time, though.* Herscherik sighed in relief. Even after the unexpected assassination attempt, things had turned out quite well for him.

No plan, no matter how intricate, ever went perfectly—especially in real life. Still, all the books and games Ryoko had experienced served as a good background. Ryoko had always tried to read ahead. At work, she anticipated the unexpected and prepared to finish her work without issue even when things went wrong. She had almost always guessed the mystery when reading or watching whodunits. She’d been killer at strategy games, too, by calculating her moves far in advance. She had even dipped her toes into chess, shogi, and go.

Herscherik was beginning to realize that Ryoko’s geek brain, as well as her experience as an office worker, could definitely work to his advantage. On top of comics and light novels, Ryoko often read weightier and more complex works—anything that had piqued her interest. She was a bibliophile at heart. Books reflected the author’s mind like a mirror. In a way, reading books was a way of peeking into the mind of others. The vast knowledge Ryoko had gained from reading countless books gave Herscherik an exceptionally wide point of view and flexible thought process. Things like observational skills, attention to detail, and critical thinking, skills Ryoko had acquired, had subconsciously shaped Herscherik’s style of intrigue.

“We’ll see how many years he’ll last...” Herscherik muttered, watching the

scenery roll by.

“Years?”

“He’s done so much evil. Someone like him won’t have a change of heart so easily.” This was true in any world. *Once on shore...* Herscherik figured. Humans were built to forget inconvenient truths. “Besides, if Count Grim completely stops what he’s doing, Barbosse would catch on. He really has to pull this off well if he doesn’t want to be eliminated by his own men.” Grim only had one path to survival; it was up to him how long he could stay on it. *They’re not as forgiving as I am*, Herscherik reminded himself. *I have to make my next move before they catch on... We’re just getting started.* Herscherik imagined that this wasn’t even the first act of his war against Barbosse but merely the prelude. He tightened his fists.

Herscherik absentmindedly watched the scenery roll by. All the thoughts racing through his head seemed to have made him forget about being carriage-sick.

Kuro shivered as he watched Herscherik, although he was neither cold nor afraid. *How many steps ahead is he thinking...? I don’t even know how far he’ll go.* Kuro trembled with excitement at rediscovering the worth of his new master. His belief that was never swayed by emotion, his resolve that made him consider all options, and his forethought that calmly calculated the next move... Moreover, his empathy that never disregarded those around him. Kuro considered these qualities becoming of a king or even a hero. Kuro had also started to become familiar with some of Herscherik’s speech patterns. Whenever he was alone with Kuro, and whenever he tried to remain cold and calculated, he spoke in a different tone. When the prince was kidnapped, and when he was blackmailing Grim, Herscherik spoke in this particular tone. While he might not have appeared collected on the surface, Herscherik was rapidly calculating ahead. His tone in these situations contrasted with the tone he employed with his father or other family members, when he was trying to play the innocent young prince.

“Hey, Kuro,” his master said, calling him out of his thoughts. Herscherik had looked away from the window and was now gazing at Kuro with a serious expression. “I want to protect Father. I want to protect my family. I want to

protect my country. I want to protect my people. I'll do anything to do that."

Kuro couldn't help but smile at those words. The core of his master's unbound potential was the kindness and sense of duty to do right by others. If Herscherik had just wanted to survive, all he had to do was forsake his princehood. But that would never even cross his mind. He wasn't merely kind, either. Herscherik knew that he couldn't protect anything with only kindness.

After a beat, Herscherik continued. He held the pocket watch tight in his hand. "Schwarz, being with me is going to be a lot more difficult than the jobs you're used to." Herscherik wasn't saying this out of hand, nor was it idle speculation. Changing the nature of an entire country was a feat completely beyond anything Ryoko had done in her life, and Herscherik knew that he would be dead if he made one wrong move. Kuro, once he had fully assumed his role as butler of service, would live and die with Herscherik. Right now, he still had a chance to turn back. "I can't give you anything in return, Kuro. I might even endanger your life." Herscherik spoke honestly only because he was speaking to Kuro. "I'm just a kid. I don't have any muscles, or magic, or even any patrons. I will only ever be dead weight to you, Kuro. If something goes wrong, I don't have the power to protect you or me." Herscherik knew well that he had nothing—that he was practically powerless with only his words and Ryoko's memories in his arsenal. That's why he needed someone he could trust wholeheartedly. Someone he could trust with his life. "Will you still... fight with me?" Herscherik stared directly at Kuro.

