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Miss Nicola the EXORCIST
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The Troubles of Miss Nicola the Exorcist: Volume 1 [Complete]

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Prologue

Grace and splendor adorned the young man, surrounding him like a picture frame. He drew the attention of every teacher or student who passed by, male or female. Whenever he left a room, the sighs of those who envied his overwhelming beauty filled the air. People said that his noble visage, which boasted a perfect beauty of form, would not be matched in a thousand years.

At the tender age of eighteen, he had already attained the rank of marquess. What is more, he was also known as the first-born prince's closest friend, and had been promised a bright future. As president of the student council at the Royal Academy, he was popular. He was blessed with a keen intellect and skilled in both the literary and martial arts.

For this young man, who was truly beloved by God and made others lose faith in the deity's wordless proverbs, [redacted] had only wanted to say one thing...

Chapter 1: Two Visages in One Mirror

1

A few weeks earlier, around the middle of August, Sieghart von Edelstein first experienced a feeling of unease.

Sieghart ended his summer vacation early to fulfill his duties as a member of the student council and prepared to welcome a new cohort to the academy. He found himself with quite a lot of work to do in the two weeks or so left before the new term started. However, the strange events began at the end of the summer.

For personal reasons, the young man had very much looked forward to September this year. Finally, it was just around the corner. It was for that reason that he was able to overlook that unease in the beginning, and only the slightest of things ever unsettled him.

When teachers or other student council members happened to spot him in the hallway, they assumed confused looks and tilted their heads to one side or looked in the direction they had come from. But Sieghart, who was aware of his somewhat distinct appearance, had long since grown used to receiving this kind of attention.

This was understandable when I was still a new student, but I'm about to enter my third year. Is there really still anyone at the academy who finds the sight of me remarkable? Sieghart had this thought, among other such misguided ideas. *Well, I suppose they haven't seen me all summer. Perhaps this is to be expected*, was another such thought that came to him.

Even if he did not want to admit it, he realized there was something wrong when these suspicious reactions kept happening constantly over the last two weeks of summer vacation. As the new term approached, and the general student body returned to their dormitories in droves, the nature of this bizarre feeling of unease changed steadily.

A certain male student said, "Thanks for showing me your summer vacation

homework. Your notes were easy to understand, just as expected of the top student in our class. You really saved my skin!”

“Huh? Ah, right, you’re welcome. But when winter break comes around, do your own homework.”

“Aw, really? My parents are merchants, so when I head home for vacation, I’ll be busy helping out with the family business.”

“Even the sons of noble houses often have a lot to do, serving as apprentices in the management of their fathers’ territories. So, our conditions are the same.”

“Yeah, yeah.” The classmate shrugged his shoulders and gave Sieghart a listless response, despite being scolded within the bounds of casual banter. In all honesty, Sieghart had no memory of lending his notes to this friend who had come to thank him for that very favor. As he had in fact lent them to another student, he thought that his classmates had probably passed them around. He soon forgot about it but that same day brought with it yet another disquieting event.

“Ah, President! Thank you once again for helping me bind those documents yesterday evening. Preparing enough for all the new students really is back-breaking, is it not?” exclaimed Sieghart’s junior in the student council.

“Huh? Ah, yes, well done... Although, are you sure that was me?”

She snickered before saying, “There you go again! How can I cope with a nonchalant glance from someone as charming as our president?”

Sieghart had no memory of assisting her either, so he finally leaned his head forward in confusion. He had actually gone into town the previous evening to buy a new inkwell, as his last one had run dry.

On that fateful day, Sieghart made a beeline for his dormitory. Once he confirmed that the inkwell and fountain pen he was sure he had bought were still in the drawer of his writing desk, he was left even more baffled.

As days went by, people told him about more “sightings of Sieghart” of which he had no memory. Two, then three, then four followed, one after the other. Each time someone mentioned such encounters, an enigmatic feeling of anxiety

and a faint chill crept over him.

By the time the new school term had begun, Sieghart was certain that *something* bearing his likeness stalked the halls of the academy.

"Oh? Didn't I just see you on the third floor?"

"A vase? Yeah, you yourself brought it to the student council room the day before yesterday, did you not, President? This is most unlike you. Are you tired, perhaps?"

"Thanks for coming, even though you already seem so busy with your student council work. We were short on people, so you were really a great help."

The frequency with which Sieghart heard people claim they had seen him had been limited to once every two or three days, but it gradually increased in number. He had gotten used to hearing such testimonies many times a day, until he finally felt cornered.

Just who is this "me who is not me"? Why did he appear, and what does he want? With all of this still shrouded in mystery, Sieghart's restlessness only continued to grow. An unfamiliar, eerie feeling crept up on him inch by inch. He felt as if strands of silk floss were wrapped around his throat, while a damp, uncomfortable film of sweat enveloped his body.

If he did not do something, he would not be able to relax. As such, Sieghart devoted himself even more diligently to his miscellaneous duties in the student council.

2

The day of the welcoming ceremony for new students at the academy had finally come. When the ceremony was over, Sieghart heard someone behind him call out his name. It was a young girl's voice, sounding like a small bell tumbling behind him—though her voice was not loud in volume, it resounded clearly through the air.

Sieghart's feet came to a sudden stop in the stone-paved corridor as the rays

of the setting sun dyed it a deep orange. Today was a day off for students in the second year and above, so no one had passed him in the hallways.

“Thank you very much for showing me around earlier. This school is very big, I couldn’t help but get lost...”

Not again, Sieghart thought to himself as he stood frozen in place. This girl was most likely a new student if she had gotten lost within school grounds. She had said that they had met “earlier,” but Sieghart had been busy tidying up the lecture hall directly after the welcoming ceremony. He certainly had no time to give new students directions. *Without a doubt, this is once again the work of “someone other than me.”*

Of course, there was no way he could tell this new student his suspicions. Explaining himself would not foster understanding. Instead, it would only leave her perplexed.

“You’re wel—” Seeing no alternative, Sieghart plastered a smile on his face and turned to face the girl. But before he had even finished turning around, he realized that something about that voice had been nagging at him.

“Kidding, just a joke,” Sieghart overheard the girl mutter to herself.

The moment he heard this, he immediately cast off any sense of shame or concern for his own reputation. After closing the distance between them in a single leap, he embraced the girl, whose body was one or two sizes smaller than his. Though, it would be more accurate to say that he clung to her.

“Nicola! It’s really you! How I’ve missed you!” Sieghart took a whiff, and the smell of a brand new uniform, combined with the girl’s own sweet fragrance, filled his nostrils. The lush black hair that tickled the tip of his nose belonged to Nicola von Weber. Despite her being younger than Sieghart, they had been childhood friends, and she was the woman he loved most in the world.

Under normal circumstances, Sieghart would have never committed such a pitiful blunder as failing to recognize Nicola’s voice. He was once again aware of the fact that he had suffered substantial emotional distress.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you? I take my eyes off of you for a short while, and you drag me into a malevolent matter that would make anyone

recoil. Good job spooking me, but really, give me a break.” Nicola’s tone of voice showed her displeasure and let Sieghart know she was tired and cared little about his problems. Yet he could not help but feel relieved.

This was precisely Nicola’s usual manner. The feeling of being treated as someone deeply familiar allowed Sieghart to breathe a sigh of relief, causing his fears to dissipate in the blink of an eye. The childhood friend effect was incredibly powerful.

“Ah, seriously, why weren’t we born the same year so we could have enrolled here together? Do you know how long I’ve awaited your arrival?!” Sieghart pursed his lips.

A two-year academic gap that would never close existed between the childhood friends. One had to reach the minimum age of sixteen to enroll at the Royal Academy, so Sieghart had been forced to wait two whole years for Nicola to join him there.

“I do not know. Try asking my parents, who conceived me fifteen years ago.”

“Oof... I really don’t think I can say that to the people who will one day become my parents-in-law.”

“That will never happen, not for all eternity, so no problem there. Please go ahead, face them head-on and ask them directly. More to the point, you still haven’t given up?”

“Of course not!” Still clinging to Nicola, Sieghart suddenly and forcefully raised his face. The two found their faces closer than they had expected, and both gasped in surprise. Sieghart found Nicola’s face so close to his that the tips of their noses might touch.

“Ugh, too close, your face is too beaut—I’m about to go blind...” Nicola let out a series of such peculiar moans.

As for Sieghart, he had hoped to get a closer look at Nicola’s deep ocean blue eyes, but his wish was not granted. After Nicola pushed him away mercilessly, he found himself facing the ground.

“Nicola, that hurts...”

“Oh, enough already. Stop looking at me, Mr. Noble Phantasm for a Face.”

As this childish fight unfolded, Sieghart felt their usual rapport return and smiled for the first time in a long while. Perhaps it was because Nicola had watched Sieghart’s smile reappear, or maybe that was unrelated, but she primly resumed a serious expression and started talking.

“Now then, what’s the matter? I thought some strange entity wandered around here, but it turned out to be wearing an unpleasantly familiar face.” Although Nicola was short for a girl her age, she looked much more dignified and imposing when she folded her arms and stood up to her full height.

Sieghart answered nervously, “It appears that there is a me who is not me.” He then explained that he had first realized something was amiss about two weeks prior, and that the frequency with which this other self had been sighted had gradually increased. Nicola did not make a peep while he spoke, but listened silently and intently.

When he had finished, she placed her beautiful, white hands on her chin and simply murmured, “Hmmm.”

“What on earth does ‘he’ hope to achieve by impersonating me?” muttered Sieghart, letting out a sigh that was halfway to a grumble. That was before he noticed Nicola looking up at him with not even the faintest trace of an expression remaining on her face.

“It sounds to me like he is no longer satisfied with just impersonating others. Isn’t that right? Mr. Somebody Who Can’t be Anybody?”

“Huh?” Nicola tapped a finger against Sieghart’s chest as he was transfixed by her deep blue eyes, causing him to stumble backwards slightly. There were still no other people walking through the corridor. At some point, the sun in the western sky had passed from orange, straight through vermillion, to a dark dusky red. The remaining sunlight cast long shadows along the stone pathway.

Though Nicola and Sieghart had been the only two people there a moment ago, the sound of shoes striking the cobblestones suddenly echoed throughout the corridor. The third person’s footsteps seemed to come from behind Sieghart.

“Nicola, get away from him. He’s an impostor.”

Nicola was silent for a moment. “Huh?”

Sieghart could not believe his ears. The voice behind him was, without a doubt, his own. Not only that, but this impostor claimed Sieghart himself was a fake. These words, which carried terrifying implications, slipped in one ear and out the other. He could not process what the voice had said.

“What are you saying? I am... I’m...” Sieghart said. *Of course I’m real.* There should be no room whatsoever to doubt that fact. Still no one who had encountered the impostor, that *thing*, around the school had realized that it was not Sieghart.

If Nicola came to believe that the fake behind Sieghart was the real thing, then she would regard Sieghart himself as a fake. After arriving at that thought, Sieghart felt the warm blood in his veins drain away in the blink of an eye. He felt as if his body had frozen from the extremities to its very core. He felt dizzy. The ground beneath him felt as if it had melted away, so even his footing seemed uncertain. His breathing grew steadily more shallow until it hurt to breathe at all.

“N-Nicola...” Sieghart looked pleadingly at Nicola, who still stood in front of him. Nicola, however, did not look back at Sieghart. She stared steadily at the space behind him, with an absentminded smile creeping across her face.

Sieghart cautiously began to turn his head to look at what stood behind him, but none other than Nicola reached out and pulled him back to face her instead.

“Don’t look behind you,” she whispered, with one of her soft, white hands on each of Sieghart’s cheeks.

Sieghart’s heart leaped forward in his chest. Under normal circumstances, this probably would have made him nervous, but he was much more concerned about what lay behind him. He certainly could not celebrate.

“Aren’t you a pushover? I didn’t think there would be any harm in trying to look like I suspected that the real Sieghart was the fake, and I thought I might even draw you out. Still, to think you really fell for that.” With her eyes still

steadily fixed on whatever was behind Sieghart, the young girl shrugged slightly before muttering. “I’m just glad that you’ve saved me the effort of searching for you again.

“And so this farce is over now. It’s time to stop playing pretend.” Nicola hurled her words behind Sieghart with a fearless smile, almost sounding like she was taunting or ridiculing whatever was there.

But the voice behind Sieghart spoke up, insisting that it was the real Sieghart, “Nicola, you’re being trick—”

“No, you will not fool me with such cheap theatrics. If you really want to take this guy’s place, you must be some kind of masochist...” said Nicola, rudely cutting off the voice behind Sieghart. She then shrugged her shoulders in exasperation. At that moment, Sieghart realized that Nicola had determined the presence behind him to be the fake. “In any case, I will not allow you to play the part of this man any longer. It’s time to stop playing pretend. Don’t make me say it again.”

“SO UNFAIR. HOW NICE, I WANT IT FOR MYSELF. WON’T YOU GIVE ME A PLACE TO BELONG?” The voice behind Sieghart no longer sounded anything like him and changed its character, becoming slimy and more ominous. Cold sweat poured down Sieghart’s face as his body temperature plummeted and his teeth chattered. He could not stop shaking.

Sieghart gave Nicola an imploring look once again. As she looked back reproachfully, she stood up on tiptoes and roughly stroked Sieghart’s head while saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay. It’s over now, so calm down.”

Even with the girl he loved stroking his head, Sieghart could not help but notice that the presence behind him, the root cause of his terror, had not yet departed.

When Nicola saw that Sieghart’s fear hadn’t gone away yet, she let out a thoroughly irritated sigh and pulled him closer by the hand.

3

“It’s time to stop playing pretend. Don’t make me say it again.” When Nicola

put more force behind her words, the thing that had assumed the form of her older childhood friend lost its stability in the blink of an eye. Nicola chuckled quietly to herself. If a little taunting was all it took for it to lose control of its appearance, it must have been a real weakling. The thing, which had been entirely humanoid moments earlier, was reduced to nothing but a sticky cloud of black haze.

Satisfied that it would take little effort to exorcise in these conditions, Nicola let down her guard. Her childhood friend, standing before her, squeezed her hand tightly. She looked away from the haze and up at Sieghart's eyes, which looked like those of an abandoned puppy.

"Ugh." Nicola drew her lips into a thin line as his long, smooth, beautiful silver hair stopped her in her tracks. His expression of fear did not in the slightest detract from his flawless white skin or the features on his face, which were epitome of elegance. Nicola had never been able to resist the eyes of this unequaled male beauty—a ravishing young man who seemed to have monopolized the goddess of forms' favor—when they were filled with tears.

Even after Nicola reassured him that he was safe now, her childhood friend, two years her senior, was still white as a sheet and shaking. Nicola resisted the urge to click her tongue in annoyance, letting out a long sigh instead. She then reluctantly pulled the hand Sieghart had been squeezing toward herself. Sieghart followed it, and Nicola embraced him.

"Huh? N-Nicola?!"

Nicola had thought from the very start that if she pretended to doubt the authenticity of the real Sieghart, she would be able to draw the impostor out. She knew that the objective of apparitions like the doppelgänger was typically to take the place of the people they imitated. This was true in all places and at all times.

But Nicola considered that, from the perspective of someone haunted by their doppelgänger, acting as if she doubted the authenticity of the original, with no discussion or warning, may not have been the most thoughtful approach. Nicola felt a little ashamed of the extent to which she had avoided spending effort on searching for the impostor.

So as she hugged Sieghart, she told herself that this was merely a form of shock therapy infused with something of an apology. She was merely taking drastic measures and had no ulterior motives. That was the excuse she told herself as she wound her arms around the slender yet toned body of her childhood friend.

Nicola patted Sieghart on the back, as if comforting a small child. This was surprisingly effective. Nicola could not help but think that she had overdone it a bit. Still wrapped in her arms, Sieghart showed no further signs of terror but looked flustered, as even his ears turned bright red from embarrassment.

“Now, as for you. If you had just kept to fooling the people around you, you could have retained some of your charm. But if you really wish to take a real person’s place, I can’t overlook that, you know?” said Nicola, glaring at the black haze.

The haze seemed to recoil, slithering up the corridor as if to put some distance between Nicola and itself.

“You can either leave or stay and have your very existence snuffed out. Hey, puny. It’s your choice.” With her left arm still wound around Sieghart’s waist, Nicola raised the middle and index fingers of her right hand in a gesture that looked as if she were brandishing a knife. She then swept that hand in a straight line through the air. The haze, which had been in human form a short while ago, split in two near where its neck had been.

The severed head portion crumbled into dust and vanished. What was left of the haze quickly shrank, dwindling until only a ball the size of a fist remained.

While floating in midair, the black sphere trembled slightly, as if frightened of Nicola. Nicola furrowed her brow.

“You needn’t tremble so. You’re acting like I’m the villain here. Even though I said I wouldn’t exorcise you as long as you left, ah ha ha.” Even as it continued to tremble, Nicola pointed at the ball with its surprisingly shiny surface, drawing it toward her.



Once the thing, still trembling nervously, was within arm’s reach, Nicola

snatched it up without hesitation and flung it out of the nearest window. It flew into the distance, soaring farther than anyone would have expected just from her arm strength.

“Whoa, it really flew a long way, huh?” Nicola raised her right hand to eye level as if performing a salute while she watched the ball recede into the distance. She never saw it touch the ground. It simply continued flying toward the horizon, eventually fading away in the twilight.

After waiting for a moment to confirm that there was no sign of the ball returning, Nicola took her left hand, seized Sieghart by the back of his jacket, and mercilessly peeled him away from her.

“Right, it’s all over now.”

The black haze was formed by the negative emotions that people had unconsciously leaked out. Even though each person would only emit a tiny amount, the similar emotions brought about by a sufficiently large number of people with similar negative emotions would attract each other. They would eventually converge to form an apparition. Many a little makes a mickle.

In this case, a large number of people all had feelings of yearning and envy toward the same individual. Over time, these feelings fused and formed an entity with its own shape and agency. These were, at least, the broad strokes of what had happened.

Although there were countless students at the academy, they all directed their emotions toward the same person. This was rare because negative emotions would have never formed an entity in most cases. Such was the fearsome power of having such a ravishingly beautiful visage with popularity and social standing.

Still, entities like this soon expired once removed from the source of negative emotions and would no longer present a problem so long as it did not return to the academy. Nicola considered the matter settled.

“What was that...?”

“I doubt it will come back after I threatened it that much. Your impostor will not be making another appearance.”

Sieghart let out a sigh of relief. Nicola inspected his face and noticed that there were dark patches under his eyes. He must not have been able to sleep much recently.

Yet he took Nicola's hands into his own, which were slightly sinewy and quite manly. He gently cradled her hands.

"Nicola, thank you so much. I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you."

"No, no, no." Nicola bowed her head slightly but made no further comment. Sieghart, born possessing rare beauty, attracted all manner of beings, whether he wanted to or not. This included both humans and non-humans, which was no fault of his own.

It was not in Nicola's nature to abandon someone who looked as if they might die the moment she took her eyes off them. This was no fault of Sieghart's either. Nicola was not such a monster as to blame someone for being caught up in dangerous situations unintentionally.