Kuro saw a shadow of anxiety in his master's eyes. He sensed that Herscherik was trying to conceal his own insecurity in order to give him a choice in his own fate. Once again, Kuro asked himself if he could remain by Herscherik's side. Even now, leaving the prince was inconceivable. At that moment, Kuro realized that maybe Herscherik had given Grim a choice, too. Although Herscherik seemed confident that it would never happen, if Grim truly did have a change of heart, he would become one of the people of this country Herscherik vowed to protect. If that were to happen, Herscherik would protect him at any cost, even as the one who killed Ruseria. So, Kuro made his choice. Now he was confident that he had never served anyone else in this country because he had been waiting for Herscherik. Just as Herscherik could not go without helping those

around him, Kuro could not go without Herscherik.

Kuro knelt down on one knee and bowed his head. Since they were inside the carriage, they were very close to each other.

“My Liege. My body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way.”

It was the same oath that Ruseria had sworn to Herscherik. Upon becoming his butler of service, Kuro had learned royal customs and etiquette from Rook. The Oath of Service was one of them. Kuro had just considered them a particular set of words at the time, but not now. The Oath of Service was a declaration of the soul, an oath that must not be broken. Breaking the Oath of Service would not only be a betrayal of his master but also to himself. “If you wish, My Liege, I will follow you past a million foes, to beyond the sky or the Darkness Below.” Kuro looked up to find his master astonished. “Allow me the honor of pledging my eternal loyalty to you.”

Herscherik closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again, his jade-like eyes meeting Kuro’s dark crimson eyes.

“I’ll allow it, Schwarz. But you have to promise me one thing.” Herscherik set the silver pocket watch down on the seat and pinched Kuro’s cheeks with his hands, just as Ryoko did to her niece in his dream. It was a gesture filled with hope that Kuro would keep his promise and determination to make him keep it. “You will *not* die before me. When you die, I die too.” He did not want to lose anyone else like he had lost Ruseria. He never wanted to lose anyone precious to him again. Herscherik knew that this promise would only serve to make himself feel better. Still, he couldn’t help but demand it. He thought he saw a light flicker in Kuro’s deep-red eyes.

“Understood full well, My Liege.”

Epilogue: The Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom in Woe

There was a party today to celebrate the Seventh Prince of Gracis turning five years old.

It really is Shichi-Go-San... Herscherik greeted each guest alongside his father, the king. They had just finished greeting the rest of the royal family, as the princes, princesses, and queens returned even more stunning than they were at the party two years ago to deliver a critical hit to Herscherik's self-esteem, crumbling it to dust all over again. *I thought I might be in the same ballpark after two years, but nope! Not a chance!* Who could have blamed him for being a little self-deprecating? Herscherik was once again being reminded that he was much less attractive than his father and brothers. Of course, he didn't have any magic or physical talents, either. While his brothers may not have been the most fair objects of comparison, Herscherik couldn't help but mope behind his smile. He must have been the runt of the family in everyone's eyes. While Herscherik had attended the parties to celebrate his siblings, as a child he was always sent back to his room right after saying a quick greeting.

"Prince Hersch," Kuro called from behind him. In public, Kuro spoke to Herscherik with formality, adding his title to his nickname.

Herscherik turned to Kuro and followed his gaze to see the person he wanted to see the most at the party. The prince smiled. Anyone's mood would have been softened by that smile. "Excuse me a moment, Father." With his father's permission, Herscherik walked up to the person in question, with Kuro in tow, of course.

"Welcome, Count Grim. Thank you again for hosting us last year." The prince gave Grim, who had been cowering in the corner of the ballroom as if he couldn't afford to let anyone find him there, a genuine-looking smile. As the prince gave him a blinding smile, Grim's shoulder jolted and he took a few steps back. He looked like he had just seen the devil. Herscherik immediately looked

concerned. “Are you unwell, Count Grim? Should I have Schwarz bring you a glass of water?” He turned to Kuro.

Upon noticing Kuro, Grim twitched again, all color draining from his face. Herscherik let out a momentary chuckle, realizing that he was having a little too much fun. Knowing that pushing Grim too far would hurt his cause, Herscherik decided to give him an out. “Count Grim, you must be coming down with something. Why don’t you call it a night...? I’ve heard from your people that you’re treating them well. Meria wrote so, too. I’m sure things will still be tough, but I’m counting on you.”

The count nodded like a bobblehead to Herscherik’s smile and scuttled out of the ballroom with a rushed farewell.

“He looked like he was losing his mind until I talked to him,” Herscherik muttered after watching Grim run off with his tail between his legs.

“You have a wonderful smile, Prince Hersch. Count Grim looked like he had just seen a warden of the Darkness Below.”