The two friends walked side by side through the stone-paved corridor.

"By the way, Nicola. Just for tonight, do you think we could sleep together, like old times?"

Nicola could, however, blame Sieghart for saying something as outlandish as that. She glared at him with eyes that registered a temperature of absolute zero and said, "Are you stupid? Ah, right. Of course you are."

"I only mean that if you were to hold me, I would be able to sleep peacefully, without night terrors... Besides, you embraced me earlier, didn't you?"

"That was shock therapy. Besides, we are not at one of our family homes. Are you really thinking of inviting a woman into the boys' dormitory? You, the student council president?"

"Oof," grunted Sieghart. So his childhood friend, despite being so pampered, still had a certain amount of reason and common sense. But Sieghart was unusually persistent. "Just a nap then, in a vacant classroom... Is the answer still no?"

Nicola looked down at Sieghart's feet. He seemed slightly uncertain of his

footing as they walked. She remembered how Sieghart had staggered backward earlier from merely the tap of one of Nicola's fingers. It seemed that he was nearly at the end of his rope.

Nicola raised an eyebrow before sighing so heavily that all the air in her lungs was expelled. She then reluctantly grunted, "I will make an exception, just for today." After they entered a nearby classroom and Nicola sat on one of the benches, Sieghart unbelievably rested his head on Nicola's lap and wound his arms around her waist. Nicola, of course, had not granted Sieghart permission to go that far. As she moved to brush his hands away, Sieghart muttered something that made her stop.

"I'm pathetic, aren't I? The only thing I know how to do is quake in fear..."

Nicola paused for a moment. "When you feel scared, that is only your instinct for self-preservation at work. Fear tells you the best way to protect yourself from danger. I can assure you that it's better than being fearless. Please feel afraid when you need to. Sometimes you need to be afraid."



Everyone fears the unknown. This fear is not born of reason but instinct,

though it is still the appropriate reaction. Regardless of his own desires, Sieghart would always attract both people and non-human entities because of his natural beauty. Nicola truly felt sorry for him and believed that the apparition that thought of taking his place must have been a masochist.

Nicola's words prompted Sieghart to loosen his grip on her waist. "You're the only one who recognizes my weakness and forgives me for it, Nicola. That's what has really saved me all these years..."

The room was deathly silent. Only the low, gentle breathing of the man sleeping on Nicola's lap reverberated through the air. Sieghart's face, nestled against Nicola's stomach as he slept, looked slightly more youthful than usual. Nicola glanced out the window, noticing that the sun had set and everything outside was dark.

"Ah, jeez." Nicola realized she had missed her chance to set Sieghart's head down and slip away. For the umpteenth time that day, she sighed and held her head up with her elbows resting on the desk in front of her with an impudent expression.

Nicola's Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 1

Doppelgänger

In German, "doppel" has the meaning "to resemble" or "to copy". "Doppelgänger" means exactly what the name implies: "one who walks with exactly the same appearance as you."

You might have heard accounts from people saying you took actions you do not remember taking or appeared in places you are sure you did not visit. If you only hear such things from the mouths of others, you might still be okay. But if it should appear in front of you... There is no end to the unfortunate tales told about such meetings. Some say the doppelgänger is an omen of death. Some say that it will take over your place in life, or your very existence.

Chapter 2: Rushing to One’s Doom

1

Nicola von Weber had led a slightly more checkered life than most people. In concrete terms, she had experienced being reborn in a new world while retaining the memories of her past life.

She had first been born and raised in a small island country known as Japan, but she turned out to be one of those people who could truly *see*. It was definitely not the case that she had taken some peculiar drugs that made her hallucinate. She was simply more receptive than most people, so she could clearly perceive beings around her that were not humans. Because she was born that way, she did not consider her view of the world to be remarkable.

Eventually, perhaps by coincidence, Nicola met other people who could see the same things. She had discovered a talent within her and came to study the arts of opposing the non-human. At first she learned this for self-defense, but it had become her profession before she knew it. To her disbelief, she died on duty one day.

She was an exorcist who knew how to deal with ghosts, phantoms, urban legends, curses, and all the other things that transcended human understanding. One reason she had chosen this profession, which was difficult to talk to normal people about, was that she had a natural talent and affinity for it. Another reason she might cite was that the pay was good and made up for the inherent danger in this line of work. She ended up being far more prosperous than she could have ever dreamed of becoming as a regular office lady.

Though, when she considered that she had died quite young, she could not say that she had no regrets.

The last thing Nicola remembered from her past life was an almost suffocating stench and the smell of blood. Words written in dark-red blood covered the floor and walls of the room where she had died.

In general, using the blood of animals was the height of heresy. Not only would you incur the grudge of the animals you killed, but if you were particularly unlucky, you would also incur the wrath of the gods. It seemed that Nicola had been caught up in an act of heresy against her own will.

Having been called to that address as part of a job request, she found herself in a room that looked like it had been prepared for some kind of ritual. She remembered cringing at the sight of the bloody writing covering the room. At that moment, a blunt object struck the back of her head.

After a sickening thud, her field of vision was shaken. She felt her skull cave in. As her consciousness rapidly left her, the last thing she remembered seeing was a single word written on the wall. The word meant “offering.”

Nicola’s spiritual power had been quite strong, so she must have made quite a good offering. Thus, she died at the age of twenty-six and was granted a new life as Nicola von Weber.

After that experience, she regained consciousness and discovered that she had been reborn in another world with a European look as the daughter of a viscount of little importance. She could not do very much as an infant, so this period of life was the height of tedium. Her memories of this second childhood were still vague.

If she had to compare it to something, Nicola thought it was like skimming through a novel she had not particularly enjoyed for the second time. Although the world around her was substantially different, there was little difference in the process of childhood development. So it was nothing but a bore.

It was for that reason Nicola’s first enduring memory of this new life, as she lived it in a daze, was the day she met a certain heir to a marquess.

◇

One day, Nicola and her parents were invited to the birthday party of some count’s son. The party was for children in the aristocracy who were around the same age as the birthday boy, between five and eight years old. However, their parents busied themselves by working on their social connections.

The children were almost immediately shooed outside onto the wide garden terrace to play with each other. They seemed to find this setting every bit as exciting as a zoo because they were soon running around boisterously. However, Nicola could not summon the enthusiasm to run around with the other children as this was her second go-around in life.

Feeling emotionally drained, Nicola slipped away from the garden under the pretense of going to the toilet to lose herself in the count's manor so that she might kill some time.

Incidentally, the plumbing in this world was surprisingly advanced, and one could find proper toilets without much trouble. This was one of the reasons that helped Nicola conclude she was in *another world* in the style of Europe. But it was also the greatest relief she had felt since being reborn. In her world's history, European nobility had been famous for their poor toilet habits. Now, returning to the topic at hand...

After Nicola had slipped back inside the manor, she walked along the crimson carpets and turned her head back and forth as she worried about being seen. If a servant found her and guided her to the toilet, she would be returned to the garden straightaway. Her escape would have had no meaning.

Nicola noticed a presence because she had concentrated so hard while checking for adults. She saw a strange lump behind a curtain that moved ever so slightly. Looking closely, she could see a child's feet sticking out from beneath the curtain. If this happened to be something acutely wrong, ignoring them would cause her to lose sleep.

"Excuse me?"

"Ah!"

When Nicola pulled the curtain aside, she found a child quaking behind it. His amethyst eyes were filled with tears. Nicola was left speechless for two reasons.

For one thing, this child's appearance was perfect beyond anything Nicola had seen in this life or her previous one. His face was flawless and built in a way that was perfect from an aesthetic perspective as if sculpted to show the golden ratio. She could have almost mistaken the beautiful boy for an angel. She had even lost the ability to speak as time stood still.

But there was another reason for this. Nicola gasped at the sight of what was behind the angel. Putting it mildly, she saw hell and how this angel bore it on his back.

Even if she scoured all the memories of her past life, Nicola could not catalog all of the apparitions that the boy carried behind him. There were frightful obsessions given form, like departed souls, vengeful spirits, the ghosts of animals, sprites, and others. If Nicola had been given the choice, she would have elected to have never seen a catfight between dead and living spirits, but these were occurring by the dozen behind the boy.

“Whoa, this is unreal... Gross...” Nicola was so shocked that her vocabulary melted away. She knew it was not proper to utter such words. But without the mental leeway to consider what the boy’s social standing might be relative to her own, she muttered thoughtlessly to herself. The juxtaposition of the boy’s divine beauty and the unruly spirits behind him was beyond description. For a while, she simply stopped thinking.

“E-Excuse me?” said the boy, his voice trembling with fear.

After a while, Nicola regained her senses and took another look at the terrified but beautiful boy. He looked like he was a couple of sizes bigger than Nicola. Considering the other guests at the party, she guessed he was probably seven or eight years old.

Nicola opened her mouth to respond to the boy, but she was not sure what to say. She did not know how long she hesitated, but when she suddenly found her words, they sounded like a medical examination.

“Ah, now then, have you been experiencing tinnitus? A headache? Stiff shoulders, perhaps? No... I mean, have you felt your ears ring or your head hurt? Have your shoulders felt a little heavy? Anything like that...?”

Looking back on this, Nicola realized this was not something a five-year-old girl would ever say. When she reworded her question to be easier to understand for a child of seven or eight, the little boy opened his large eyes so wide that Nicola thought they might fall out. He then nodded timidly.

“I feel like people are watching me, or like I hear voices, even when no one’s around... Things also move or go away all by themselves...” The boy nodded so

furiously that Nicola thought his head might come off. As he did so, the tears in his eyes scattered through the air, reflecting the sunlight streaming through the windows.

“Ah, right. Makes sense...” responded Nicola stiffly, a far off look in her eyes.

Resentment, frustration, jealousy, envy, and feelings of inferiority came together. All of this brewed into a stew of love, hate, and admiration that was nothing but chaos. With all that on his back, it would have been impossible for the boy not to feel anything, no matter how dense or devoid of spiritual sensitivity he might be. His life had most likely been a succession of ailments visited upon him by spirits. Nicola could only feel sympathy for the boy.

Although the boy looked older than Nicola, because she had memories of her past life, to her he looked like nothing more than an unfortunate little boy.

Out of kindness, Nicola raised her index finger to her lips and whispered, “It will be our little secret.” Nicola then took a deep breath. “I ask you in all humility to take every one of our misfortunes, our sins, and our impurities, and exorcise them, purify them. Please hear my prayer.”

These words all had their own meaning and became spirits themselves that carried out their tasks when imbued with Nicola’s natural spiritual energy. However, the original objects of this prayer were spirits in Japanese mythology; it would probably not be enough in this world. This was Nicola’s first time using her abilities as an exorcist since her reincarnation.

Nicola squinted at the chaos, judging the chance of her prayer having worked to be about fifty-fifty, and could confirm that about a tenth of the spirits had been cast away. Most likely, this was due to Nicola’s innate ability to imbue words with spiritual energy. However, two words had their effect weakened significantly because she had straddled them.

Even though the effect was slight compared to what it had been when she was in her prime, in her past life, there was still definitely an effect. Ready to get down to business, Nicola faced the boy once more. She could not deny that the number of spirits was immense. Although each was weak enough to be blown away with little effort, their overall number was so great that it made her head hurt.

“Ah, come on, there’s no end to them! Exorcise, purify, exorcise, purify, exorcise, purify, exorcise, purify, exorcise, purify, exorcise, purify...” From time to time, Nicola had to tear spirits away from the boy with her bare hands one by one. She spent a little over ten minutes mindlessly repeating her incantation. By the time she had finally cleared all of the spirits behind the boy, Nicola’s mouth was parched.

Nicola patted the boy on the back, as if putting the final touches of her work. She turned around to head back to the garden with a sense of accomplishment, where she was pretty sure drinks were being served. But then she was suddenly interrupted by something pulling on her clothes. Nicola looked back to see the angel grasping her dress by the hem.

“Hey, what’s your name?!”

“Whoa, too bright!” As the boy leaned toward Nicola, his unfairly perfect face seemed to glow. “I have no name. Goodbye!” cried Nicola. She then pulled the hem of her dress from the boy’s grasp and ran away as fast as she could. She sensed that the boy would otherwise become a constant nuisance.

But she had nipped this in the bud... Or so she thought. However, the boy, who she would later learn was the son of Marquess Edelstein, soon determined Nicola’s full name using a description of her appearance. He arranged for a formal request to be issued under the name of the marquess, naming Nicola as his new playmate.

There was no way that she could refuse a request from the family of a marquess because she belonged to the family of a viscount who was so insignificant that a strong enough wind might carry him away. Though she never stopped crying about it, given the difference in their social standing, she became the boy’s little playmate and had remained involved with him ever since.

2

“Ah... I feel like I just had a dream about my childhood, but not a happy one...” Feeling drowsy due to low blood pressure and having just gotten out of bed, Nicola forced herself awake by splashing cold water on her face. She then noticed her hair sticking up wildly and tried to force it back down with a hairbrush.

Looking in the mirror, she saw a girl with smooth, glossy but ordinary hair and thoroughly average facial features. Under the right light, the color of her eyes almost appeared indigo. However, she could not claim that her eye color was rare in this world where people had a rich variety of eye colors that ranged from blue to amber.

Empirically, based on her experiences in her past life and this one, Nicola had always thought there was nothing better in life than being good-looking. However, this opinion underwent a 180-degree turn after meeting Sieghart.

“*Viva* the medium. Isn’t being average splendid?” Nicola then mocked herself internally after recalling that “viva” had long since died out in the slang of her past world. Unfortunately, no one in this world would make that quip for her.

But at any rate, she felt nothing but gratitude for her parents in this life for giving her a mediocre appearance. After doing the bare minimum in front of the mirror necessary to prepare for the day, Nicola left her room in the girls’ dormitory.

The Royal Academy of the Kingdom of Daustria was an educational institution, which Nicola had just joined. Boys and girls from the royal family, the aristocracy, and the most powerful merchant families attended it.

This school resembled a fusion between two types of schools that Nicola knew existed on the continent of Europe in the world of her past life: the finishing school, where the unmarried daughters of notable families received a cultural education, and the boarding school, where all students were given lodgings within school grounds. It was a place for children of the aristocratic

class, who wished to pursue cutting-edge fashion, and the children of the merchant class, who sought patrons to fund their enterprises, to mingle. Not only that, but it was also a place for those who were not already engaged to find a match.

The school's fundamental principle was as follows: "There is no social rank in this school. Instead, students will treat each other equally." Nicola heard about how friendships between students of different social standing flourished at the school so many times during her welcoming ceremony that she felt like covering her ears. In reality, one did seem to have a fair amount of freedom in one's choice of friends.

"Good morning, Nicola! Haven't seen you since yesterday." A voice called out to Nicola from behind as she headed to the main school building.

"Good morning, Karin," replied Nicola.

"Oh, I thought the daughters of noble houses always greeted others by saying, 'Good day to you!'" said the girl with a mischievous snicker. Nicola smiled wryly.

As a viscount, Nicola's father held a rank near the bottom of the hierarchy. She thought that, if anything, it would make less sense for her to go around shoving her upper-class status in everyone's face all the time.

"Maybe it depends on the person?"

"Does it? But I'm glad that I seem to have gotten close to a noblewoman who's easy to talk to!" said Karin Staden with an affable smile. The only thing Karin and Nicola had in common was that their seats at the welcoming ceremony had been close together. However, Karin seemed quite open-minded, as one might expect from the daughter of a merchant family, and this appealed to Nicola. Karin swooped over to Nicola with her luxuriant red hair and the hem of her uniform trailing behind her.

Her uniform was just the same as Nicola's, made of a deep navy blue fabric that was smooth to the touch. It took the shape of a dress with a high waist and a hemline that came halfway down her calf.

The boys they walked past in the school's main thoroughfare wore uniforms

with elongated jackets that had tails fluttering behind them. At first glance, this world resembled nineteenth-century Europe. But some clothing trends and the fact that the academy was coeducational did not conform to that period.

Though there were some notable elements that were from that time, others were too advanced for Nicola to grasp. Yet, as one might expect from a different reality, she was disturbed by these conflicting elements. Nicola still concluded that it was at least based on European culture.

For example, conversational back-channeling and forced smiles—mannerisms that Japanese people performed without thinking—were considered bad manners in this world. So, some caution was necessary.

“In any case, you seem quite cheerful today,” noted Nicola, seeing that Karin walked beside her so lightly that she looked like she might break into a skip at any moment.

“Ah, you did well to notice! Well, you see, I spied on both the Silver Lord and the Golden Lord this morning! Although I only managed to glimpse them from a distance, I think it was an auspicious start to the day!” said Karin, her eyes sparkling.

“Ah...” sighed Nicola, with an unusual expression that defied description.

“Wait a moment, what’s with that look?”

“Nothing. Please continue.” The word “silver” perhaps represented Nicola’s third-year childhood friend better than any other, so she could guess to whom this nickname referred. She was not, however, familiar with this “Golden Lord.”

“You know the Silver Lord, don’t you? We saw him at the ceremony. He is Lord Sieghart, Marquess of Edelstein, a ravishing beauty who excels in the literary and martial arts. And he happens to be our student council president. As for the Golden Lord, he is the one man not upstaged when standing next to the Silver Lord. After all, he is the first-born prince of this kingdom, His Highness Prince Alois. It is said that those two are the closest friends in the entire school!”

“H-Huh...” muttered Nicola. She reflected that the word “ravishing” also represented Sieghart in her mind, but hearing it from another person, she

realized how unusual it was to describe a man in those terms. But, thinking that presenting this objection to Karin in the middle of her impassioned speech would likely have the opposite effect, Nicola kept it to herself.

With her cheeks blushing a rosy red and a melancholy expression, Karin let out a plaintive sigh.

“If I had but one chance to have tea with them during my time at this school, I could brag about it for generations to come.”

“Could you really?”

“I really could!” Karin said as she seemed dead set on jumping on the bandwagon. She half-closed her gray-tinged green eyes before nodding confidently.

But, well, I must say... mused Nicola to herself. “I think I’d kind of like to see someone who isn’t outshined by Sieghart...”

“Yeah! Who wouldn’t?!”

It would only be a few hours later that very afternoon Nicola would realize that she had just encountered what was colloquially known as an “event flag.”

3

When the school day was over, students could spend their time freely on club activities, tea parties, and the like. Nicola strode through the corridors by herself with an unintentional expression of insecurity. Even when male pupils clutching their chess boards or female pupils walking in groups gave her a second glance, Nicola paid no attention to them and continued walking quickly.

Nicola’s destination was the student council room. She wanted nothing more than to get this chore over and done with.

Yesterday, after clinging to Nicola and sleeping soundly for about two hours, Sieghart had declared the following as the two parted ways, “As well as wanting to apologize for all the trouble today, there’s something I’d like to give you. So, I hope you can come to the student council room after school tomorrow. If you try to blow me off, then I’ll come by your dormitory to pick you up.” Sieghart

had added that final line to drive the point home with a needlessly dazzling look on his face.