“That’s not a compliment, is it, Schwarz?” *Like you have room to talk,* Herscherik silently added. *All color drained from his face when he saw you, too. He’s lost hair since last time, and I’m sure that he has lost some weight, too.*

Herscherik had ended up saving Grim from both prosecution *and* obesity. Herscherik thought that that was a feat worthy of praise. He only restrained himself from saying it out loud because his father had called him back to his seat. Before him stood Barbosse, exuding a powerful aura. Barbosse seemed the same as before, in his fifties but far from unhealthy.

“It’s been too long, Prince Herscherik. I’m glad to see that you’re doing well.”

“You as well, Minister.” *Wish you’d be like Grim. You should go bald, too. Bald-bosse.* Herscherik replied without showing a shred of his true emotions. Ryoko’s business smile was as effective as ever.

“I’ve heard that you paid a visit to Count Grim’s territory last year. Did something happen while you were there?” Barbosse looked at Herscherik like a bird of prey honing in on its next catch.

Herscherik pretended not to notice it. “Yes, I visited his land for a personal

errand. During the stay, we were attacked by robbers... The royal guards, and Count Grim, saved my life. I just feel terrible that some of the guards were killed trying to protect me.” Herscherik dodged Barbosse’s dig with the words and expression of a woeful prince. In fact, he did feel terrible for their losses. His guilt only worsened as he couldn’t help but feel like he was taking advantage of their death by bringing them up here.

“How tragic... It is unacceptable that the likes of burglars thrive in our country. Something must be done about this.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful!” Herscherik switched his woeful expression for one of relief. Internally, of course, he was cursing out Barbosse with every insult imaginable.

After the minister walked away, his father turned to him. “Hersch... Are you getting tired?” he asked, his true concern hidden in the subtext.

Herscherik showed his father a genuine smile. “I’m all right, Father...! You can tell me if you ever get tired, too.” Herscherik held his father’s hand that had gotten a little cold and continued. “You might worry about me because I’m still young, but I can at least be by your side.”



The king and the prince's butlers of service shared a look behind their backs. Rook gave an impressed nod while Kuro proudly smiled. Herscherik couldn't see their silent exchange. The king looked surprised for a moment at this remark from his youngest prince, but he soon returned a smile, petting Herscherik's silky golden hair with his open hand.

If this was Ryoko interacting with Solye through a dating sim, he would have immediately become her "best boy," and she would have bought any merchandise of him—from figurines to art prints. That's how intoxicating his smile was.

Herscherik let go of his father's hand and looked around the ballroom. Everything had changed right there, back when he had only just turned three. He produced the silver pocket watch from his hand and held it tight. Herscherik wanted to believe that he had grown, even just a little, in the past two years.

Count Ruseria... I will protect them. Everything that you cherished. All of it.

The powerful Kingdom of Gracis stood at the north of the continent, secretly nicknamed the Kingdom in Woe by its neighboring nations. The life of Ryoko Hayakawa ended after nearly 35 years when she was reincarnated as Herscherik Gracis, Seventh Prince of the Kingdom of Gracis. Now, Herscherik was five years old. The path ahead of him would not be an easy one. Historians of the future would call Herscherik a hero, and they would describe his presence as a thin but unmistakable ray of hope that pierced through the dark clouds like a strand of his bright, golden hair.

The Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom in Woe — Fin.

Anecdote: The Shadow-Fanged Butler of the Reincarnated Prince

In the Kingdom of Gracis that stood as a superpower in the north of the continent—known as the Kingdom in Woe to neighboring nations—a young man was walking down a hallway in the royal castle. The time was already past midnight, but he had come across more than an average amount of knights and soldiers on patrol. This was because one of the princes, the king's favorite prince in fact, had been kidnapped but returned safe. Every knight, soldier, and constable in the area had been deployed after the kidnapping was discovered. The prince in question, however, simply returned with his nanny as if nothing had happened. Members of the search party were called back to the castle to reinforce security, which had doubled the patrols throughout the castle. The young man in the hall whom Herscherik called Kuro, however, wasn't bothered by it.

Kuro sneaked past the patrols in the corridor, recalling his conversation with the young prince he had just seen. *I wish you could be my butler of service, Kuro*, Herscherik had muttered. Kuro wasn't aware that a trace of a smile formed on his face every time he remembered the prince's remark. But just then, Kuro's expression dampened. What the prince was trying to accomplish seemed impossible to Kuro. The prince was ready to charge into enemy territory with no regard for his own safety and without any measures to protect himself. Kuro assumed that Herscherik was aware of how dangerous it would be without Kuro having to tell him so, but Herscherik chose to enact his plan anyway. He chose the lives of his people over his own. While Kuro felt proud of the prince's decision, he couldn't help but feel frustrated at his current position. He had no right to criticize, stop, or even help Herscherik in his endeavor. Kuro tightened his fists.

Then, Kuro saw a light up ahead. Pegging it for a guard on patrol, Kuro immediately slipped through a nearby door—after making sure that no one was in the room, of course. The room appeared to be a private office of someone

important. A wide desk sat in the center of the room with a large window behind it and bookshelves lining the walls. Double checking that no one else was in the room, he hid behind a bookshelf and remained silent.

I can't believe I let my emotions get the best of me... Kuro thought, as he waited for the patrol to pass by. Kuro had always been able to remain cold and collected, completing his mission while banishing all of his feelings. When it came to that young prince, however, those emotions proved impossible to overcome.

Suddenly, he sensed someone nearby. "Who's there...?" Kuro observed the room until he spotted a particularly dark spot.

"Your reputation precedes you... is what I was going to say, Shadow Fang. But seeing that you let me get so close, maybe you're a little overrated." A voice came from the darkness, and a silhouette appeared.

Kuro recognized the figure with astonishment. "You're..."

"Sounds like you know who I am," the silhouette chuckled.

The person Kuro recognized had no business being here. Moonlight illuminated the silhouette, revealing the figure in full. It was a man older than Kuro with dark green—or perhaps steel-colored—hair and eyes of the same hue that gleamed with a dauntless and piercing light.

Rook Febvre... What's the king's right-hand man doing here? Kuro knew the man. Childhood friend and butler of service to the 23rd king, Solye, and the second son of the Marquis Febvre. The Febvres had garnered a reputation for producing excellent officers throughout the clan's history, men whose services were always cherished by the kings of their time. However, after Solye took the throne at a young age and Barbosse became a minister and advisor to the king, the Marquis Febvre and his family were relocated to the countryside. Rook alone had remained in the capital to serve the king. He excelled at his job just like any of his ancestors and supported the king for years as his right-hand man. Kuro had heard rumors that Rook was so knowledgeable that he even had connections in the underworld, but he had never verified that.

Rook spoke to Kuro, who remained on guard. "I looked into you. You work through the underground guild under the moniker of Shadow Fang. Male, but

birth name, birthplace, and age all unknown, no known family members... I was surprised that I couldn't find out a single thing about you." Despite saying so, Rook showed no sign of actual surprise. He only stared at Kuro with curiosity. "You perfectly execute any mission, from reconnaissance to thievery and even assassinations... But you never settle down. A lone wolf, freelance, spy-for-hire. Does that hit the mark?"

"What's your point?" Kuro snarled at Rook, wanting to stop beating around the bush. He didn't have time to strike up a leisurely conversation.

As if he'd seen right through Kuro, Rook grinned. "You've been someone's dog before, haven't you?"

Kuro froze for a moment at Rook's assured tone, practically confirming the fact. Still, Kuro tried to deny it. "What are you—"

"That shook you, huh? So naive." Rook chuckled and shrugged. "You thought you could explain away all your skills and prowess as mere products of talent and experience?" Rook had accurately deduced that Kuro had not acquired all of his skills on his own. A spy's most important ability was blending into one's surroundings without being noticed. Of course, infiltration and combat skills were both important, but not as much as the skill of gathering information. While these all required both talent and experience, Kuro's work had been much too refined for him to have built those skills on his own. "I can smell a kindred spirit. Besides..." Rook widened his grin. The moonlight eerily flickered across Rook's face. "You find joy in serving others... That's how you were trained."

Kuro's mind froze. He knew that Rook was right—he had been conditioned that way. Although, Kuro reflected, he didn't even realize that he was being conditioned back then.

Seeing Kuro immobilized like a fallen marionette, Rook continued. "But, you look for a master with the right qualities. That's why you were drawn to Prince Herscherik... and became enchanted by him." Rook noticed the ever-so-slight tremor in Kuro's shoulders. "Even as we speak, you're scheming how you can be by his side."

"Shut up."

“Why should I?” Rook asked with a teasing tone. “If you keep reacting like this to the truth, you’re not nearly as professional as you think. What would Prince Herscherik think of you if he found out...?”

When Herscherik’s name was mentioned, Kuro lost it. He was the one person in the world whom Kuro wanted to protect from his past. Just imagining Herscherik’s disappointed look was too much for Kuro to bear. He closed in on Rook in the blink of an eye, thrusting the dagger that seemed to materialize in his hand straight toward Rook’s face. Rook dodged the attack with ease, albeit only so easily because Kuro had lost his cool, making his attack predictable. Under ordinary circumstances, Kuro could have taken Rook in a fight easily. After his stab failed to connect, Kuro lowered his center of gravity and turned to kick Rook in the torso. Rook saw that coming too and caught his kick with one hand. Kuro glared up at Rook, almost audibly grinding his teeth.