As the two had known each other for a decade, Nicola should have expected Sieghart to read her mind, but she scowled all the same. She then tried to imagine the kind of trouble that might be sparked if this “Silver Lord,” who drew the attention of crowds wherever he went, came to visit a mere viscount’s daughter in the girl’s dormitory. Unfortunately, she had no alternative but to present herself voluntarily.

After stopping in front of a stately door made from mahogany, Nicola knocked four times. *Tap, tap, tap, tap.*

Nicola had learned from living in this world that knocking twice, as the Japanese did, was considered by people in the West to be reserved for the doors of toilet cubicles. In any other circumstance, it was considered rude.

“Excuse me. It is I, Nicola von Weber.” Not caring about how she had hit her knuckles against the door with unnecessary force or that her tone of voice was a bit stern, Nicola opened the door roughly before immediately regretting her actions. Even though she had expected to find Sieghart waiting inside, another figure was in the room.

Standing next to Sieghart was a young man with golden hair, which drastically contrasted Sieghart’s silver. It only took one look for Nicola to comprehend that this was probably the Golden Lord she had heard about that very morning. As she recalled what she had heard from Karin, she was forced to reflect on her rash behavior, which seemed to have triggered an event flag.

It was fairly rare to find someone who was not completely outshined by Sieghart. There was no mistaking who this was.

“Welcome, Nicola. This here is His Highness, Alois.”

Nicola summoned all her willpower to stop herself from wincing.

“Hey, nice to meet you, Fräulein Nicola. I am Alois von Kleist-Daustoria. This isn’t an official ceremony, so let’s dispense with the formalities!” Alois put on a friendly smile and extended his right hand. But whatever he might have said, Nicola was meeting the first-born prince of this kingdom. Unsure of whether or

not to take the prince at his word, Nicola looked up at Sieghart. Her childhood friend nodded approvingly.

Nicola decided that was good enough and, after taking Alois' hand, gave a nonchalant self-introduction.

"Hey Sieg, look. It's been so long since you called me 'Highness' that I got goosebumps."

"What a coincidence, I felt a shiver go up my spine too." As Alois cackled with laughter, Sieghart shrugged. It seemed the rumors were true. They really were close friends.

"Now then, Nicola, come join us. We've prepared an afternoon tea to enjoy in the garden."

Nicola found herself taken by the hand of Sieghart, causing her to stagger forward ungracefully.

"Hold—I was going to go straight home after taking whatever it was you wanted to..." Nicola had only come because Sieghart said he had something he wanted to give her and she had heard nothing about a prolonged social engagement. She did not imagine that the first-born prince of this kingdom would wish to share a table with a middling young girl whom he had never met before, especially given his high social standing. But after a glance at Alois, she saw him looking back at her with a smile so breezy it was actually irritating as if he meant to contradict her assumptions.

"Now, now, don't be like that! I've wanted a chance to talk to you for ages. After all, Fräulein Nicola, you are the love of Sieg's life!" After being issued this title, which seemed sure to mislead people and cause trouble, Nicola's eyes shot open in shock. With Alois pushing her from behind and Sieghart in front pulling her forward by her hand, Nicola finally winced openly.

4

Though Sieghart, her childhood friend, would be one thing, Nicola knew she could not freely reject the first-born prince. In the blink of an eye, she was escorted to the balcony outside the student council room and forced to sit on

one of the antique chairs around a cabriole-leg table with a circular top.

Despite Nicola not knowing what Alois found so funny, he laughed and said, “Ah ha ha! I’m telling you, you can’t completely hide how you feel, Fräulein Nicola!” All Nicola could do in the face of this was sit in glum silence. She was surprised by just how casual this prince had turned out to be.

Nicola could not complain about the adorable sweets displayed on a three-tiered cake stand or the high-end tea. These were certainly delicious, but the gorgeous men seated in front of her had soured her stomach. Sieghart, who had swept his long, translucent silver hair to one side and loosely tied it together, remained a perfect, flawless vision of structural beauty. His long silver eyelashes, which looked like they belonged on feathers, framed the amethyst gems of his eyes and cast shadows over them. This contributed a passionate burst of color to his already alluring irises.

On the other hand, Alois had slightly scruffy blond hair with eyes the color of emeralds. Though his face was on the boyish side, his features were altogether elegant. While he carried himself with the sweet disposition of a fairy tale prince, his face was still far more neatly arranged than the average person, even though he was still inferior to Sieghart.

Right then, Nicola was comparing Alois to an incomparable beauty, so he could not help but look slightly less gorgeous. But Alois would surely find himself easily classed as a beautiful man.

One was graceful and the other was charming. As their beauty belonged to different categories, at this point, it was all down to personal preference. The two stood in stark contrast, so much so that Nicola understood why people needed to juxtapose their gold and silver hair.

With his eyes seeming to ooze honey, Sieghart gazed at Nicola as she sipped her tea. She was not sure what he found so interesting, but she had long since grown accustomed to this behavior and was determined to ignore it.

The problem was the gaze that Alois had placed on her. He looked at her with eyes filled with curiosity, like a cat that had just found a new toy.

As the rays of the afternoon sun bounced off their needlessly shiny gold and silver hair, it became too much for Nicola to bear as she frowned when they

stared at her.

Nicola paused before saying, “Firstly, please allow me to correct the assumption implicit in the dishonorable way I was described earlier. Though it is true that I served as Sieghart’s childhood friend, it is not as if we are engaged or anything. I hope you can refrain from saying anything else susceptible to misinterpretation.”

She saw Sieghart look heartbroken out of the corner of her eye and could not help but let out a whimper and mutter to herself, “Oof... He’s just too pretty...” This was before she realized that she could not afford to pay him any mind and dismissed him entirely. Sieghart knew that Nicola had a weakness for that expression, so he had almost certainly made it on purpose.

Besides, the words that Sieghart muttered to himself as he pouted were not cute in the slightest.

“We’ll get engaged eventually, so I don’t see the problem,” he said. Nicola could not understand a word of what he was trying to say. In the first place, a marriage between a marquess and the daughter of a viscount was impossible.

Nicola looked at Sieghart icily.

“Hmm, hmm, oh, is that right? Even if it is one-sided, that doesn’t change the fact that, as far as Sieg is concerned, you are the love of his life, does it?” remarked Alois.

“As I keep saying—”

“Ah, that’s right. Nicola, getting back to the main reason I called you here today...” Sieghart cut Nicola off this time.

Realizing that no one here would listen to her, Nicola felt the veins in her temples begin to throb. She coughed and managed to calm herself down. If she had been alone with Sieghart, she probably would not have been able to do this, but the first-born prince was there as well. Instead of pressing the matter further, she simply furrowed her brow more deeply.

“There you go. This is what I wanted to give you. Consider it my thanks for your constant help and a gift to celebrate your admission to this school. Go on, open it.”

Sieghart handed Nicola a carefully wrapped, rectangular box. Doing as she was told, Nicola tore away the wrapping paper and lifted the lid of the box to find a simple fountain pen inside. She noticed that it had been produced by a well-known craftsperson when she picked up the pen and held it aloft. The tasteful contrast between the pen's deep azure and silver trim was beautiful enough to enchant anyone. It certainly matched Nicola's tastes well.

But despite all that, the first thing that struck Nicola was the overwhelming impression: *This looks expensive.*

"I'm afraid I have nothing to offer you in return for such an expensive item, so I can't accept this," said Nicola. But as she attempted to return the pen, Sieghart wrapped his hands around hers.

"It needn't be expensive. Anything you make by hand is valuable to me. So why not give me your usual gift?" said Sieghart, slyly tilting his head to one side. Nicola growled in annoyance. "Ah, you see, the one you gave me last time has long since lost its fragrance."

There was a rustling sound as Sieghart fished for something around his neck before revealing a tiny scented sachet sewn from gauze. This sachet, which Sieghart had taken to wearing around his neck, was Nicola's handiwork. She had utilized knowledge from her past life in making it, and it had a limited ability to ward off spirits.

However, a trained eye could instantly spot that this sachet, which Nicola had sent Sieghart by mail only two months earlier, had already lost its potency. Nicola supposed if that was the case, she would have to give him a new one anyway.

Wearing a sour expression on her face, Nicola begrudgingly took a new sachet out of her pocket. The contents of this new sachet was dried wisteria, mixed with just a trace amount of sandalwood. Wisteria, known as *fuji* in Japan, was a flower that repelled spirits and other evils. However, Nicola used scraps of cloth to make them because the sachet itself was intended to be disposed of eventually. The wisteria grew naturally outside, so Nicola just harvested it. The material cost of this gift was practically zero.

Even so, Sieghart looked delighted and his face seemed to glow as he took the

sachet and treated it as if it were precious. Nicola's lips twisted into a jagged grimace.

"Oh, are these really so special?" asked Alois.

"I'm just happy to receive something that Nicola made herself. Though they are incredibly effective as well," replied Sieghart.

"The sachet itself is not very potent. It really does little more than comfort the wearer," said Nicola dismissively.

"No, no, it really is effective... The moment the last one's fragrance went away, *that thing* appeared." The *thing* that Sieghart grumbled about in a low voice was most likely the doppelgänger that Nicola had cast out yesterday. Sieghart must have been recalling the encounter because his jewel of a face clouded over slightly.

Nicola was silent for a moment, before saying, "I see." Nicola had not been speaking out of modesty, as her sachets really provided nothing more than comfort. Still, this was probably preferable instead of being told that they had no effect. To hide her bashfulness, she spoke with an excessively blunt tone.

Suddenly feeling Alois' gaze upon her, Nicola saw how the prince slowly rested his elbows on the round tabletop and clasped his hands together. He then put his chin on top of them. His emerald eyes became fixed on Nicola.

"So, Sieg's mysterious little helper. Just what are these mysterious phenomena that Sieg seems to get caught up in now and then?"

Nicola's hand froze just as she reached out to take a macaron. She glared at Sieghart reproachfully as if to say, *You told him?* But Sieghart shook his head in denial.

"No, Sieg hasn't said anything. But I'm inquisitive by nature. The more someone tries to hide something, the more I want to know about it." Alois grinned broadly, like a cat cornering a mouse.

In response, Nicola fixed the prince with a steady grin of her own. She plastered a smile evenly across her face like a mask, imbuing it with a warning for the prince not to take one step further.

“Your Highness. I can assure you that there exists a world that you are better off not knowing about,” said Nicola before deciding that the conversation was over and standing up from her chair.

Nicola could not stand fearless fellows like this one. She knew that she was being impolite, but Alois was the one who had said to dispense with formalities. Nicola glanced at Sieghart, who smiled wryly as if to say there was nothing else for it. He surely understood that Alois had just stepped on a land mine as far as Nicola was concerned.

Expecting Sieghart to somehow smooth things over, Nicola bowed to them. She then left Alois with one last perfunctory warning before taking her leave.

“Forgetting anything you have doubts about, or that you are merely curious about, is for your own good. With that, I bid you good day.”

5

Alois’s first impression of Nicola was that she was an extremely cautious girl that put the image of a black cat in his mind. Although her diminutive stature made her look somewhat adorable, like a small animal, she was by no means a breathtaking beauty. Alois knew that his own appearance was more elegant than most people, but he was also aware that even he could not compete with Sieghart’s fair and beautiful face. Yet Sieghart said that he was infatuated with this young lady.

In all honesty, Alois had expected a beauty worthy of his best friend. He had almost felt let down by the structure of her face from the high expectations he had set. Certainly, Alois did feel some affinity towards her for the fact that she could hold a proper conversation with the likes of Sieghart and himself without blushing and shuffling her feet. Furthermore, he found her expression that she had been unable to hide completely, which seemed to say, “When can I leave?” particularly amusing.

Still, that alone was not enough to maintain Alois’s interest. What really intrigued him was what she had kept hidden inside. He craved her knowledge of ghosts, phantoms, and supernatural phenomena—what one might call the

spiritual realm.

When Alois heard people whisper rumors of such things from time to time, he thought, *How interesting, if only it were true*. He had never quite been able to believe them. But as his friendship with Sieghart deepened, his way of thinking started to change.

At any rate, strange phenomena that defied common sense happened regularly around his best friend. Under such circumstances, Sieghart had always simply sent a letter to his childhood friend. He would never discuss these happenings with Alois, as they were quite boring to him.

Even over the last two weeks, though he had hid it quite well, Alois could tell that Sieghart had been feeling terrible based on the color of his face alone. Only once had Alois spotted the two Siegharts existing at the same time, from a distance, which had allowed him to deduce that something strange was going on. But, like always, his friend had not seen fit to confide in him.

While looking more exhausted with each passing day, Sieghart had repeatedly muttered, “Come the new school year, Nicola will be here...” Alois found himself unable to do anything but pretend not to notice.

And so Alois’ thoughts returned to Sieghart’s childhood friend, the viscount’s daughter, in whom his best friend put so much faith whenever he was caught up in one of these strange situations. After seeing today how much Sieghart’s complexion had recovered, Alois thought that she probably really had resolved the terror that had been plaguing Sieghart on the day of her welcoming ceremony.

Anyone would surely believe it was more difficult not to find such a girl interesting. Moreover, Alois simply did not relish the thought of being left out. Those feelings had spurred Alois to boldly intrude on Nicola’s territory, but he had received a definitive rejection from her. This was nothing like the noncommittal answers he was more used to hearing. After watching Nicola walk away, Alois shrugged.

“My, my. Somehow I seem to have incurred her displeasure. Did I say something wrong?”

Sieghart chuckled with his eyebrows downturned as if to say that he knew

Nicola was surprisingly severe about such things. But he then fixed Alois with a reproachful gaze.

“But you are also at fault. Just as Nicola says, there are some things you are better off not knowing about. In fact, I especially don’t want you to know anything, Alois.”

Alois shrugged again before downing his now completely cold cup of tea. It probably was genuine concern that had kept Sieghart from confiding in him. He was not so childish or foolish as to fail to understand that. Still, he could not help but feel dissatisfied.

6

A few days had passed since that fateful tea party. Still not rid of his feelings of dissatisfaction, Alois gazed vacantly out of the window of an empty classroom, lost in thought. He could not help feeling bothered after all. Alois knew that he was more inquisitive than others from a young age.

Still, it was rare for someone of his lofty status—the first-born prince of this kingdom—to find the time to lose himself in his thoughts. Alois actually found himself enjoying this opportunity to brood a little.

His childhood friend, a young man who also served as his bodyguard and valet and who accompanied him most of the time, was not at school today. Alois had been told that his manservant had sustained an injury during his summer training and had not yet recovered by the start of the new school term.

Alois certainly did not dislike his friend, but Sieghart tended to be overly passionate since he held Alois in a position of supremacy. And so Alois sometimes winced at the thought of being attended by him around the clock. He intended to make the most of the time he had to himself until his bodyguard returned to his side.

Moreover, Alois had enough consideration to allow Sieghart to spend some time one-on-one with his childhood friend. In a rare occurrence, Alois had not gone to see his best friend after school today.

Alois wondered what precisely the inexplicable phenomena surrounding

Sieghart were, how Nicola resolved them, and how he could get one of them to tell him what had happened. This was an ideal theme for Alois to mull over as he passed his spare time.

Gazing outside with his elbows resting on the windowsill, Alois happened to look down at the courtyard.

“Ah...” he quietly gasped to himself, without intending to. Ever since he could remember, Alois had had the repeated experience of noticing something strange in his field of vision and squinting to better see it. It always appeared to him dimly, in a blur. It was indistinct, as if a veil had been placed over it.

Failing to understand this phenomenon was unbearable to someone as inquisitive as Alois, but no matter how hard he squinted, it never came into focus. Even its outline did not seem clearly bounded. It remained obscure.

Since he could not discern what it was, he always forgot about these encounters soon after they happened. In this instance, it occupied just one point in his field of vision. It formed a blur underneath one of the trees in the courtyard, like ink dropped into water. As always, no matter how much Alois concentrated, it would not come into focus—or so he thought at first.

“Huh... Oh?” The *thing*, which had remained indistinct for so many years until this day, came into focus for the first time. Its once obscure outline gradually became distinct. Alois’ heart leaped forward in his chest and he felt cold sweat start to run down his back.

“Forgetting anything you have doubts about, or that you are merely curious about, is for your own good.” The words Alois had heard a few days earlier went through his mind.

Alois had to look away, before *it* noticed him. If it knew he had seen it, it would all be over for him. His instinct almost screamed the optimal course of action at him, but he could not look away for some reason.

Quite the contrary, it felt as if his legs had sprouted roots that fixed him firmly to the floor or as if his brain and body were no longer connected. He could not move a muscle in his body, not even his limbs. Although he felt as if the chill running through his veins might cause him to shiver at any moment, his whole body seemed to have turned to stone, down to the very tips of his fingers.

An alarm bell clamored inside his head. But no matter how clearly he perceived the danger, he no longer had an ounce of freedom with which to move his own body.

Taking its time, the thing swayed eerily, its undulations becoming more violent little by little. Then, without warning, it stopped entirely. Now that it was stationary, Alois could see its outline clear as day.

“Ah...” Alois gasped again. Though it had merely ceased moving, Alois once again knew in his gut that this was very bad. In addition to his cold sweat, he felt every hair on his body stand. As he sat in stunned silence, he unknowingly foresaw his own death.

It was at that moment that the young lady Alois had met only a few days earlier appeared out of nowhere. It certainly seemed correct to say that she “appeared” rather than “arrived.” Before Alois knew what was happening, she casually pushed her way into his line of sight.

“Your Highness, you must not look. It will do you harm.” Her voice, lacking intonation, tumbled gently into Alois’ ear. Nicola’s outstretched hand covered his eyes entirely, so all Alois saw was darkness.

He could faintly feel Nicola’s body heat through her hand, although it was still abnormally cold. Regardless, he still felt the slight warmth course through his body. As it did so, sensation began to return to his limbs, little by little.

Finally, he felt the stiffness in his shoulders melt away. With one hand still covering Alois’ eyes, Nicola used her other hand to grab him by the wrist before forcing him to face away from the window. Although he could not move a muscle moments earlier, his body followed Nicola’s lead.

“That is not something you should be looking at,” said Nicola before removing her hand from in front of Alois’ eyes. His sight revealed a classroom with no one in it besides the two of them. He felt an awkward rush of air go down his throat and finally realized that he had stopped breathing during the encounter. Still holding Alois by the wrist, Nicola started walking again, dragging Alois behind her without mercy or hesitation. She must have decided her destination beforehand because there was no hint of delay in her footsteps.

“Hey, what was that just now? Fräulein Nicola? Where are we going? Hey.

Hey, Fräulein Nicola!” Alois called out to Nicola repeatedly, but it was almost as if she could not hear him at all. Not only did she not answer him, she did not even turn back once as she pushed her way through the hallway.

Alois belatedly began to worry that this might not even be the viscount’s daughter he had met so recently. As he tried to shake her hand off, it would not budge. He could only follow her until they went to a garden behind the school.

Sieghart and Alois, who tended to draw attention wherever they went, had found this little-known garden and often took refuge there. But the moment Alois stepped into the familiar garden, he looked quite foolish as he stood with his mouth hanging open.

“Uh, what? Fräulein... Nicola...?”

Nicola sat under the shade of a tree, allowing Sieghart to use her lap as a cushion as he lay sprawled on the lawn. She slowly raised her head to look up at Alois with eyes that looked half dead.

“Good day to you. That was something of a close call... I told you to forget about such things.” Unlike when they had met a few days ago, Nicola no longer attempted to hide her displeasure, even with Alois standing in front of her. For some reason, she remained seated as she looked up at Alois.

But if Nicola is there, thought Alois, *then who on earth is holding my wrist right now?* Alois gingerly turned to look to one side but found that the one standing beside him was another Nicola, though her face was expressionless.

“There are... two Fräulein Nicolas...?”

But once the Nicola who had Sieghart resting his head on her snapped her fingers, the Nicola who had escorted Alois here turned into a piece of paper shaped like a person. The paper figure followed gravity as it fluttered down onto the grass.

Alois was dumbfounded, unable to believe what had just occurred before his very eyes. He picked up the person-shaped piece of paper and found drawings resembling eyes and a mouth on it, sketched in faded dark-red ink.

Still unable to believe his eyes after facing this phenomenon, Alois looked back and forth between Nicola and the paper doll, over and over.

Nicola ignored Alois completely and, after slapping the reclining Sieghart on his forehead, said, “Sieghart, the task is complete. Please move aside. Come on, hurry up.”

After Sieghart reluctantly sat up, Nicola asked him which was the shortest route to the courtyard. She then walked away, clearly intent on leaving Alois behind to stand there, stock still.

But Alois suddenly became flustered and grabbed Nicola’s hand. “I’d like you to wait a moment. Could I trouble you for an explanation?” With his tone, he made it clear that he had no intention of letting go until he got one. He exerted some strength in his hand when holding Nicola by the wrist. Her wrist, which was so slender, looked like a twig that might snap if he applied too much force to it.

After a silent battle of wills between the two, Nicola seemed to resign herself to the fact that Alois would not give up so easily.

Nicola sighed, then said, “All right then. Tomorrow, after school.”

“Understood. Tomorrow, then. I’ll be waiting.” When Alois released Nicola’s wrist, she finally turned away from the two boys and walked away.

Sieghart called out to Nicola one more time before she was out of sight, “Nicola, everything’s all right, isn’t it?”

“Yes. No need to worry.”

“I see. Well, see you later. Take care.”

Still facing away from Sieghart, Nicola waved goodbye as she walked away. Alois thought to himself that she was probably going to confront that terrible *thing*.

Alois could not help but want to know more about what he could not understand. If something seemed interesting, he wanted to know all about it. That was Alois’s driving principle.

But if someone asked him if he wanted to see *that thing* again, his answer would surely be “no.”

Alois was silent for a moment before saying, “Sieg, are you sure you want to

let her go by herself?”

“Even if I went, I’m afraid there’s nothing I could do.” As Sieghart was gifted with both intelligence and beauty and praised as a master of both the pen and the sword, everyone around him spread rumors that there was nothing he could not do. But under these circumstances, Sieghart could only look down with melancholy eyes and speak in self-deprecating terms. “This is Nicola’s territory. If she says she’s fine, there’s nothing I can do but believe in her and wait for her return. Although I can’t say that I like it.”

“Is that right...?” Alois was no longer gripped by terror, by that oppressive sensation that his life was forfeit. But with the sweat drenching his shirt and feeling the cold wind, he had goosebumps for a totally different reason.

No matter how long he waited, the uncomfortable feeling of his uniform clinging to his skin would not go away.

7

After school, Nicola and Alois stared each other down. This was the day after she had disposed of the disagreeable entity that lurked in the courtyard. For some reason, Sieghart had picked Nicola up and set her down on his knee.

Throughout all the day's classes, Nicola had wondered whether she could escape her fate, but this was how she had ended up. As she was walking through an empty hallway, she thought about feigning sickness as an excuse when suddenly a pair of arms were thrust under her from behind. The owner of those arms then picked her up and carried her away, almost as if she were a cat. Unable to resist, she was taken to her present location.

At one point, Nicola tried letting her body go limp to make it seem she had given up and attempted to surprise her captor with a sudden burst of strength. Such was a last-ditch effort to flee from Sieghart's knee. But she could not have removed the arms wrapped around her waist, even if she had a lever.

"Hmph, hmph," Nicola groaned as she tried once more to wriggle herself free. But behind her, Sieghart did not move a muscle.

"Ah ha ha, you're so cute when you squirm, Nicola," said Sieghart.

"*Tch*... Very well. I won't run away, so please put me down."

"One hundred and twenty-seven times," whispered Sieghart in a voice so pleasant that Nicola thought it was wasted on him.

"Eh?" Failing to understand the significance of this number, Nicola turned back to look at Sieghart but soon regretted it. At close range, his excessively well-ordered face was too much for her to bear and so Nicola whimpered, "Ugh... He really is good-looking, though."

Though Sieghart smiled gracefully, there was a force behind it, almost if something awful lurked beneath the surface.

"One hundred and twenty-seven. That's the number of times you said, 'I won't run away' and then proceeded to run away, Nicola."

Nicola wondered, *Why would he go to the trouble of keeping count?* Utterly

flabbergasted, she looked up at the sky. While bothered by Sieghart's incredible memory, which was wasted on her, Nicola was strangely impressed with just how many times she had escaped him. She could hardly believe he was talking about her.

"Now then, I take it your lover's quarrel is finished? Hey, I'd really like to know what happened yesterday," said Alois, glancing out at the courtyard through a window. That was before he turned to look at Nicola, who remained suspended on Sieghart's knee.

Sieghart had brought Nicola to the same classroom Alois had been in when he'd spotted the apparition yesterday. No one else preferred to hang around once classes had finished, so there was a lot of space in the room with only the three of them inside.

"I must ask you, please do not take too keen an interest in such things. You will attract them more easily if you do."

"Huh, really?"

"Would you please try not to look so excited when I give you a warning?" Nicola glared coldly at Alois, who showed no sign of relaxing his curious demeanor. "I came to get you this time, but I am not so curious or kind as to come and save someone who sticks his nose into trouble just for fun." Roughly translated, what Nicola meant was, "There won't be a next time."

Nicola had no time for fools who had no sense of fear. She felt no obligation to save people who rushed into danger like moths to a flame.

Sieghart's hands must have been free because he started playing with Nicola's hair from behind. When Nicola glared back at him in irritation, he simply said, "Oh, don't mind me. Continue." Yet he did not look concerned in the slightest.

She begrudgingly put Sieghart out of her mind and shifted her sight back to Alois. His expression showed he was still dead set on getting an explanation, which made her frown.

"I told you, did I not? There exists a world you are better off not knowing about. The more you know about it, the more its inhabitants will approach you. If you think you can go through life without understanding it or having any

knowledge about it, that would be for the best. You don't want to die under suspicious circumstances, do you?" Simply put, Nicola told Alois to tread carefully if he valued his life.

Circumstances differed greatly between Sieghart and Alois. Sieghart, with his peerless beauty, never had any chance of living a life free of such perils. If Nicola had not bestowed an appropriate amount of knowledge upon him, he would have passed on to the other side in no time at all.

But nothing would be preferable to living with no knowledge about the inhabitants of that world. Nicola wished Alois would simply forget about the encounter. She stared back at Alois, her eyes telling him that she had no intention of backing down.

After a moment, Alois reluctantly returned Nicola's gaze with a shrug. "All right. To be fair, I did break out in a cold sweat yesterday. In that case, could you at least tell me what I should do if I come across one of those things again?"

"No, no. One near miss does not mean that you will come across them again so easily. For now, I will give you a talisman. If you carry that, you should not experience any further problems."

Those who had made contact with that world even once had a particular air about them. The non-human did not tend to overlook it. If Alois avoided interacting with any apparitions for a while, the echo of that encounter would eventually fade away.

However, Alois shook his head and said, "This isn't the first time I've seen it."

Nicola took a moment to register this. "Eh?"

"I've spotted something like that from time to time up 'til now. Though each time I have seen it, I forget about it soon after."

Nicola was silent for another moment. "Up 'til now? This really wasn't the first time?"

"No, it wasn't. It happens to me once every year or two. Though this was the first time I saw it so clearly. And with my personality, I couldn't help but pay attention to something so mysterious."

Nicola asked Alois to describe his experiences in more detail. He told her he had seen something that did not appear human more than once before. But the shape appeared indistinct, almost as if it were behind a veil. Yesterday, it suddenly snapped into focus for the very first time.

“You’re kidding,” groaned Nicola after a moment. Realizing this was a completely different story, she cradled her head in dismay. A person with a bit of bad luck could deem such encounters a close call. But each encounter was inevitable for someone haunted by that world’s inhabitants throughout his life. Those outside the realm of humanity would not overlook this history.

Nicola almost blurted out, “You’re like two pesky peas in a pod, aren’t ya?” With what little reason she had left, she suppressed this impulse, even if that really was the case. It was not only humans who preferred those who were beautiful or elegant. Although not quite as gorgeous, Alois could still stand beside Sieghart. There was no way that he could not enchant the non-human.

Alois could have simply been lucky until now, but he was always doomed to arrive at the same wavelength as the apparitions. Nicola grimaced and groaned again.

“Oh, come on!” In all places and times in history, ill feelings gathered around those who had power, followed by apparitions. If Nicola could have one wish granted, it would be to not get involved with the firstborn prince of the kingdom.

However, the stronger one’s interest was in the supernatural, the more the distance between one’s own world and the next would shrink. Nicola knew that if she became part of the reason for Alois crossing that boundary, she could not remain so detached.

Nicola paused for a moment before saying, “I retract my previous statement. I shall tell you the bare minimum you need to know.”

“Thanks! Ah ha ha, there’s no need to scowl so. Don’t worry. I’ll obey whatever warnings you give me, Miss Nicola. I vow not to do anything rash. You have my word.”

Unlike Nicola, who looked like someone had forced her to thoroughly chew something especially sour before swallowing it, Alois beamed with happiness as

he made this declaration.

When Sieghart playfully blew into Nicola's ear to distract her, she silently stepped on his foot.

8

"First of all, can you tell me what it was that I saw yesterday?" asked Alois.

Nicola could not immediately respond when asked exactly what the thing was. Remaining somewhat defiant, Nicola folded her arms imperiously as she sat on Sieghart's knee. He showed no sign of getting tired of annoying Nicola as he began to put her hair in braids.

"Hmmm... If I had to describe it, I might say that it is 'something nameless,'" ventured Nicola.

"You don't even have a name for it?" Alois said and frowned almost imperceptibly. At this stage, it may have sounded like Nicola was just trying to sidestep the question, but there was really no other way of putting it.

"Quite right. It is one of the endless, nameless apparitions one might find anywhere. Amongst these, some will snuff you out the moment you lay eyes on them while others will simply float around. The one in the courtyard yesterday was a somewhat disagreeable example, but there is still no definitive name for it. In fact, Your Highness, let me say this."

Nicola paused for a beat and leaned closer to Alois, staring him squarely in the eye. She was about to tell him something she had reminded Sieghart of repeatedly ever since they were little.

"You must be very careful about giving such things a name."

Alois was silent for a moment. "But why?" After blinking once in surprise, Alois's boyish face looked more childlike than ever.

"Names are the shortest spells in the world. A name represents the true nature of a thing. The very act of granting something a name can give a hazy apparition a more clearly defined shape. So you must not go around naming things without a good reason."

On the flip side, the act of granting a name could bind an apparition's existence to this plane and make them easier to command. But it was unrealistic to expect a layperson to pull this off, so there was no need to tell Alois that.

Though Alois still did not look entirely satisfied, he reluctantly nodded. "Hmm, well, I can see what you're saying. Basically, it's better for some things we don't know to remain unknown."

"That is what I am saying." Irritated by Sieghart's chin resting on top of her head, Nicola shook her head furiously to get rid of him. When she did so, several braids of black hair fell back down. Sieghart must have gone to the trouble of removing the hairpin he had used for his hair to style hers in an updo. Nicola looked back at Sieghart suspiciously. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hm? I was putting your hair in a braided chignon, Nicola. You've just been talking to Alois this entire time, leaving me all by myself. I was bored," replied Sieghart.

"Sorry, Sieg. But I'd still like to ask a few more things. Please lend me Miss Nicola for a little while longer," said Alois.

Once again, something insulting nearly slipped past Nicola's lips. She wanted to say something to the effect of, "What are you talking about, you wretched prince?" But she once again swallowed these words just before they emerged. Of course, it was Nicola that Alois should be apologizing to and asking for more of her time, not Sieghart.

"I guess it can't be helped," said Sieghart, taking it upon himself to grant permission. Nicola glared at Sieghart and Alois out of the corner of her eye.

"Very well, let us proceed at once," said Nicola, urging Alois.

"Right. Ah, you said that the more I learn about this world, the closer its inhabitants will be, didn't you? Does that mean that I'll find them easier to see from now on?"

"That is a possibility," admitted Nicola.

Whenever one turns the knob on a radio to adjust the frequency, even randomly, one might arrive at frequencies close to those of existing stations.

They may hear them transmitted with a mixture of noise, but one would hardly ever land on an exact broadcast frequency. However, this time, Alois had landed on an apparition's frequency perfectly.

Such entities would not overlook such an occurrence as they mainly craved the beautiful and pure. There was every possibility of the non-human continuing to harass Alois in the future.

"For that reason, I will tell you the bare minimum necessary to prepare you. Sieghart, for starters, please tell him the five fundamental articles of conduct."

"You want me to tell him?" said Sieghart. Nicola could feel him tilt his head in confusion above her own. His needlessly smooth and glossy silver locks tickled her cheeks, so she brushed them aside with her hand.

If you're so bored, you can take part in our conversation, thought Nicola.

"Article One: Never give your name to non-human beings. Do I have that right?"

"Indeed. It is especially taboo to give your name when it is asked of you. Please be sure to never give your real name in such situations."

Having your name discovered was just as dangerous as giving an apparition a name. A name could bind a being and make it easier to control. The concept was widely known in Japan, partly thanks to fiction. But the people of this world were unfortunately not so familiar with it.

"Article Two: Do not put anything from the other side in your mouth... Right?"

"Correct. If you eat something that is not of this world, you will find yourself unable to return home." By breaking this taboo, those who could otherwise be easily saved forfeited their lives. This rule was present in *Yomotsu Hegui* from Japanese mythology, Persephone's descent into Hades from Greek stories, and many other legends around the world. In these stories, eating the food of another world made one an inhabitant of it too. That was the point of no return.

As a brief aside, Nicola had been reluctant to eat anything when she was reborn in the world that she currently inhabited for this very reason. Such behavior had worried her parents a great deal.

“Article Three: If you make a promise, make sure that you keep it,” resumed Sieghart.

“While you would ideally avoid making any promises in the first place, you must follow through with them if you make one, no matter how small.”

A promise amounted to a contract. Those who dwelt outside the human realm were particularly strict with breaches of contract.

“Article Four: If you make a wish, decide for yourself what price you will pay. Is that right?”

“Yes, you are right. Whether you present your hair or blood as an offering, spirits are always willing to offer something in return. But you must never allow them to name their price. Even though it is best not to ask anything of them in the first place, you might do so as a last resort. Please remember this rule should you ever find yourself in such a bind.”

Be they fairies or devils, those who sought compensation for their help were seldom upstanding citizens. Even if one had no choice but to ask for their help, allowing them to set the price was a sure path to hell.

“The last one is to never anger the gods, I think,” said Sieghart.

“Yes. This rule is the most important of all. There is nothing more fearsome than the power of the gods. If you ever disrespect the gods, I will be the first to cut ties with you.”

“Eh? By gods, do you mean the ones people worship at temples?” Alois blinked a few times. The shocked expression on his face asked “Do gods really exist?”

Nicola nodded solemnly. “They certainly exist. Not only have people given them names but there are myths describing their personalities. Sculptures and paintings have also established a shared understanding of their physical appearances. The act of thinking shapes an image, or what we call imagination.”

The official religion of the Kingdom of Daustria was polytheistic, much like the religions seen in the Japanese *Kojiki* myths, Greek mythology, Nordic mythology, and Egyptian mythology of Nicola’s former world. With neither a founder nor scripture, how they practiced this religion was similar to Japanese

Shinto. Their mythology contained no clear doctrine or commandments to follow.

Though they might be less than the *yaoyorozu*—the eight million *kami* spoken of in Shinto myth—the people of this kingdom could hardly be expected to pay their respects to all the seemingly countless gods in this world.

Most people seemed to only vaguely recognize a few pillars of the pantheon and their particular spheres of influence. It seemed rare for people to worship them fervently. So it was not as if Nicola did not understand Alois's confusion. But wherever there were myths, one could always find gods.

Nicola had not yet interacted directly with anything resembling a god in this world. She, however, had felt as if a godlike being was observing her from a specific nearby location several times in the past.

As long as she knew gods existed here and did not take appropriate measures against them, she would one day face their wrath.

"Those are the five articles of conduct. I reserve the right to abandon you without mercy if you intentionally break any of them and land yourself in trouble. Please keep them firmly in mind, Your Highness."

Even though Nicola had brought Sieghart into this conversation in part to remind him, Alois was still her main target.

With a serious expression, Alois nodded gently and said, "Understood. I will make sure to never break any of them." It seemed that Alois had not been lying when he said that he would follow Nicola's warnings from now on.

Nicola thought bitterly, *If only his attitude had remained carefree until now, I could have abandoned him without feeling guilty.* Despite his flippant attitude, Alois was at least not fatally stupid. Nicola sighed heavily.

"As for the other forbidden acts, I will tell you those little by little whenever we have the opportunity."

"You really forbid lots of acts, don't you, Nicola?"

Nicola turned around to look at Sieghart, only to see him gazing off into the distance. She pinched his porcelain-white cheeks to get his attention.

Just who do you think you have to thank for the fact that you've survived to the age of eighteen? she thought.

"Ow ow ow, that hurts, Nicola."

"You have failed to show proper gratitude and restraint towards me."

"I really am grateful. But if I showed restraint, you wouldn't meet with me anymore, would you?"

"I do not see any problem with keeping our contact to the bare minimum."

"You see. That's why I need to be a little pushy when it comes to you, Nicola," said Sieghart as he sulked like a small child, pouting his lips and resting his chin on Nicola's shoulder.

"Hey, Miss Nicola. Maybe you can tell me what this is next?" asked Alois. The serious expression he had worn until a moment earlier had suddenly vanished, replaced by a look of open curiosity. On one hand, he brandished the person-shaped paper figure Nicola had used the previous day to fetch Alois—her *shikigami*. Nicola remembered she had failed to retrieve it yesterday. She scowled, thinking that such an oversight was not like her.

"That exceeds the bounds of the bare minimum you need to know about, so I cannot give you an answer. There is really no need for you to know what it is."