Rook calmly met Kuro’s glare. “What a mess. Didn’t expect to shake you this easily. Did I really overestimate you so much?”

“Overestimate...?” Kuro relaxed. Finally realizing that he was being tested, Kuro regained his cool.

Rook released Kuro’s leg and cut to the chase. “Shadow Fang, will you be Prince Herscherik’s butler of service?”

Kuro gulped. It was precisely what he wanted the most. Still, he saw many obstacles in the way for him to assume that position. “But I’m...” He couldn’t finish his sentence, so he only shook his head and stared at the floor. Anyone who served royalty was required to have a reputable background. At the very least, he would have had to be born into nobility or to a rich merchant. Kuro, by contrast, was an underground spy who had abandoned his home country to roost in Gracis. What’s more, he had committed numerous crimes throughout this career. Even as he longed for the position, Kuro couldn’t help but wonder if he would actually be allowed at Herscherik’s side.

“I’ll make you a background. Don’t worry about your criminal record, either. We can even do a trial run if you want,” Rook declared, as Kuro silently struggled with the decision.

Rook had begun researching Kuro ever since his first encounter with

Herscherik. Using his own network, he had uncovered everything he could about Kuro, as well as the work he had performed. Whenever Kuro gathered information, he always made sure that his target didn't even realize that anything had been taken from them. He never put any informants in danger, either. He never accepted assassination requests without a good reason behind them, and he never killed anyone he didn't have to. In particular, he never accepted any mission to assassinate a child, no matter the price. In fact, any such requests proposed to Kuro always vanished in a matter of days. After looking at every piece of information he had gathered about Kuro, Rook was sure that he was the only one suitable to become Herscherik's butler of service. Rook had intended to propose the idea to Solye all along, and the kidnapping had only sped up the process.

"What do you want?" Kuro asked, expecting Rook to use him to get to Herscherik.

Rook's answer, however, blew Kuro away. "Just one thing. For you to stay by Prince Herscherik's side." Kuro looked up at Rook's steel-colored eyes piercing through him. "Stay with His Highness, help him, protect him, and support him. Otherwise, do whatever you want."

"Don't you think I'll hurt Hersch...?" Kuro countered, glaring back at Rook.

Rook scoffed. "Could you hurt him if you tried? You two already have nicknames for each other." Kuro couldn't deny that. "What say you?"

Kuro closed his eyes at the question. What he saw in the darkness was the prince sitting on his sofa and quietly watching the flames in the fireplace. He had no doubts about it. "What do you think?"

Rook nodded in satisfaction and turned his back. "Then let's get started. First things first, leave that underground guild. After you take care of anything down there, meet me at my manor. You know where it is, don't you?"

Kuro nodded and blended into the dark of night, vanishing from the castle.

A shadow entered a certain well-off market through the back door. It silently moved through the abandoned shop and through a door labeled "employees only." Beyond it, there was a simple room with nothing but a basic set of a table

and two chairs, as well as a bookshelf against the wall. The shadow stood before the bookshelf and started pushing on the spines of some of the books rather than taking any of them out of the shelf. Then, the floor directly by the bookshelf slid away, revealing a downward staircase. The shadow descended the staircase to another door at the end of it. Upon opening the door, the shadow was met by a woman.

“Oh, Shadow Fang,” she greeted him. “What are you doing here at this hour?” The faint light of a lantern flickered over the woman’s face. She had brunette hair cut in a boyish style, with piercings on her lips as well as her ears and a ring on each finger of the hand that supported her chin at the moment. Each and every one of those accessories were magical items. This woman, the receptionist of the underground guild, was a highly powerful spellcaster.

“I’m out,” Kuro simply said.

The woman widened her eyes in surprise. “Oh... Really?” She couldn’t help but be skeptical, but as soon as she looked into Kuro’s red eyes burning bright with determination, she knew he was serious. Slowly, she stood up. “All right. Give me a minute.” She disappeared into the space beyond the door.

As he waited, Kuro observed his surroundings. He was standing in the headquarters of the underground guild in Gracis, which also happened to be the guild leader’s hideout. Kuro usually accepted jobs at one of their branches in a separate location, but the guild leader rarely showed up at branches. Ordinarily, leaving the underground guild was an extremely involved process that took some time. Kuro couldn’t afford that. In fact, he had only come to this place a few times prior. The first was when he joined the underground guild, and he had come here occasionally after that to receive important missions straight from the mouth of the guildmaster. All in all, this was not even his tenth time coming here or seeing the guildmaster. The only thing Kuro knew about the leader was that he could never read him.