"Oh, no *need* for me to know about it, you say? Would that mean that there isn't any harm in me being aware of it?"

Nicola was silent. There was something indescribably irritating about Alois's expression as he celebrated having tripped Nicola up. Alois lightly flicked the scrap of paper with his finger. She had drawn pictograms in dark-red ink representing eyes and a mouth on the piece of paper.

"Please do not treat that so roughly," Nicola finally said.

"Oh, why not? I guess if you told me what it is, I could treat it appropriately."

Nicola clammed up again. She weighed the myriad pros and cons of giving Alois this information and watched the scales in her mind tip to one side.

"Very well. I shall tell you. In exchange, please return it to me first."

“Sure. Here you go.”

As soon as Nicola nodded her approval, Alois easily obliged her request. Perhaps because she had already told him to treat it more carefully, he grasped the piece of paper very gently as he handed it over.

Once the piece of paper was safely back in her hands, Nicola held it before her eyes. After confirming that it had sustained no damage, she set it down on the desk in front of her.

The two drawings on the paper figure, one resembling closterium algae cells and another looking almost like an inverted letter “A,” had been drawn in Nicola’s own blood. These were all, in fact, Japanese pictograms.

“Written here are old letters meaning ‘eye’ and ‘mouth.’ Writing ‘eyes’ will allow the *shikigami* to share its vision with the user, writing ‘ears’ will cause it to share its hearing, and writing ‘nose’ will share its sense of smell. Since I didn’t write ‘mouth’ here, then it didn’t speak.”

“I wondered why it didn’t answer me when I spoke to it yesterday... You’re telling me that it really couldn’t hear me?”

“I suppose not. I did not write ‘ears’ anywhere on it, after all.” *Huh?* Noticing Sieghart peering down at her, Nicola looked straight up. His long, silver hair surrounded her like a curtain. “What do you want?”

“The letters on that one are different from those written on the one you gave me to carry around, aren’t they?” Sieghart took a similar person-shaped paper figure out of the inside pocket of his school uniform jacket. He was right. Instead of pictograms, the name “Nicola von Weber” was written in cursive.

“When used, a shikigami with my full name written on it will become a perfect clone of me. The one I gave to Sieghart can act independently with my exact personality and intellect.”

Nicola had given the paper in question to Sieghart when he first entered the academy. She had enchanted it so it would activate automatically in times of peril. Knowing that Sieghart would stay there for two years by himself, she really had no choice.

“A clone, huh? Miss Nicola, could it be that you wanted that back so badly

because any damage inflicted on it would be reflected on your own body?" asked Alois.

Nicola said nothing, but frowned, thinking to herself that Alois was unfortunately perceptive in certain matters. He was absolutely right. Although very useful, Nicola's shikigami could not be deployed too recklessly. It would reflect some portion of any damage it received back on the user.

The proportion of damage that was reflected depended on the number of powers Nicola granted to the shikigami. Because she had only written "eyes" and "mouth" on the one in front of her, even if it were to be torn to pieces, Nicola would merely feel fatigued, or her mouth might suddenly feel dry. She still believed it'd be preferable to retrieve it rather than let it be destroyed without her knowledge.

Still holding the shikigami with Nicola's name inscribed on it, Sieghart looked down at Nicola and spoke.

"Since we'll always be together from now on, shouldn't I return this?"

Nicola was silent for a moment. "No, we definitely will not always be together, so please hold on to it." They were not even in the same year, so it was impossible for them to spend every hour of every day together.

"That's a bit harsh..."

Looking up at Sieghart was starting to hurt Nicola's neck, so she returned her gaze to Alois. She thought Sieghart was probably wearing that dejected expression she found so difficult to resist. As long as she did not see it, there was no need to worry about it.

"Ah, come to think about it, something else bothered me," said Alois. "When we left this empty classroom yesterday and went to the garden behind the school, why didn't any students we passed in the hall look in our direction? I would have thought that, given my status, the sight of me being dragged around by a girl would attract attention..."

This was true. Under normal circumstances, a mere viscount's daughter dragging around the Golden Lord by the hand would inevitably attract attention. However, it was not as if Nicola had taken any special measures to

prevent this. A shikigami only allowed to use its eyes and mouth simply had a very faint presence.

But Nicola had finally grown tired of answering Alois's questions. She almost felt like she was humoring a child in that stage of development where any answer you gave them was followed by another question: "Why?"

Nicola finally answered, "I am afraid that is a trade secret."

"*Trade*? Hey, why can't you tell me?"

Nicola was not a particularly patient person. Without thinking, she finally clicked her tongue in irritation, then covered her mouth in shock when she remembered who she was talking to.

"Ah! There! There it is! The same rude attitude you always have when talking to Sieg! You can talk to me the same way, you know? No need to hold back! Come now! Please?"

"You're really getting on my nerves, you know that, Prince?!" This most recent masochistic request from Alois finally prompted Nicola to speak her mind.

Given her naturally short temper, Nicola thought she had done quite well to put up with Alois from their initial meeting until now. Nicola's tolerance for stress had finally maxed out. If Alois said there was no need for her to tolerate him any longer, then she was more than happy to go along with that request.

"Very well, but please sign a written oath first. It will be an oath saying that no matter how disrespectful my words or my attitude to you might be, I will not be charged with any crime!" she added.

"Sure, I'll sign that! If that's all you need, I'll sign as many as you want!"

Nicola stared at the freakishly masochistic prince. She felt as if she were looking at a dehydrated frog under the sweltering sun.

"Sieghart, give me some paper. Paper. Quickly." When Sieghart opened his school bag to take out a sheet of paper, Nicola escaped from her place on his knee. She then thrust the fountain pen Sieghart had recently given her into Alois's face.

While Alois used the fountain pen to scratch out his written oath on the paper Sieghart had taken out, Sieghart pointlessly offered a few meaningless explanations for Alois's behavior.

"Well, you see, Alois is used to being waited on hand and foot. So being treated as rudely as this must be novel for him... I suppose."

"The reason really does not matter to me," said Nicola, covering her face with a hand. She had unintentionally presented herself as an 'amusing woman' in the eyes of the prince. But she had established her rudeness toward Sieghart over the course of a friendship lasting many years. The thought that her attitude had immediately ensnared this masochistic prince made her head hurt.

"All right, Miss Nicola. I've finished," said Alois.

Nicola wordlessly accepted the sheet of paper from Alois before checking the date, his statement, and his signature one last time.

"I acknowledge that I have received your written oath. Now then, please keep our interactions to the necessary bare minimum. Not only that, but if you land yourself in trouble with the non-human through your own carelessness, I will *totally* abandon you."

"Got it. If that's all, I look forward to working with you again," said Alois, grinning at Nicola.

No longer needing to hide how she felt about the wretched prince, Nicola clicked her tongue forcefully.

After a moment's silence, Nicola said, "As for you, Sieghart, please do not talk to me unless no one else is around. If it became widely known that I, a dreary viscount's daughter, acted familiar with the Silver Lord, it would only lead to trouble."

"Even now that we're finally attending the same school?"

"*Because* we are attending the same school." After snatching her fountain pen from Alois, she stowed it away in her brand-new school bag and stood up. The circumstances were different now from how they had been when Nicola and Sieghart visited each other's estates. If they acted too carelessly where strangers might see them, they would only attract more resentment and envy.

Nicola wanted no part of that.

Tap, tap. A reserved knock sounded at the door.

Good timing, thought Nicola, as she headed for the door herself.

“Ah, please excuse me. In order to use a vacant classroom, please submit a request to the student coun—I mean, if it isn’t Prince Alois and our student council president? This will not do. It sets a bad example for the other students when a senior student and the president himself break the rules.”

A senior student with lush light blonde hair flowing behind her walked into the classroom. As Nicola attempted to slip past the older girl and into the corridor, the sound of the girl snickering stopped her, almost as if she were mocking Nicola.

“My, this is a rare sight. I have never seen those two alone with a female student before. Just what might your relationship with these two be, young lady?”

“No relationship whatsoever.” Though she did not know the rank of the girl, Nicola thought it was safe to assume she belonged to a family of higher rank than her own, the house of a viscount. After a brief but polite gesture, Nicola turned on her heel and walked away. But a nagging doubt stopped her in her tracks.

“Huh?” Tilting her head to one side, Nicola tried to figure out what was bothering her. She could not put her finger on it. “Hmm... Well, probably nothing.”

She thought everything paled in comparison after suffering the misfortune of being given yet another student to protect. As such, Nicola started walking again.

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 2

Shikigami

Unlike a doppelgänger, these can be controlled by one’s own will and are one of the many useful tools in an exorcist’s arsenal. The “shiki” in shikigami is found in the Japanese words for “equation” and “formula,” which bears the meaning “in accordance with law.” Based on the privileges granted to them, the abilities of a shikigami change.

If one writes “eyes” on the paper doll, the shikigami will share its vision with the practitioner using it. If one writes “ears,” it will share its hearing.

If one writes their full name on the paper doll, not only will the practitioner be able to share all five senses with the shikigami, but it will even be able to act independently. Of course, this would be within the bounds of the practitioner’s own personality and knowledge. Isn’t that super convenient? The one I gave to Sieghart is of this kind.

The one downside is that if the medium for its creation, the paper, is damaged, that effect will rebound onto the practitioner.

Chapter 3: Pale, Blue, and Frail

1

With a shrill *clang*, a sword flew from the hands of the count's son. The practice sword's crumpled blade traced an arc in the air before landing on the finely manicured lawn and sticking into the earth.

"The victor... Ernst von Mueller!"

Ah, I thought he'd end up being my next opponent, thought Sieghart, as he sat resting against the wall of the western tower. Showing no sign of being particularly surprised, he stood up and, after one last stretch, prepared himself for his next fight.

Though Sieghart excelled in all things to quite a high degree, he could not take the top spot in just two subjects: the swordsmanship and horsemanship practiced by future knights. This was entirely because he was in the same year as Ernst. Noticing that his hair was loose, Sieghart briefly untied it before firmly fastening it in a high knot again.

As Sieghart gathered his hair, in his mouth was a hair tie that Nicola had given him as a birthday present. Though Nicola had not picked it for this reason, Sieghart liked that the deep navy blue of the velvet ribbon matched her eyes very well.

The next bout in the tournament, conducted as part of their swordsmanship training, would be the last for the day. The match would be between Ernst and Sieghart. Sieghart was used to settling for second place, but today he faced Ernst with renewed resolve.

"Ernst, you really are strong."

"No, I just come from a long line of military officers. When it comes to my studies, I am quite hopeless. To display such martial prowess while excelling in your studies makes you far more impressive than me, Your Grace."

Sieghart smiled wryly, knowing how sincere a personality Ernst possessed and

that this was surely not flattery on his part. He also knew all too well that he was a jack of all trades and a master of none. Though he excelled to some degree in every discipline, he would never stand out as a true genius. He would always remain in the realm of generally accomplished mediocrities.

Though Sieghart knew he was asking too much from life, he could not help but envy people who were not merely skillful like him but had thoroughly mastered a particular skill and thereby become extraordinary.

The class was nearing its end. As it was also the final round of the tournament, Sieghart suddenly noticed that the other male students had gathered around them to watch as they fought.

“Those two again?”

“But this is Ernst’s first tournament since recovering from his injury, right?”

“You’re right. Today, it could be that... Well, it just might be...”

Sieghart could not help but overhear the crowd’s comments. Though it was a foregone conclusion that they gave Ernst better odds than him, it still stung. Given that he was altogether useless within Nicola’s territory of the supernatural, he wanted to become strong enough to protect his childhood friend from anything in the physical realm.

Even though it was early autumn, Sieghart still winced at the midday sun beating down from the sky. Beneath the western tower and blue sky, there was nothing to provide shade from the sun on these training grounds. Sieghart slowly exhaled and waited for the signal to begin.

“Both combatants, en garde... Begin!”

The moment the signal was given, Sieghart took a big step forward and unleashed three thrusts in a flurry at Ernst. But Ernst evaded these with minimal effort, bending back slightly, forcing Sieghart to retreat with a single stroke. Without pausing for even a moment, Ernst leapt back into striking range as he raised his long sword.

Despite Sieghart having trained himself, he naturally had difficulty putting on muscle. As Ernst was blessed with the wits for battle and physique, attacking head-on would surely result in defeat.

Their swords clashed. Sieghart slid his blade along Ernst's, blocking his strike and parrying his blade. Without a moment's delay, Sieghart stepped diagonally past Ernst. He feinted as if to cross swords with Ernst before sweeping his leg to trip him up. However, he ultimately could not overcome Ernst's formidable core strength. Instead, he narrowly evaded a counterattack by ducking and rolling. At some point, the sachet around his neck, which had been tucked away under his shirt, dangled in the air. The tip of Ernst's sword caught it, cutting the cord and sending it flying. But Sieghart knew he did not have time to worry about where it ended up landing.

Without delay, Sieghart planted one hand firmly on the ground and leapt to his feet. He swiped his sword as he aimed it at Ernst's neck However, Ernst easily anticipated this strike—which Sieghart knew was reckless—and deflected it with the hilt of his sword. But Ernst had lost his footing too.

To regain their footing, the two leapt away from each other before simultaneously breaking into a run to cross swords again. The restless heartbeats and ragged breathing of both combatants were all too audible.

Before Sieghart's blade could hit Ernst's chest, Ernst had already fixed the tip of his sword at Sieghart's throat.

"The victor... Ernst von Mueller!" announced the fencing instructor. A cheer erupted from the crowd.

The two combatants, having finished their match, eyed each other as they struggled to relax their heavy breathing.

"It's frustrating, but I guess I never stood a chance against you, Ernst."

"No, I had cause to worry a few times throughout that match. If you shared my same physique, Your Grace, I think we would have been evenly matched."

Sieghart could not help but wonder about that as he smirked to himself. They were only on equal footing because Ernst had the handicap of having recently recovered from an injury. He would probably never be able to match Ernst in peak condition.

If Ernst was the type of man to sit about and neglect his training, that might have been a different story. Unfortunately, Ernst was not only gifted with wits

and a large physique. His steadfast personality, which ensured that he always tried his hardest, made him especially strong.

Sieghart was silent for a moment. “Thanks. I wonder if I can spar with you some other time.”

“Of course you may.”

Sieghart held out his hand toward Ernst, who gripped it powerfully in return. The fencing instructor directed the students to put away the practice swords and announced the end of the class.

Their class had run overtime without Sieghart realizing it; as the crowd of onlookers already contained female students taking their lunch break. Other students were even spectating from afar or down the corridors connecting the west tower to the rest of the school. Without Sieghart’s knowledge, the crowd had expanded quite a bit.

Once Sieghart paid attention, he suddenly noticed eyes gazing at him, accompanied by shrieks of delight. He muffled a sigh. Although he would not let it show on his face, he had disliked the attention of large groups of people from a young age.

But Sieghart’s fencing instructor, apparently not picking up on how Sieghart felt, said, “Popular as ever, I see.” He looked at Sieghart curiously and followed it with something more vulgar. “You don’t have a fiancée yet, do you, Edelstein? A word of advice. If you’re going to have a fling with a girl, pick one who knows her place. Otherwise, she’ll make trouble for you afterwards.” With a suave wink, the instructor patted Sieghart lightly on the shoulder before leaving.

As the instructor was still fairly young and tolerant of the male students’ bad behavior, he was the subject of their enthusiasm because they looked up to him as an older brother. However, Sieghart did not belong to that group and preferred to avoid the man.

The school’s founding principle was: “There is no social rank at this school. Instead, students will treat each other equally.” It was only natural that the relationship between students and teachers would take priority when considering this.

That said, it did not sit well with Sieghart to have someone with whom he was not especially close to speak to him so casually in such vulgar terms. Besides, his heart was already so strained by his unrequited love for Nicola after many years that there was no chance of him having a fling. Sieghart said nothing but bitterly watched the instructor walk away, unable to say a word in protest.

“Ernst, I plan on meeting up with Alois in the dining hall after this. You’re coming too, right?”

“No, about that... I must pick up the assignments I missed while I was away from school, so I am afraid I cannot have lunch with you.”

Sieghart looked back at Ernst to see him frowning and looking genuinely apologetic.

“I see. I’ll tell Alois that, then.”

“Thank you very much. I will take my leave.” After bowing gracefully, Ernst quickly walked away, leaving the training grounds beneath the western tower.

Sieghart noticed he had gotten quite out of shape during the summer break. He was suddenly overcome by tiredness following his first serious bout in quite some time. His body felt sluggish and his legs felt heavier than usual.

The mix of boys and girls in the crowd of onlookers, which had grown to twice the size it had been at the outset, broke off into smaller groups as they sought their own lunch. Following that flow, Sieghart soon became surrounded by a group of female students.

The girls unanimously praised Sieghart’s technique with his sword, but he could not help but think that it was Ernst whom they should gather around if that was what they valued. With an ambiguous smile and a noncommittal response, Sieghart freed himself before casting his now heavy head around and muttering to himself, “Maybe I’ll start training a bit more often.”

2

After embroidery class, which was mandatory for female students only, Nicola headed for the dining hall. She made small talk with Karin, who had been

assigned to the same class as her.

“Oof, my shoulders are sore after that,” Karin declared. “I really hate doing fiddly work for long stretches of time!”

“I think people who enjoy it are probably in the minority.”
“But Nicola, you made twice as much progress as me with the design they gave us to work on.”

“It’s not like I work faster because I enjoy it.” Even if one did not enjoy elaborate work, one could learn to do it faster. Nicola, who regularly had to sew together sachets for Sieghart, had naturally grown used to it, no matter how little she might care for the process.

“Still, at least you’re more skilled than I am.”

“Well... That much is probably true,” agreed Nicola, half-smiling as she remembered the other girl’s handiwork, which was difficult to call neat by any standard. In all honesty, it would probably be tough to find someone with less dexterity than Karin. Once Nicola had stayed after class to help Karin, who was lagging far behind the rest of the class, and noticed that the hands on the nearest clock showed that lunchtime was already halfway through.

“Won’t you do my assignment for me, Nicola?”

“No way.”

While the two girls made idle chitchat just as they were stepping onto the staircase landing that led to the dining hall, a tall male student coming the other way suddenly stopped right next to Nicola.

“Are you Miss Nicola? Viscount Weber’s daughter?”

Nicola took a moment to find her words. “Yes, I am. What of it?” Being called “Miss” Nicola put that wretched prince in her mind, so she had already learned to scowl reflexively upon hearing this term of address.

Although Nicola and this male student were not previously acquainted, he seemed dissatisfied with her response and scowled menacingly in her direction. The furrows on Nicola’s brow grew deeper still.

They did not appear to be friendly, no matter how you looked at the two of

them. Apparently, Karin still somehow misconstrued this interaction as she beamed and whispered mischievously in Nicola's ear.

"Nicola, tell me all about it later!"

Not noticing the ominous atmosphere around Nicola and the boy, Karin showed an entirely unexpected form of consideration.

Karin excused herself when she said, "I think I left something behind in the classroom." She then withdrew before Nicola had a chance to stop her.

All that remained was an awkward silence. Nicola said nothing. Neither did the male student.

The young man had such an impressive physique that the diminutive Nicola could not tell what he looked like. She already strained to look up at Sieghart when they talked, but this angle threatened to really hurt her neck.

Besides his lean features, Nicola could tell that his body was muscular beneath his school uniform. The young man's short-cropped, dark brown hair contributed further to his military appearance. He continued to glare down wordlessly at Nicola with his blue-gray eyes. Finally, he approached her, closing the distance between them in a single step.

Not wishing to tilt her head back any further or avert her eyes, which would make her feel as if she had lost, Nicola edged defiantly away from the young man. Yet she fixed her eyes on him even if she felt like a rabbit cornered by a bear.

A voice suddenly rang from the bottom of the staircase, interrupting this outlandish and inexplicable situation.

"Hey, you can't do that. Do you know whose woman you're picking on?"

Nicola gazed over as she recognized this carefree voice she had regrettably come to know so well recently, followed by an overly familiar hand placed on her shoulder from behind. She could tell without even turning around it was Alois.

"She's Sieg's woman, you know?"

Nicola took a moment to respond to this. "That's awfully novel. Usually, you

would say that when someone puts their hands on your woman. Incidentally, it is not as if I belong to Sieghart either." Nicola snapped her head back to glare at Alois. As always, her words fell on deaf ears.

Alois even saw fit to crack a joke. "Ah ha ha, aren't you just disappointed that it wasn't Sieg who came to save you?"

Nicola paused. "You really are a disappointment as a prince." Having received Alois's written oath that nothing she said or did around him would be considered a crime, she no longer had anything to fear. She knew that holding her displeasure would be bad for her health.

Alois responded to Nicola's rudeness by smiling cheerfully and saying, "Yes, yes, this really is a fresh kind of treatment!" This prompted Nicola to look at Alois even more like he was a worm crawling over her shoe.

"Why, you! Show His Highness some respect!" snapped the taller boy. Funnily enough, it was not Alois who objected to Nicola's attitude. Instead, it was the militaristic young man standing in front of her.

Nicola rummaged in her bag for the written oath she had received a few days prior before silently thrusting it under the young man's nose. After intently reading the oath from top to bottom, he turned to look at Alois with a look of disbelief.

"Y-Your Highness... Did you really write such an oath?"

"Yeah, I did. This is Miss Nicola. Isn't she fun?"

After realizing that this young man was subjected to the whims of this wretched prince daily, Nicola could not help but feel a bit sorry for him. However, her more pressing feeling was that she could no longer wait to find out just who this unfriendly man was.

Nicola finally said, "So, just who might you be?"



“I... I am the prince’s bodyguard!” cried the young man, snapping to

attention.

This self-introduction failed in many ways, so Alois smiled and said, “Well, this man is Ernst von Mueller. My personal attendant.”

Though it was not usually allowed for students at a boarding school to bring their servants with them, it appeared the school made an unsurprising exception for members of the royal family.

I see, mused Nicola. *That’s why he addressed me in a way so reminiscent of that wretched prince*. But if the two of them were really old acquaintances, did that not make their greetings toward one another an unbelievable farce? Nicola glared at Alois in disbelief.

A look suddenly came over Alois’s face as if he had just remembered something. “Oh, wait, that’s right! We don’t have time for this! I came here to fetch you!” Without hesitation, Alois grasped both of Nicola’s arms. She felt herself shudder.

“I took my eyes off of Sieghart for one minute and suddenly he was engulfed by this creepy, pitch-black haze. Save him!”

“Not again.” Nicola sighed and covered her face with one hand. Her childhood friend in his senior year was apparently still very attractive to apparitions.

Nicola paused before saying, “The shikigami I gave to Sieghart will activate automatically if his life is ever in peril. The fact that it hasn’t means that this is not urgent. Let’s meet up after school somewhere no one else is around.”

Alois’s face seemed to say that he wondered if Sieghart would really be all right, but he nodded reluctantly.

“In that case, let’s meet in the student council room since the council isn’t active at this time of year. Don’t forget, all right?” That final reminder was probably something Sieghart had taught Alois to do.

Nicola shrugged, as if to imply that she was obviously not so heartless as to abandon someone heavily haunted. Out of the corner of her eye, Nicola noticed Ernst glaring at her and heard him growling. He clearly disapproved of her treating Alois so casually. He wanted to say something about it, but Nicola did not care.

After pretending she did not see the dark entity writhing just outside the window and peering in, Nicola quietly sighed to herself.

3

And so the school day came to an end. Just as promised, Nicola headed to the student council room, only to find there was no one there besides Ernst. She nearly groaned but hastily stifled it.

Though there were several chairs and desks available, the ever-solemn Ernst stood in a corner of the room. The moment he saw Nicola enter, he immediately took on the same sullen demeanor that he had approached her with earlier.

Nicola felt quite uncomfortable receiving such hostility from someone she had only met that day. She found Ernst's bad mood contagious and could not help but scowl. However, she could not bear the awkward silence any longer and broke the ice.

"Excuse me! I wonder, have I done anything to offend you?" Nicola was not so mild-mannered as to stay quiet while being treated so harshly for no apparent reason. When she asked Ernst for a reason, not attempting to hide the venom behind her words, he glared at her with his eyes wide open and growled in a low voice.

"I don't believe in anything that I have not seen with my own eyes! I don't believe your claims! Do not deceive His Highness with your shady nonsense any longer!"

Nicola was silent for a moment. "Ah, I get it now. So that's your problem?" Nicola finally connected the dots and struck the palm of her hand with her fist in that moment of realization. *You could have told me that from the start*, she thought, smirking slightly as if to dismiss Ernst's concerns. "If you don't believe me, that's just fine. Not a problem at all."

"Wha—!" Ernst could not even finish speaking.

Nicola had accepted there would always be realists in the world. Even if that kind of person saw that their friends, or even their lord and master, believed in the supernatural, they could not bring themselves to understand such things. Nicola was confident that even if she brought out a shikigami before Ernst's

very eyes, he would continue to doubt her, putting it down to some trick or ingenious device. She almost felt like asking Alois, “Did you really have to tell anyone? Especially this jerk?” But she did not mind if Ernst believed her or not.

She knew all too well that people like him made up the majority of the population in the world, so she was used to this attitude. Regular people had their own version of reality. Nicola, who could perceive what lay beyond the physical realm, defined her reality by what was there in front of her. Ernst, who could not see, defined his reality by what *wasn’t* there. Unless something shook his rigid sense of reality, he would probably never encounter an apparition.

As Nicola gazed at Ernst with her eyes narrowed, as if looking at something too bright to bear, someone wildly opened the door to the student council room.

“Miss Nicola, you’re here already?!” It was Alois, half dragging Sieghart behind him by the hand as they entered the council room.

After quickly looking Sieghart over from top to bottom, Nicola sighed openly.

“Is that it? This is how he always is.” Quite literally, this was Sieghart’s typical condition. A black haze covered him from the neck up, nearly obscuring his radiant visage. However, he was not haunted by anything so unpleasant as to be worth making such a fuss about, and there were not even that many apparitions.

When Sieghart visited Nicola during extended vacations from the academy, this was almost always how he appeared. There was nothing here to get so worked up about.

“I told him I could cope with this much. Even right now, my shoulders feel a little heavy. But I don’t feel especially inconvenienced,” said Sieghart, idly scratching his cheek. Or so it appeared from where Nicola stood as it was difficult to see him clearly with the black haze in the way.

This was quite a blockheaded remark from Sieghart, totally lacking any sense of urgency, but that was understandable. Hauntings were such an everyday occurrence for Sieghart that he had long since grown used to them.

“What, so you feel fine with all that pitch-black stuff around you?!” cried Alois

frantically as he turned around to look at Sieghart in disbelief. He then backed away as far as he could. “Hey, does that mean that whenever I saw Sieg before, he was in the same state, and I just didn’t notice...?”

“If you really hadn’t noticed until now, I suppose so. This fellow spends about half of every year haunted by something...” said Nicola. It seemed that Alois truly had become more perceptive of the other world. Nicola could not tell whether this effect would be permanent or merely temporary, but she was sure that the world he used to know would look very different now. Though she had warned him, and he had merely reaped what he had sown, Nicola still cast a glance filled with pity at Alois.

Unable to understand what his lord and master were talking about, Ernst scrutinized Sieghart repeatedly, each time looking doubtful as he puzzled this scene over. Finally, he glared not at Alois—who had remarked on Sieghart’s haunting—but at Nicola with eyes full of suspicion.

What a nuisance, thought Nicola.

Wishing to return to the matter at hand, she swiftly exorcised the apparitions around Sieghart. As she turned to look squarely at the black haze, the feeling that something was not quite right suddenly struck her.

“Although you are often haunted by something, I just gave you a new sachet. This apparition doesn’t look as if it would have had the strength to overcome the potency of a brand-new sachet...”

“Ah!” Sieghart and Ernst exclaimed in unison before looking at each other as if they had just had the same thought.

“I completely forgot...” said Sieghart.

“Forgive me, Your Grace! I shall go and look for it!”

“Ah, Ernst, hold on...! Oh, he’s gone already...”

Without heeding Sieghart’s plea to wait, Ernst hurried out of the room and soon vanished entirely.

“What, what? What’s going on?” asked Alois, looking puzzled. Apparently, Nicola was not the only one who did not grasp the situation.

“When Ernst and I had our bout during our afternoon swordsmanship lesson, the point of his sword caught the sachet and sent it flying. We’d both forgotten about it entirely...” Sieghart explained to Nicola, his eyebrows drooping apologetically.

Nicola thought, *At least this explains why Sieghart ended up haunted again so quickly.*

“Oh, by the way, who won that bout?” asked Alois, inquisitive as ever.

Smiling wryly, Sieghart replied, “Though it pains me to say it, Ernst did.”

“I guess beating Ernst really is a tall order, even for you, Sieg...” replied Alois, unsurprised at the outcome.

Huh? Nicola stared off in the direction in which Ernst had departed. She was also aware that Sieghart was fairly skilled in swordplay. Despite her childhood friend’s elegant appearance, he could easily wield with one hand a sword whose weight would cause Nicola to keel over, even if she used both hands. On top of that, she had seen him win several bouts against professional knights. Ernst, that stubborn knight, was clearly capable if Sieghart could not defeat him.

Still, Nicola could only think of Ernst’s departure from the room as a blessing. Having someone cast doubt on her techniques and area of expertise while glaring at her as if she were a fraud would not do wonders for her mental defenses as she performed her exorcism rites.

When inspecting the haze around Sieghart, she saw it sprout two arms, which wound tightly around his neck. It then beat what would be its fists against his head. But because the haze was simply too weak, or Sieghart was simply so used to being haunted, this seemed to have little effect as he remained nonchalant.

As Nicola approached, the black haze loosened its grip on Sieghart and reached out for her with two protrusions that looked like arms.

Nicola braced herself, but what happened next surprised her.

“Huh...?” For some reason, the black haze’s arms gently stroked Nicola’s head. All of Nicola’s occult knowledge could not have prepared her for this. Most of the apparitions that haunted Sieghart were attracted to his beauty like

moths to a flame, and they acted hostile toward any woman that came close to him, including Nicola.

Yet this one was hostile toward Sieghart while having an affinity for her. She could not help but smirk at the emergence of this rare pattern of behavior.

“How interesting. Would you mind explaining yourself?”

4

Nicola eagerly rummaged through her school bag for a piece of paper before writing the words “YES” and “NO” on it, followed by the alphabet and a set of numbers. Finally, she handed Sieghart a smaller scrap of paper and instructed him to cut a hole in the middle using the scissors from her sewing kit.

Alois peered at Nicola’s handiwork before asking, “Hey, what are you making there?”

Nicola nearly replied, “This is a ouija board, the European equivalent to and the origin of *Kokkuri-san*.” That was before she realized this would make no sense to him. She had also learned that if she indulged Alois by answering every question he asked, she would be stuck doing so until the sun went down. So she really had no intention of explaining herself in any detail.

The ouija board in front of Nicola was also known as a Kokkuri-san, or Japanese table reading. “Kokkuri-san” could be written phonetically using the Chinese characters for fox, dog, and *tanuki*, or racoon dog. This reflected the fact that, in Japan, this technique was reserved for summoning animal spirits. However, the original form of the ouija introduced via Western tradition was a form of necromancy used to communicate with the souls of the departed. The world in which Nicola had found herself appeared to be European in style, so she felt that she really ought to use a ouija board rather than the Japanese Kokkuri-san.

She would do so according to the following method:

Have several people gather around the board in a circle, then have the participants place their hands together on the planchette—or movable indicator—on top of the board.

Should the participants succeed in contacting a spirit, if someone then poses the spirit a question, the planchette will move by itself to spell out the response.

Nicola's mentor had taught her this method after telling her there was little difference between it and the Japanese equivalent. She always wondered how on earth she would ever put this particular piece of occult knowledge to use. It turned out that all she had to do was transmigrate to a new world. As she completed her handiwork, Nicola briefly thought about her past life.

With the impromptu ouija board finished and placed atop one of the needlessly heavy desks in the student council room, Nicola looked at the other two participants.

"In the past, I have told both of you that names are very important, have I not?" said Nicola.

"Yeah. You said that they represent the nature of things," replied Alois.

"You also said we should not give things names too casually, right?" said Sieghart.

Nicola nodded firmly. "That is exactly why I want us to give a name to a presence that is still indistinct this time. Ah, though this is not something you should ever try without my supervision. We'll do it just this once."

Sieghart nodded obediently, followed by Alois, who seemed more disappointed. The difference between the personalities had never been so vividly on display. Nicola glared exclusively at Alois. Once she had done so, to her satisfaction, she looked steadily at the black haze coiled around the back of Sieghart's head.

The black, hazy apparitions that ran rampant here and there could be separated into two categories. First, there were those coagulated from the negative emotions that leaked from the minds of humans. For the most part, these lacked the capacity for complex thought and chiefly acted according to emotion.

The other category comprised the souls of the dead, typically referred to as earthbound spirits or ghosts. At first, the soul of a departed person will think and act much like the person did while they were still alive, but this does not continue indefinitely. They experienced isolation like no other, such that they could reach no one, powerless to interpose themselves in any matter. These souls could not even see themselves reflected in mirrors or in water.

As months and years went by, these apparitions finally forgot their own names. Their former figures crumbled away and they became nothing but vague clouds of haze. The memories and desires they had gradually faded until only the simplest of emotions remained. Though both the former and latter type of apparition eventually turned into a black haze, the starting point for each was different.

Nicola glanced up at the black haze before her once more. The apparition clinging to Sieghart was hostile toward him, but seemed to have an affinity for her. Rather than acting based only on simple emotions, it seemed more likely that the apparition's memories and consciousness from life were still at work. That was why Nicola had figured that it was more likely to have started out as a ghost.

If her hypothesis was correct and the haze really was once a human spirit, helping it remember its name may be enough to bring back its original form. Nicola was so used to exorcising ragtag, hazy spirits, both living and dead, whose mental faculties drew them to Sieghart, that she had long since grown weary of this task.

She was more than willing to deal with a departed soul of a different disposition and perhaps learn something of its past.

Nicola placed the paper planchette Sieghart had made right in the middle of the finished ouija board.

"This is a tool for conversing with spirits. We are about to ask this one to tell us its name. I want both of you to place your hands on the planchette. You need only touch it lightly and not think about moving it. It will move all by itself."

After receiving only a rough explanation from Nicola, the two boys rested their fingers on the planchette. The spirit was already in front of them, so there was no need to go to the trouble of summoning it again.

Nicola took a deep breath to prepare herself before resting her fingertips on the planchette.

“I know this is sudden, but please tell us your name.”

For the first ten seconds, nothing happened. Nicola ignored the two boys as they glanced at her during the silence, keeping her eyes fixed squarely on the board. The planchette shuddered slightly before it moved as if pulled by an unseen force, making a rustling sound as it traversed the board.

“Huh, it really did move...”

“All we did was rest our fingers on it!”

Nicola grinned to herself. However, after wandering around the letters ABC for a moment, the planchette began circling an area outside of where any letters or the words YES and NO were written. It appeared that the spirit could not remember.

I didn’t think that would work, thought Nicola, as she had only made an idle question. This outcome was well within her expectations. After collecting herself, Nicola spoke once more.

“Then I will ask a different question. Were you a student at this academy?”

In response to that, the planchette slid straight to YES. The two boys gasped before staring intently at the ouija board.

“So, were you a man?”

The planchette indicated NO. This caused Nicola to raise an eyebrow in surprise. Usually, the spirits of women who clung to Sieghart, drawn in by his gorgeous looks, menaced Nicola for being a woman who came near him. In this case, the exact opposite had happened, and the spirit was hostile toward Sieghart. Therefore, Nicola had been convinced that the spirit was once a man, but this had apparently been off the mark.

“So, was your family a noble one?”

YES

“Was your father a count or higher?”

NO

“A viscount?”

NO

“A baron’s family, then.”

YES

“How many people were in your family?”

4

“Including your parents?”

YES

“Was the fourth your older brother?”

NO

“A younger sister, perhaps?”

YES

Nicola had asked a series of yes or no questions up to this point, thinking these would be easier to answer and might help the spirit remember. Even so, the spirit responded to some of these slowly and others instantly and without hesitation.

Sieghart and Alois could only watch with bated breath as Nicola’s exchange with the possessed planchette proceeded.

After Nicola had asked about the spirit’s personality, likes, dislikes, and anything that could roughly ground it in its surroundings and inner life, she was silent for a moment before narrowing her eyes.

“Now then, I would like to ask you again. Please tell us your name.”

Although the planchette still faltered, it kept to the letters of the alphabet.

A...N...N... Nicola noted the letters displayed by the planchette and read out

the name as it was revealed to her.

"'Anne von Bülow.' Your name is Anne. Is that right?"

The black haze coiled around Sieghart suddenly contracted, then expanded again, before forming a whirling vortex. It then reshaped itself. An apparition that had forgotten its name could not maintain its form. Conversely, it could regain its shape if one helped it remember that forgotten name.

Sieghart and Alois gasped as the black haze completely cleared away and a girl with fine chestnut-brown hair floated in its place. The girl wore the same uniform as Nicola, but her translucent body declared she was no longer of this world.

Both friends opened their eyes so wide that they looked as though they might fall out. Still, no words emerged from their flapping mouths.

Without so much as a glance at the two boys, the translucent girl murmured, "Ahh, that's right, I remember now... I'm Anne. I threw myself from the top of the western tower..."

"Hmm," intoned Nicola, placing a hand on her chin. The girl's death had decidedly not been a peaceful one. As such, Nicola paid no attention to the boys that sat with their mouths open like suffocating goldfish and resumed questioning the translucent girl. "So, what made you do that?"

Anne cast her eyes down before answering, her voice trembling. "I carried out a secret relationship with the son of a count... I truly loved him, and he told me that he loved me. He said we should forget about the difference in rank between our families and elope together! But in the end..."