“Boss wants to see you,” the woman called.

Kuro stepped into the guild leader’s room, where a man greeted him. The man didn’t have any identifying characteristics to speak of and was average-looking overall. The lamps in the room illuminated this average man. His eyes

and hair were light brown, the most common shade in Gracis, and he wore a calm smile. If Kuro didn't know better, he might have forgotten the man by the next day—that's how unimpressive he was. The desk before the man was piled with papers, with an uncovered inkwell on the corner and a fountain pen leaning on it. The room looked to be nothing more than an ordinary office. For Kuro, who had spent years in the underground, the fact that the man's appearance and demeanor seemed to actively avoid giving off any strong impressions was a huge red flag.

This man—the underground guildmaster—spoke. “Hello, Shadow Fang... Or do you prefer *Thirteen*?”

Kuro restrained himself from frowning at the remark. Thirteen was what Kuro had been called in his hometown. When the guild leader asked for his name, Kuro had let it slip. That had been the one and only time he'd ever mentioned that name. He didn't expect anyone to remember it, but the man before him addressed Kuro with that name, all from behind the same gentle smile. Kuro made a point not to show his discomfort with that and only stared at the guildmaster.

For his part, the guildmaster only shrugged. “Smile a little, why don't you? You were still kind of cute when you first came here.”

“I'm out. How much?” Kuro cut right to the chase. He had no intention of indulging in idle chit chat.

“You have no charm *or* patience... Your new master's not going to like that.”

Kuro couldn't help but let his brows twist at the remark. The guildmaster, on the other hand, was actually impressed. Kuro had always been indifferent to others. He always remained solitary, doing his job and nothing more. He had built an impenetrable wall around him, rejecting anyone who came near. The guildmaster was now curious—Kuro had obviously met someone so important to him that he couldn't hide his feelings, and he wondered who that person was.

Noticing the look in the guildmaster's eyes, Kuro simply repeated, “How much?”

Kuro's sharp glare seemed to be stabbing the guildmaster like a knife. He let

out a small sigh and gave Kuro a price. “Ten gold coins.”

“That’s it...?” Kuro couldn’t help but feel suspicious of the reasonable offer. While ten gold coins was about three times the annual income of an average family, Kuro had made more than that on a single job of moderate difficulty. Money and strength ruled in the Gracis underground guild. There was no room for empathy or the social bonds often seen in legitimate mercenary guilds. In a way, the underground guild was the most efficient organization of all. Kuro had heard that the man before him was the very one who had restructured the guild that way, molding it out of what used to be a lawless ragtag band. The payment required to leave the underground guild, where money trumped all, varied depending on the individual’s skills and contributions to the guild. Even so, this seemed much too cheap.

“Normally I’d ask for at least ten times that.”

“Then why let me off so easy?”

“Does it matter to you?” The guildmaster returned a question, still smiling the same smile. Their eyes met, and heavy silence ruled the room.

Meanwhile, the receptionist was leaning against the open door to the room, holding back a yawn. She had always considered the guildmaster’s condescending tone to be one of his vices. While his calm expression did a decent job of hiding it, he wasn’t the leader of an underground guild for nothing. He was quite the character, to say the least.

“You have done a lot for us, Shadow Fang,” the guildmaster started again. “Fine. I’ll tell you if you’d like. First, you’ve contributed a significant amount to the guild. Anyone who requested you was willing to pay us a little extra, too.”

The receptionist could confirm this. Many of their clients had requested Shadow Fang, and most of them were exceedingly wealthy. Although, it was none of her business as to how they acquired their riches. Moreover, the underground guild was only responsible for setting up communications between the client and agent. Even when Kuro turned down a request, the guild would not refund their cut to the client. While Kuro was picky about which request to take, he had never actually *failed* any of them. This led to more and more people requesting his services, as his reputation as an agent who never

failed spread through the underground. The guild was making bank just on their fee for connecting clients to Kuro specifically.

“And you know *the* second son to the Marquis Febvre.”

“Marquis Febvre?” Kuro repeated as he remembered Rook’s teasing smile. He couldn’t understand how the leader of the underground guild knew who the king’s right-hand man was. But the emphasis on “the” struck him as odd.