Nicola watched the girl, who had not been much older than her, look down before gently stroking her stomach. She grimaced as she understood what had befallen the girl without needing to ask any further questions.

The shock on Sieghart and Alois's faces finally diminished as they glanced at each other wearing frowns instead.

There certainly was a high degree of freedom of association at the academy. Sieghart and Alois proved that friendship could blossom between students of wildly different social statuses. In only one month since enrolling, Nicola had

made a friend in the merchant class and another whose father's rank exceeded that of a viscount.

Even though friendship between students of differing social statuses was encouraged, there was an unspoken taboo against a romance between such students. In this world, a morganatic marriage—a marriage between people of different social statuses—resulted in legal and social penalties levied against the couple and any children they might have.

It was not impossible to have a marriage that was equivalent to eloping, but doing so would cause the bride and groom to be cut off from society. Their children would also lose any prospect of inheriting a peerage or any other entitlements, so the disadvantages were many and great.

Society would, therefore, harshly reject a budding romance between young people of differing status, which could lead to such a marriage. Yet there was no denying that flings between the unmarried boys and girls who attended the academy—playing with fire, as some would have it—were rampant.

Even in broader society, romance novels featuring lovers of differing social statuses were incredibly popular. This had stoked the aspirations of young men everywhere, who already were idealistic.

And so a surprising number of students enjoyed fleeting love affairs, with the added spice of knowing that it was a forbidden love. Sieghart explained this with a sorrowful expression, showing the student council president had a lot to think about with this matter.

"I really thought that we were the one and only pair in this school who had something like the true love found in storybooks," murmured the spirit of the girl quietly. "But in the end, he decided that it was just for fun after all, and he cast me aside. Not only that, he spread the rumor that I constantly made advances on him from that day forth. With everyone at the academy talking behind my back and no one to talk to... I suppose I must have had a nervous breakdown."

Anne's words may have been slightly self-deprecating, but it was clear from her tone of voice that she reminisced as she spoke. Still, Nicola had expected a greater sense of despair considering the circumstances.

“I was stupid, wasn’t I? I was so caught up in my forbidden love and let that good-for-nothing man manipulate me,” Anne added. “I can see that now. But back then, it meant everything to me.”

Sieghart and Alois appeared to be at a loss for words to respond to this. After sharing a glance, they closed their mouths. Nor did Nicola venture to either affirm or negate the girl’s self-criticism. Romance between lovers of differing social status only ever went well in fairy tales.

Although Anne had been still a teenager and prone to dreaminess when she unfortunately lost her life, Nicola would not go so far as to defend the girl. However, she was not so heartless as to tell the girl what she really thought and kick her when she was well and truly down. So Nicola intentionally changed the subject.

“Come to think of it, why on earth did you decide to haunt Sieghart?” This question caused not only the afflicted Sieghart to lean forward in anticipation of the girl’s response, but Alois as well.

Anne hesitated for a moment, as if she had just remembered Sieghart, then opened her mouth to answer.

“Well, I’m pretty sure I was beneath the western tower when... That’s right, I saw that man. I heard him tell the silver-haired pretty boy, ‘If you’re going to have a fling with a girl, pick one who knows her place.’ So I thought that this pretty boy was probably no good either, and I quietly followed him around.”

“Who was ‘that man?’” asked Alois, parroting the girl’s manner of reference.

Sieghart furrowed his brow in irritation. “I think she probably means Lord Bellmar, our fencing instructor. I’m pretty sure he said something like that to me once our lesson was over.” Sieghart’s tone was bitter.

“I see. The training grounds for fencing students are right below the western tower, right? And Count Bellmar is famous throughout noble society for being quite bold in his amusement with women,” said Alois with a shrug of his shoulders.

In other words, Sieghart had spoken with Bellmar at the precise location of Anne’s death and had summoned her wrath in doing so.

Meanwhile, Anne bobbed through the air around the student council room before performing a twirl right in front of Nicola.

“After following this pretty boy for a while and listening to his conversations, I heard him introduce himself as a marquess. Despite that, he was always saying this and that about a viscount’s daughter. So I thought, ah, this fellow must be a playboy as well. I felt I had to punish this good-for-nothing man for deceiving a girl below his station!”

“And that’s why you haunted him?” asked Nicola.

“Probably? That sounds about right,” said Anne unapologetically while impishly pressing a finger against her cheek.

“How outrageous. I’m completely serious about Nicola,” said Sieghart before sighing as if he felt disappointed beyond words.

Alois snickered before whispering in Nicola’s ear, “Oh, that Sieg of ours. He always talks fondly of you when we have lunch together.”

Nicola responded to this with a frown. “What kind of farce is this...?” she muttered with her shoulders slumped.

5

“Maybe we shouldn’t have made her remember her past...” mumbled Nicola. Everything suddenly seemed so ridiculous that she collapsed face-first on the desk before her in the student council room.

In front of her, Sieghart conversed at length with the ghost floating in the air about how he and Nicola had met, and the memories they shared. Nicola could not help but cringe. Sieghart had already recounted the same memories to her enough times that she had grown tired of hearing them.

Upon hearing someone chuckle, Nicola raised her head to see Alois gazing at her happily with his elbows resting on the desk.

I really can’t stand him, thought Nicola as she glared back at Alois, but he did not seem at all bothered. He simply smiled back at Nicola.

“What are you looking at me for?”

“I was wondering, Miss Nicola, why won’t you return Sieg’s feelings for you? Unlike the man who dumped Miss Anne, you know that Sieg is serious about you. Going by what he’s said, he has felt the same way about you for the past ten years. Isn’t that so?”

Nicola paused before saying flatly, “I can’t return his feelings because of the difference in social standing between us.” *We’ve just heard a perfect example of how these love affairs across social strata don’t lead anywhere good. What the heck are you talking about?*

Alois blinked for a moment.

“What sort of reaction is that?” asked Nicola.

“Is that all? I mean, I thought there must be some other... In that case, am I to understand that if something can be done about the difference in your standing, you’d be willing to marry Sieg?”

“Your question is based on an assumption that cannot possibly become true, so I feel no need to answer it,” Nicola declared coldly.

But with a look on his face like a child who had just thought of some prank to play, Alois said something unthinkable. “Well, as a member of the royal family, shall I make an exception and permit your engagement?”

Nicola saw nothing funny about this joke and frowned as deeply as she could. “There is no need for you to do that.”

“I’d be happy to.”

“That’s OK.”

“Ah, you mean you’re OK with me granting permission?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Fine with me granting permission, you mean?”

“Aren’t you persistent?” cried Nicola before slamming her fist on the desk. “I mean I must decline, you stupid prince.”

“Ah ha ha, you’re a tough nut to crack.”

Even after Nicola glared at him with open disdain, Alois was unfazed and even

more delighted. Nicola's head started to hurt as she decided it had been a mistake to fight Alois head-on. She then collapsed again onto the desk in front of her.

Looking in Sieghart's direction, Nicola saw he was still subjecting Anne to a barrage of his tales of love. Nicola thought, *I feel so sorry for you, Anne.* Even as Sieghart continued shooting words, her concerns turned out to be unfounded. Unbelievably, Anne seemed to enjoy listening to Sieghart.

Anne blushed so brightly that the redness in her cheeks was visible despite her translucent body.

I get it. He is good looking, thought Nicola with a brisk smile.

As always, Sieghart's face was so composed that it beggared belief. Every feature was in precisely the right location, together constituting the epitome of beauty. There was no greater feast for one's eyes.

"You seem to like Sieg's face, at least, Miss Nicola," said Alois, teasing. He then chuckled.

"Well, I mean...! Show me someone who doesn't like beautiful things," Nicola said as she scowled and glared up at Alois as if to say, "What's wrong with that?"

"You also seem to have something of a soft spot for Sieg," said Alois, folding his arms and closing his eyes. Nicola was stunned.

"I have nothing of the sort."

"I wonder about that. You didn't hesitate to give Sieg that shikigami, did you? Even though it would pose quite a risk to you if it got damaged?"

"That's because... Sieghart attracts spirits far too easily." However, Alois and Sieghart now both faced the possibility of encountering apparitions. Nicola realized this was a poor excuse as her eyes wandered away from Alois.

Alois smiled even wider, as if delighted by Nicola's reaction.

"Your childhood friend loves you, and his face is to your liking. It is not as if you hate him..." he said. "You really are stubborn, aren't you?"

Strictly speaking, Sieghart's face had attained a truly miraculous beauty,

transcending the realm of individual preference. Saying that his face was merely to Nicola's liking was not quite right.

It was unfair to say that Nicola had fallen in love with Sieghart because of his face and for Alois to state that she did not "hate him." She could not deny that she felt affection for Sieghart as her childhood friend, as it would be refuting her ten years of friendship with Sieghart. Rather than do that, she shut her mouth and looked away from Alois.

After a moment, Nicola said, "Regardless, I am only a viscount's daughter."

"The daughter of a viscount, you say." Alois looked meaningfully at Nicola. "Miss Nicola, are you not the granddaughter of Marquess Elsheimer?"

This surprised Nicola. "Well, yes, I am." *Well done for committing the unfathomably complex relationships of the aristocracy to memory*, she thought bitterly before narrowing her eyes at Alois.

Just as Alois said, Nicola's grandfather was indeed a marquess. There were, broadly speaking, two reasons for elevation—being granted a higher peerage within the aristocracy.

First, a nobleman could distinguish himself in a way that the crown would recognize. Second, a noble could inherit his father's peerage. In this world, it was not rare for a single noble to hold multiple ranks. Nicola's grandfather was a marquess, a count, and a viscount all at once. The rank of count had already been inherited by his eldest son and Nicola's father had inherited the rank of viscount.

If the unthinkable were to happen to Nicola's uncle, the current heir to the title of marquess, her father would advance to the rank of marquess. Nicola's standing would leap from the daughter of a viscount to the daughter of a marquess. There was a chance, theoretically.

She slowly shook her head. "My uncle will inherit the rank of marquess. That has nothing to do with me."

"If all goes as expected, that is."

"Quite. But if the unexpected happens, my entire family may well be assassinated. I will only end up in peril if things do not go as expected."

In this world, Nicola had often heard stories of contests over noble estates awash in blood. Nicola's uncle, her father's elder brother, seemed to be quite a greedy man. To indicate the extent of his greed, her uncle was once only the second oldest son. One day, his crucial elder brother had an "unnatural accident," along with his wife and children, sending them all to the next life.

Once Nicola saw the former eldest brother's family whispering words of resentment in her newly elevated uncle's ear, it was not difficult for her to imagine what had happened.

Nicola was suddenly aware of a familiar fragrance that caused her body to freeze up. After speaking to Anne of his love for Nicola to his heart's content, Sieghart had sneaked behind Nicola. By the time Nicola hastily turned around, it was already too late.

After lifting Nicola like a cat, Sieghart swiftly occupied the chair she had been sitting in and placed her on his lap. Nicola could not help but click her tongue in annoyance at this characteristically blatant criminal act.

"Please don't get carried away just because you're visually appealing," said Nicola.

"Thank you for complimenting me on my appearance," replied Sieghart. Paying no mind to the fact that Nicola had tutted at him, his needlessly brilliant, florid face broke into a smile. Nicola continued to huff and puff.

Sieghart had apparently been listening to Nicola and Alois's conversation, as he spoke past Nicola to Alois.

"Regarding my father-in-law—"

"Don't call him that," snapped Nicola.

"Right, right. Regarding Viscount Weber, he seems to be a peaceful fellow with no greed. He has even said that if the alternative is to expose his family to danger, he is happy to remain a viscount. So the chance of removing the obstacle of rank between Nicola and me is low."

"Oh? I was convinced that you sought to marry Miss Nicola because there was a chance of her becoming the daughter of a marquess," said Alois, blinking in

surprise.

While hugging Nicola tightly, Sieghart continued, “The bond between us is much simpler than that. Nicola and I are really not concerned with matters of nobility, so we are prepared to throw away our entitlements. Even as a farmer, I think I would do surprisingly well.”

To be fair, thought Nicola, *considering that Sieghart performed virtually any task at an above-average level, he really might do well as a farmer*. Nicola herself had worked in a very rare profession in her past life, but she came from an average household in Japan. She certainly was not very concerned with matters of nobility. *Still, as if I’d let someone so gorgeous end up as a farmer.*

She looked bitterly at Sieghart and noted he was a work of art from the top of his head down to the tips of his toes. The very thought of his skin becoming deeply tanned from working under the sun and his fingers chapped or covered with dirt made Nicola think he should remain a nobleman.

“My father-in-law was even kind enough to say—”

“I told you not to call him that.”

“Viscount Weber was even kind enough to say that if I convinced Nicola to elope with me, he would happily provide me with citizenship within his realm.”

Nicola simmered with rage toward her father, wondering what he thought he was doing, making a promise involving her without consulting her first. But he was not around for Nicola to voice her complaints, so she scowled instead.

Sieghart stroked Nicola’s head, expecting this to soothe her, but it did not make any difference coming from the prime cause of her woes. She tried to slap Sieghart’s hand away, but he apparently expected this and intercepted her hand, leaving her growling and looking very foolish.

Seeing this, Alois and Anne looked at each other and chuckled, Anne seeming particularly amused. There were even tears in her eyes as she clutched her stomach and laughed. Once Anne was finished laughing at Nicola and Sieghart, she flew into the air and circled them.

“Ah ha ha, I feel so much better after a good laugh! I suppose that I simply chose the wrong man. True love really does exist, even between lovers of

different ranks.”

“Please, spare me...” said Nicola. The words “true love” did not ring true to her and sent a shiver down her spine.

Despite being translucent, Anne blushed like a maiden falling in love and was red as a rose. She even looked a tad envious as she half-closed her eyes. Starting at the extremities, her body appeared fainter, little by little.

“Don’t you have any unfinished business? Like paying back the man who dumped you, for example?” asked Nicola.

“I really no longer care what happens to that worthless man. When I look at you two, I think that perhaps I should have become a commoner and raised that child by myself.” Anne cast her topaz-colored eyes down and rested her hands on her stomach again. “Even if I had to face disownment and expulsion from the academy, if I had the courage to die, perhaps I should have chosen another path in life instead... Only kidding, of course.”

The thought of a girl who had lived her whole life in a noble family being thrown out to live as a commoner one day and raising a child by herself was not realistic. But Nicola did not feel like disenchanting her of that fantasy just because she had to live in reality. Even if the notion was nothing more than a dream, Anne was free to revel in it as she was no longer part of this world.

Nicola took a moment before speaking up again. “I don’t see the soul of the lost fetus... Of the baby you lost by your side. Your baby probably went to the afterlife first and is still waiting for you.”

“If we should meet, first I’ll have to apologize. I wonder if I’ll be forgiven.” After performing a twirl around Sieghart, Anne met Nicola’s gaze once more with a lovely smile. “I’m glad I met you. Thank you for making my last experience here a happy one.

“Live happily ever after, you two,” Anne added with a whisper. These were kind words, but Nicola still did not wish to hear them. Anne then dissolved smoothly into the surrounding air until even Nicola could no longer see her.

After a moment, Alois asked, “What happened to her?” having witnessed a spirit pass on for the first time.

Nicola looked up. “She’s returned to the place where she belongs.” She then silently cast her eyes down again. Perhaps Anne, like Nicola, would be reborn and begin a whole new life. An inappropriately jovial voice suddenly broke the solemn silence between the three of them.

“Your Highness, Your Grace! My deepest apologies for taking so long!” Ernst had returned to the student council room in high spirits and held the sachet that Nicola had recently given to Sieghart. If Sieghart had kept ahold of the sachet, she would not have needed to deal with an apparition so soon. After thanking Ernst, Sieghart took the sachet back.

Nicola looked up at Sieghart reproachfully and said, “Please don’t let it out of your sight this time.” Having needlessly tired herself out by uncharacteristically working on a whim, Nicola let out a single heavy sigh.

Out of the corner of her eye, Nicola saw a cloud of black haze jumping up and down to stay in view as if asserting its presence. Nicola turned to glare at it as if to say, “Don’t cause me any more trouble.”

But the entity, seeming to rejoice in receiving Nicola’s attention, wound itself up into a ball before bouncing even more enthusiastically onto a windowsill. While massaging her temples, Nicola slumped forward onto the desk and rested her head on her elbows.

6

Although Nicola thought that yet another spiritual matter had been settled, this was not the case. Nicola would find this out a week after Anne's spirit had supposedly passed on.

"A ghost appeared in the western tower?" The topic suddenly arose at a tea party arranged within Karin's social circle.

"I heard about that! They say that a female pupil at this academy who committed suicide still wanders the grounds, seeking revenge on the man who dumped her, don't they?"

"I heard about it too!"

Girls on either side of Nicola recounted the same rumor. Apparently, Nicola was the only one who had not yet heard about it. As the guests at this tea party were exclusively the daughters of lower nobility and wealthy merchants, the girls somewhat lacked manners and were all too willing to engage in shrill gossip.

"I believe that I actually saw that ghost with my own eyes," said Elsa von Ratzel, the daughter of a count.

"Really?! What did it look like?" Karin prompted Elsa to speak further, her eyes sparkling.

After setting down her teacup on its saucer, Elsa glanced at the faces gathered around the round table with her amber eyes. She then lowered her voice, as if to lend gravitas to her story, and continued.

"Around dusk, I saw a girl crouching on the top floor of the western tower, so I tried calling out to her. If I remember correctly, the girl had wavy hair like mine, which was chestnut-brown, and eyes the color of topaz." As Elsa said this, she pointed to her soft, dark brown hair.

Nicola recalled Anne's appearance and frowned. From the description Elsa had given, it really sounded like she truly had seen Anne.

Elsa continued, "And then, I heard her muttering something to herself, so I

strained my eyes and ears to hear what it was. The whole time I was there, she kept repeating, ‘You’ll pay, you’ll pay, you’ll pay, you’ll pay, you’ll pay, you’ll pay.’ Then I took a closer look at her and realized that I could see right through her legs! So in the end I was too frightened to call out to her, and I just got out of there.”

“Oh my!” exclaimed Emilia Rois, a merchant’s daughter. “Well, that was definitely a ghost! Leaving without talking to her was the right move!”

The other girls around the table nodded in agreement following Emilia’s declaration.

Nicola could restrain herself no longer and asked, “Hey, how long ago did you see it?”

Without hesitation, Elsa answered, “It was two days ago.”

Nicola tilted her head feeling puzzled as there was no doubt in her mind that Anne had passed on to the afterlife a week ago. However, the witness account matched Anne’s appearance and the haunting that had taken place at the western tower where she had died.

The only details that did not sit right with Nicola were that this sighting had occurred after Anne’s spirit had passed on and that the ghost still harbored a powerful grudge against the man who had cast her aside.

When Anne told Nicola that she was no longer concerned with her former lover, she did not sound like she was lying. Perhaps after a change of heart, her spirit could not pass on.

Or perhaps... Nicola must have spaced out while she mulled over this mystery because Karin, sitting next to her, grabbed her arm and shook her out of her idleness.