“The Febvres are famous for providing excellent officers to the king, one generation after another. On the surface, at least. Under the surface, they’re the kingdom’s guard dogs. The one you know particularly excels in that department.” The leader had confirmed the rumors about Rook with the nonchalance of meaningless small talk. If the Febvres were the kingdom’s secret service, Kuro could understand why Rook had called him a “kindred spirit.” The guildmaster continued, “The current king seems to keep the Febvres at a distance, but if their second son’s still serving the king, it means that the Febvres haven’t given up on him entirely. The guild doesn’t want to give *the* Febvre, or any Febvre for that matter, the wrong idea about you.” The leader had implied how powerful a presence the Febvres were in the underground.

Kuro, however, was concerned with something else. The fact that the Febvres were one of the nation’s most prominent houses both above and below the surface spoke volumes as to the power of Minister Barbosse, whom the prince was trying to take on. This meant that Barbosse wasn’t merely a fool drunk on power. He had his connections in the underground, too. Kuro frowned again.

Seeing Kuro’s reaction, the leader internally smirked at getting his point across successfully. Outwardly, he maintained the same gentle smile and continued, “In short, the guild’s much better off letting you leave on a good note. Money rules down here, as you well know. Pay us the amount I specified, and no one will stop you.” The leader squinted. That action alone made Kuro feel like the temperature in the room had dropped several degrees. “As long as you keep your end of the bargain, of course.”

The stipulation for leaving the underground guild was to not divulge any information about the guild or its work. That included everything from the location of any branches to any client information, and any details on the jobs

performed. The exception was information gained on any hired job. Break this contract and the guildmaster himself would be on the case. Anyone who breached the contract would end up begging for death before having their entire existence erased from society. No amount of money nor extenuating circumstances would change this rule.

“I know,” Kuro acknowledged and produced a sack full of golden coins. He took out ten coins and placed them on the desk.

The guildmaster counted them. “That’s ten. Now you’re free. But you can come back anytime, you know?”

Kuro ignored the remark and turned right around. The receptionist made way for him, watching him leave.

Once they were alone in the room, the receptionist spoke first. “There’s something you’re not telling him, isn’t there, Boss?”

The leader grimaced. “I’m contractually obligated not to.”

Several years prior, a man had brought a boy to the underground guild—a boy who would later be known as Shadow Fang. The man had joined the underground guild to save his son from an illness. The underground guild did more than assassinations and espionage; dangerous and less-than-legal requests that couldn’t be handled by legitimate guilds were all brought to them. These included searching for precious metals in mines long shut down by collapse or poisonous gas, hunting for rare and protected animals that lived deep in the woods, and smuggling illegal drugs into and out of the country. All in all, these jobs were high-risk, high-return. The man had taken one such request, risking his own life to save his son’s. In the end, he couldn’t make enough money in time to prevent his son’s death. The man paid his dues to the guild for leaving it and returned to his life above ground. In addition to the fee that he owed, he left 30 additional gold coins.

“He’s not the kind of person who’ll end his life here. If the time comes when he wants to leave the guild, put these toward his dues.” The man had shoved the gold coins at the leader, not taking no for an answer. He seemed to care for Kuro, since he was close in age to his late son.

Contrary to the man’s expectation, Kuro had spent his days isolated and

uninterested in everyone, doing nothing more than his job. In fact, it seemed like he was actively *rejecting* everything else. Now, Kuro had changed—enough to show a change in his expression. The guildmaster guessed that Kuro was still unaware of that himself.

“I wonder who caused him to change so much?” The guildmaster, who seldom showed interest in anyone else, couldn’t help but wonder about the person who had moved young Kuro so much.

The receptionist watched her boss in contemplation for a while before shrugging her shoulders and leaving the room.

After leaving the underground guild, Kuro skulked through the dark to arrive at Rook’s manor, the Febvre residence in the capital. By the absence of any servants in the manor, as well as the dust covering the statues within it, Kuro could easily see that the manor had laid untouched for a long time. As Kuro sneaked into the castle without a sound, Rook was there to welcome him, albeit saying, “What took you so long?”

Rook showed Kuro to a room in the manor. On their way, Kuro sensed someone else close to them, but Rook noticed and shook his head to indicate that, whatever it was, it wasn’t a problem. Kuro decided not to worry about it, assuming that it must have been another Febvre. In this room, Kuro was first asked for the measurements of his clothes.

“You’re going to officially be introduced to the castle tomorrow—well, today. You have to dress the part.”

Kuro told Rook his measurements out loud. He sensed the figure outside of the door disappear.

After a few hours, Kuro was given a few butler’s uniforms that fit him like a glove as well as some pairs of shoes and a set of accessories. Then, Rook prepared various papers and documents on his desk and gestured for Kuro to sit down.

“First, I’ll have you memorize the duties of a butler. Then, we’ll go through etiquette—”

“No need. I’m familiar with the customs of this country.”

“Fine. Then the family trees of the royal family and other powerful nobles, their relationships to each other, their underground connections...”

Kuro took in everything that Rook taught him. Memorization was a vital skill for espionage. Memorizing all necessary information was practically a prerequisite to the job. Kuro soaked up every single one of Rook’s words, as well as the contents of all of the documents on the desk. By the time they were finished, it was starting to get light outside.

“Last one.” Rook held out something to Kuro.

“What is this?” Kuro frowned. It was a children’s book.

The cover of the book depicted someone wearing a crown, someone beside that figure, a knight with a sword, and a spellcaster wearing a robe and holding a staff.

“It’s a popular book among the children of this country.” Rook explained the obvious. Kuro raised a brow, but Rook ignored him. “Read it carefully. Now, I’m going to go prepare breakfast for Solye and Prince Herscherik. You’ll see His Highness in the afternoon. Be ready by then.”

After watching Rook leave, Kuro looked down to the book and back at the door a few times before sitting down at a chair and opening the book.

The story of the book was a very simple one, clearly intended for children. The king, wearing a crown, defeated villains and monsters with the help of his butler, knight, and spellcaster. While they were met with danger along the way, the four always worked together and conquered every challenge.

My body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way.

Although they were merely drawings, the three characters who knelt and pledged these words in the book somehow seemed full of valor to Kuro.

“An Oath of Service...” For some reason, that phrase sank into Kuro’s chest like a heavy stone. Kuro shook his head. “They’re just words.” What he needed to protect the prince was information on his enemies.

Putting down the book at the edge of the desk, Kuro picked up the stack of papers that he had gone through already. There was plenty of time in the morning for him to double check them. He imagined seeing Herscherik, the prince who would soon become his master. Sure that Herscherik would be surprised and happy to see him, a tiny smile formed on Kuro's face. He still didn't realize it.

The Seventh Prince of Gracis, Herscherik, would later be known as the Hero of Gracis. His butler Schwarz Zweig was always by his side. According to official records, the butler was a son of the Viscount Zweig, but no account about his upbringing was available. He devoted his entire life to Herscherik. He lived his life as his master's shadow and turned his fangs against those that opposed his master, like a guard dog. People called him the Shadow-Fanged Butler.

The Shadow-Fanged Butler of the Reincarnated Prince — Fin.

Postscript

Nobiru Kusunoki here. Nice to meet you—unless you’ve read one of my pieces online before, in which case... Welcome back! Thank you very much for picking up a copy of *The Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom in Woe*. Not that I expect many readers to begin with the postscript, but I won’t be spoiling anything that happens in the story here. So put your mind at ease as you waste your time reading my rant disguised as a legitimate postscript.

I have heard somewhere that anyone can write at least one hit in their life. Whether it’s a hit or not, this was the very first novel that I ever finished, despite my short attention span. I’d come across Let’s Be Novelists [note: a popular website in Japan where anyone can post their work. Many light novels, including this one, got their start on this website] and read through one user-posted novel after another. I felt fulfilled, despite losing sleep over my voracious reading habit. But humans are greedy by nature, aren’t we? Eventually, I found myself looking for trope-filled novels that I could sink my teeth into but couldn’t find any new ones. That’s when it hit me: I can just write one myself. I’m a nerd, after all. So, I set out to be self-sufficient.

I’m sure that I initially set out to write clichéd genre fiction. How did I end up with a female protagonist reborn as a prince with no actual protagonist qualities? In the end, I grew to love this premise.

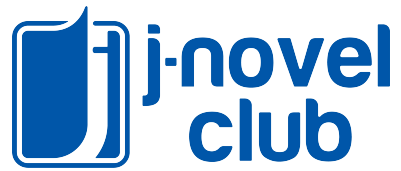
Very fortunate for me, the piece was picked up by Futabasha. Now that my very first completed novel has been published, I feel like I used up all of my luck for the rest of my life... So I hope a lot of people can enjoy *The Reincarnated Prince*. I would hate for my entire life’s worth of luck to go to waste.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone who read the book, everyone who has followed me since back when I was posting it online, editor-in-chief M who took notice of the story, my editor M who always kept up with me and even let me write this postscript, Arico the very talented artist who drew all of my characters looking their absolute best, everyone who helped me in the

publishing process, my family who always understood and supported my deep dives into the world of my hobbies... Thanks to all of you, the Reincarnated Prince came to life as a book. I can't thank you enough!

If possible, I would love to see you again at the end of the next volume.
Signing off (rant over),

Nobiru Kusunoki



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The Reincarnated Prince and the Kingdom in Woe (Volume 1) by Nobiru Kusunoki

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