“Nicola! Hey, Nicola! Have you been listening to me at all?” exclaimed Karin.

“Eh? Ah... What were you talking about?” replied Nicola.

“For the last time! Why was it that Ernst came to talk to you the other day? I won’t let you off even if you pretend to not hear me. It’s time to fess up!”

Nicola noticed how every other girl around the table gazed at her with

curiosity.With a far-off look, she remembered what a friend in her past life had once told her: “The conversations of high school girls are like word association games.”

The first thing I think of when I hear “banana” is “sweet,” “sweet” makes me think of an apple, an apple is red... At some point, these conversations would always veer off in an unexpected direction.

But Nicola, who was not even sure where she stood with Ernst, found it difficult to respond. She was pretty sure that she was not supposed to give an honest answer like “He threatened me for being suspicious and getting too close to his master.”

Feeling defiant, Nicola told them a completely made-up answer, “Ernst fancies a girl who happens to be an acquaintance of mine, so all he wanted from me was a promise to introduce them.”

Disappointed sighs sounded around the table at this merely adequate explanation. For half of the girls, the reason they sighed was that they had hoped for saucy details. The other half was disappointed to hear that Ernst already fancied someone.

Nicola blinked in surprise. She would not have expected Ernst to be so well-known or popular. Karin noticed her look of surprise and seemed shocked herself.

Then Karin furtively whispered in Nicola’s ear, “Nicola, haven’t you heard? Ernst is famous as the most skilled swordsman currently attending the academy. Quite a lot of girls from the lesser nobility have their hearts set on him as he is a sure bet for future advancement and is not yet engaged.”

“Oh?” replied Nicola, unable to summon any enthusiasm for Ernst. She would not have expected someone so uptight to be popular with girls. While she pondered this, the free association conversation swayed into new territory.

“Now that you mention Ernst,” Elsa began cheerfully, “we saw him sparring with the Silver Lord in fencing class! Didn’t we, Susanna?”

“Yes, we did!”

Elsa and Susanna, who was the daughter of another count, held their heads

high with pride.

“Our class finished early that afternoon, so we were lucky enough to get a really close view of the action!” boasted Elsa.

“How lucky!” the other girls around the table shrieked in excitement.

“A muscular man is more my type than an elegant lord.”

“I find men like that a bit intimidating. Scary, even...”

“Oh, but that’s what makes them so exciting!”

“I know what you mean!”

“Eh?!”

Nicola gulped down her tea, which had gone entirely cold, as she watched the girls gossip about what they sought in a man with a look of disdain. She scrupulously ignored the girls’ frivolous conversation and cast her mind back to the report of a ghost appearing in the western tower.

◇

After school the very next day, Nicola visited the top floor of the western tower alone. From the outside, one could see that it had a large clock embedded within its walls. Once inside, she saw a large, dark gray bell hanging from the ceiling and walked directly beneath it.

Nicola looked inside the tower and through its stained-glass windows at the school grounds below, but she saw no sign of Anne. Just to make sure, she searched all the lower floors as well, yet the result was the same. She could find no ghost muttering words of resentment.

She frowned when she noticed the dark entity peering in through the window but ignored it for the time being and headed straight for the student council room.

***

Nicola opened the door to the student council room and felt lucky to find the very person she was looking for.

“It’s not very often that you decide to come and see me, Nicola.” A smile of

pure delight bloomed across Sieghart's regal visage before he beckoned Nicola inside. She felt less fortunate and more irritated, however, when she noticed that there were two unwanted guests by Sieghart's side. But there was nothing she could do about it.

To no one's surprise, a fearsome look came over Ernst's face the moment he saw Nicola, wanting desperately to growl at her. She quickly turned her gaze away from him. Alois looked at each of them in turn, saucer-eyed, before smiling broadly as if he had just discovered something that amused him greatly.

However, Nicola quickly realized those familiar three were not the only people in the student council room.

"Oh, do we have a guest? My, aren't you the new student who was here the other day?" a voice called out.

The student council room comprised two connected spaces. After reacting to Nicola's arrival, a female student appeared in the doorway to the back room. Nicola recognized her as the senior student who had reprimanded Alois for using a vacant room without permission. That happened on the day Nicola met with Alois to explain the truth about her shikigami and other supernatural matters.

Sieghart grabbed Nicola's hand and dragged her in front of the older girl.

"Miss Olivia, this is my childhood friend, Nicola."

Nicola was quite sure that she had told Sieghart that she wished to conceal the fact that they knew each other as much as possible within the academy. So what did he think he was doing by introducing her so casually? She looked awestruck up at Sieghart, but he just smiled.

"You don't need to worry about her," said Sieghart. "Nicola, meet Miss Olivia. She is the daughter of Marquess Lüneburg and the deputy president of our student council."

After hearing this explanation, Nicola's shocked expression shifted almost imperceptibly to one of wonder. The Lüneburg family was powerful enough that even Nicola had heard of them.

"She is also my fiancée," added Alois in an off-hand manner.

Nicola had expected the firstborn prince of the kingdom to be engaged to the daughter of a duke, not the daughter of a marquess. But as far as she knew, no duke in the kingdom presently had a daughter of marriageable age.

Olivia laughed softly with an air of refinement, sending waves through her long, blonde hair.

“You are truly blessed to call such an adorable young lady your childhood friend, President. I’m so envious!”

Still, Nicola wondered if Olivia’s use of the word “adorable” implied that her *size* was adorable. This keen insight from Nicola was helped by the fact that Olivia’s proportions were indeed formidable. Although she was far smaller in stature than most, Nicola took a good look at Olivia. She could not help but be astonished by the pair of plump fruits that loomed over her and almost threatened to burst out of Olivia’s uniform.

After assessing Olivia’s voluptuous, womanly frame, Nicola silently looked down at her own diminutive, slender body. The most charitable thing one could say was that there was not an ounce of unnecessary tissue on it. Not only were her arms and legs skinny, but her chest and backside were all but absent.

Nicola thought bitterly that it would make much more sense for Sieghart to prefer a glamorous woman like Olivia rather than one of modest proportions like herself.

But, well... Maybe I should try padding my dress out with something. I am only considering this out of my vanity as a woman. It definitely has nothing to do with Sieghart. Nicola vigorously shook her head to snap herself out of her trance.

After further consideration, she realized that Sieghart and Olivia would indeed make the perfect couple. As Sieghart was a marquess and Olivia was the daughter of one, their families were equal in rank. Nicola also thought that they looked the part, and it was very unfortunate that Olivia was already engaged to Alois.

“I don’t have any friends who are younger than me. I’d be so pleased if we could get along,” said Olivia with a charming smile.

Thanks to the bountiful pair of fruits that Olivia carried with her, Nicola's initial impression had been entirely focused on her body. After giving a noncommittal reply to Olivia's offer of friendship, she looked up at the girl's face.

Having grown used to Sieghart and Alois, Nicola was no longer impressed by a merely attractive set of features, but Olivia had quite an attractive face.

"I have somewhere to be very soon, so I will have to take my leave for now. But first I shall serve our guest some tea. Nicola, darling, you came to see our president, right? Come, sit, sit." Olivia grabbed Nicola by the hand and sat her down in a nearby chair before withdrawing into the adjoining room in a hurry.

"Alois and I can't help but attract crowds as we walk about the academy. Olivia was the one who suggested that we use the council room as a hiding place during periods when the council had no duties to perform. Ever since, this place has really come in handy." From his tone of voice, Nicola could tell that Sieghart really was grateful.

This was certainly not a place where the general student population could easily come and go unless they had business with the council or were invited by a council member.

"We tend to come here just to pass the time, so if you ever need us, come and visit."

Nicola could do nothing but nod reluctantly while privately hoping that she would never have cause to come here again. This world without smartphones really was quite inconvenient.

"By the way, Miss Nicola. Is anything the matter?" asked Alois, peering down at Nicola.

After a moment, Nicola answered him directly, "Have you heard the rumors about a ghost appearing in the western tower?"

Perhaps this question immediately reminded Sieghart and Alois of Anne because a look of suspicion came over both of their faces. From this, Nicola inferred that they had not yet heard the rumors. Ernst, who simply disliked rumors of this kind, also frowned deeply.

“To avoid drawing attention, we spend most of our time holed up in this room, so we miss out on most of the rumors circulating throughout the academy,” said Alois with a shrug.

“Oh, hadn’t you heard?” said Olivia as she returned carrying a tea set. All the eyes in the room turned to her. “You’re talking about the ghost of the girl who committed suicide at this academy, right? It’s the talk of the whole school at the moment.”

Olivia looked around at the room’s occupants as she served the tea.

“Although...” Olivia continued, sounding perplexed, “I only heard this rumor exactly one week ago. I’d never heard about it before, and there have been no students who committed suicide in the time we’ve been here. So I have to wonder why such a rumor began so suddenly...”

Sounds like the rumor really started right after Anne’s spirit had supposedly passed on to the afterlife, thought Nicola, narrowing her eyes. However, she could not continue pondering this for long. Once Olivia had finished serving the tea, for some reason, she took Nicola’s hand and squeezed it tightly.

“I’m afraid I must leave for today... But since we are now acquainted, I hope we can have a much longer chat next time! Darling Nicola, let’s have a tea party on our next day off! Okay?”

“Eh, eh? Yes, I’d love to...” Despite her reservations, Nicola nodded, unable to resist her pushy senior schoolmate.

“Wonderful! I look forward to inviting you back here soon,” said Olivia before cheerfully leaving the student council room.

As Nicola watched Olivia leave, Alois chuckled and said, “You’re such a pushover that I can’t help but laugh, Miss Nicola.”

Who asked you? Nicola though. Instead of saying anything, she stepped on Alois’s foot.

Nicola then turned back to Sieghart and asked him to investigate something for her. Sieghart nodded cheerfully and disappeared into the back room. Though Nicola did not wish to be left alone with one person who irritated her and another who detested her, she was willing to make that sacrifice.

Just as she had expected, Alois hassled her the moment Sieghart disappeared into the adjoining room. Without a hint of pretense, she sighed.

“Ah, Miss Nicola. Come to think of it, I wonder if you could give me one of those sachets that Sieg has for protection. Those seem to be surprisingly effective.”

“No way,” Nicola said, immediately refusing his request. “In the first place, you should really not desire handmade gifts from other young ladies since you already have a fiancée. It would be frowned upon.”

But Alois merely laughed at this and got a twinkle in his eye. “Hmm, I think it would probably be fine. It’s not as if we have any romantic feelings for one another, so I don’t think Olivia would mind.”

Even if that’s the case, Nicola thought*, isn’t there such a thing as reputation?* The total lack of consideration in Alois’s words left Nicola dumbfounded.

Standing upright just behind Alois and off to one side, Ernst suddenly leaned forward and said, “With all due respect, Your Highness, if I might suggest something! If you require protection, then I am already by your side for that very purpose! There is no need for you to enlist the help of someone as dubious as her!” Ernst then pointed at Nicola and growled.

But Nicola nodded enthusiastically and said, “He is quite right. In all honesty, I think he would be much more effective than a sachet.”

“Eh?” Ernst and Alois both looked astonished and gasped comically.

“Was it not always the times when Ernst was not by your side that the strange apparitions presented themselves to you, Your Highness?”

“Eh? Hmmm... Now that you mention it, I’m pretty sure... You’re right?” Ever since one of *those things* first came into focus for Alois, he had become extraordinarily perceptive of entities outside the human realm. Perhaps he always had the makings of someone who could contact the dead.

If so, Nicola thought, *it’s even more amazing that he survived this long*. But after meeting Ernst and hearing that he was Alois’s attendant, everything suddenly made sense.

Nicola took another look at Ernst but had to squint, almost as if she had been dazzled by the sun. She told herself that Alois would have better protection if Ernst stayed by his side than one of her hand-sewn sachets could provide.

“Oh, so what are you saying? Is Ernst strong even against non-human opponents?” Alois turned around to look at Ernst with his eyes shining.

Nicola felt the need to make one small correction. “Strictly speaking, it is Ernst’s guardian spirit that repels them. It is ridiculously powerful.”

“Guardian spirit?”

Nicola nodded firmly. The term referred to any spiritual being that attached itself to a particular person to protect them. She recited the explanation that her mentor had given her in her past life.

Whether in spiritualist circles, Christendom, or Japanese folk beliefs, each faith contained its references to guardian spirits and described them differently —making it an incredibly vague concept.

This vague definition meant that there were countless variations. Sometimes a guardian spirit was the departed soul of someone connected to the beneficiary of its protection, like an ancestor. Other times it was the ghost of a beloved pet. And in some cases, entities that could be referred to as phantoms or deities protected people, though this was extremely rare.

“Hey, do I have one of these guardian spirits as well?” asked Alois, brimming with curiosity as he leaned across the table. Nicola reflexively pulled away from him.

“Well, you do, but it seems fickle and probably doesn’t work very hard.”

Alois goggled at Nicola. “Eh? It doesn’t... Work very hard?”

“Correct. It probably thought the matter I asked Sieghart to investigate was more interesting than what we’re discussing now. It wandered off in Sieghart’s direction and is no longer with us in this room.”

Nicola pointed toward the back room, where Sieghart was currently in. She reasoned this spirit often wandered off when it found something more interesting than protecting the object of its guardianship. It was probably often

absent at crucial moments.

“I... I see,” murmured Alois, an indefinable expression on his face. “Well, then what about Ernst’s guardian spirit?”

“Ah... It is a profusely luminous entity, I would say.”

“A profusely luminous entity.”

“Yes. It is transcendently bright. I would even go so far as to say that he looks like he is bearing the sun on his back.” Annoyed by Alois’s meaningless parroting of her words, Nicola fixed an icy stare at him.

“Why, you!” cried Ernst. “Is this some kind of joke?!”

“No, I’m being totally serious...” Nicola muttered, irritated after Ernst lashed out at her. As if responding to Ernst’s mood, the luminous body behind him suddenly flashed far brighter, enough that Nicola had to shield her eyes with her hand.

Normally, Nicola would have to consciously search for guardian spirits to see them. But Ernst’s spirit was so assertive and aggressive that she did not need to strain her eyes when it appeared.

Each time Ernst threatened Nicola, his guardian spirit shined needlessly brighter than she could stand. So she visibly recoiled each time this happened and found it a nuisance. That was how powerful his guardian spirit was—so powerful that more feeble apparitions would be blown away the moment they approached him. If Nicola had to compare Ernst’s nature to something, she would have to say that he approached the power of a god.

“Hmph! I don’t believe in anything that I can’t see with my own eyes, be it ghosts or guardian spirits. However, if what you call my guardian spirit is really so strong, then it will defend His Highness as well, won’t it? So we won’t be needing you!”

Nicola was silent for a moment. “I wonder about that. As far as I can see, your guardian spirit will only protect you.” From Nicola’s perspective, the guardian spirit, like Ernst himself, regarded its charge as having the utmost importance. It could only prevent anything it regarded as strange from getting close to Ernst, so any protection Alois had received was merely an unintended consequence.

“Therefore,” continued Nicola, “the best course of action available is for you to always remain by Ernst’s side, Your Highness.”

“Always? Day in, day out? That might be a little much.”

“Wh-What is that supposed to mean, Your Highness?!”

“Ah ha ha.”

“Y-Your Highness?!” Ernst was almost clinging to Alois at this point.

“I meant nothing by it,” said Alois, attempting to comfort Ernst before turning back to Nicola. “Yeah, could you give me a sachet after all?”

“No way.”

“I shall defend you, Your Highness! Please do not place your trust in such a suspicious person!”

And so this fruitless, foolish discussion continued to repeat itself in circles until Sieghart returned.

***

“How unfair. You all look like you’ve been having quite a lot of fun,” said Sieghart, peering down at Nicola, Alois, and Ernst. In one hand, he carried a sheaf of documents that had been yellowed by the sun.

“Yeah, it’s been lots of fun,” replied Alois, stifling a chuckle.

“No, it really hasn’t,” said Nicola and Ernst in unison, both of them sulking.

Sieghart also chuckled before looking at Nicola and Ernst and saying, “You two are quite friendly, aren’t you? I feel a little jealous.”

“No, we aren’t. As if we’d get along.”

“That’s right, Your Grace!”

Sieghart smiled cheekily as if to say, “See what I mean?”

Nicola glared at Sieghart before pressing him. “So, were the documents still there?”

“Yeah, they were.” A slightly cloudy expression fell across Sieghart’s regal visage as he thumbed through the sheaf of sun-yellowed pages and found the

one Nicola had requested.

“Seven years ago...” Just by skimming the page, Nicola learned it was not so long ago that Anne von Bülow had died.

“Ah, I see. So that’s what you wanted to know,” murmured Alois, staring at the page beside Nicola and running his eyes across the name at the top of the page. Only Ernst, who had not been present on the day of the séance, looked confused because they had left him completely out of the loop.

“By the way, Nicola. I had a look and could not find any staff or students currently at the academy with the surname Bülow.”

Nicola gasped as Sieghart figured out what she had been thinking and had taken the initiative to investigate the matter. But with this result, the mystery had only deepened. If someone connected to Anne was not responsible for the recent ghost sighting, then who was? And why had they done this? Nicola had just lost herself in deep contemplation when Sieghart interrupted her.

“Although,” he said. “If I remember correctly, I’m pretty sure...”

The words that followed prompted Nicola to open her eyes wide in shock.

“I see,” said Nicola in a low voice after dropping her gaze. “Thank you, Sieghart.”

Sieghart smiled awkwardly, then patted Nicola’s head. “Don’t do anything dangerous, all right?”

“As long as nothing goes wrong, I won’t do anything.” *As long as nothing goes wrong.* In her past life, no job was more certain to go wrong than one that followed that very wish. If Nicola had not completely forgotten that fact, she would not have uttered those fateful words.

7

Nicola raced up the stairs of the western tower, already out of breath, following a vaguely humanoid paper doll that could as well have been modeled on a *Clione* genus sea slug.

Her heart pounded so hard that it hurt to breathe due to her lack of daily

exercise and natural absence of coordination.

“W-Wait up...”

The paper doll seemed shocked by the lack of fitness present in the very occult practitioner who had created it. After stopping a few steps in front of Nicola, it turned its head and waved one of its tiny hands to beckon her forward. It appeared that the doll would not allow Nicola to stop and rest. Though Nicola had indeed commanded the doll to alert her if it detected any movement, it was perhaps too committed to its task. It was strict, even with its master. But the fact of the matter was that, at this pace, they might not make it in time.

Nicola took a few pieces of paper out of her pocket before staggering to a window. After she gently blew on the scraps of paper, they transformed into pigeons in the blink of an eye before flying away. Nicola told herself that this would at least buy her some time. She wanted to stop and catch her breath, but the paper doll leapt and gave her a reproachful smack on the cheek.

“Dammit, I know, I know...” Nicola summoned her last ounce of strength and forced herself to move her arms and legs. She felt like she was walking through a swamp. The paper doll performed a little twirl of satisfaction before taking the lead in their mad dash once again.

As they finally reached their destination, the top floor of the western tower, Nicola almost collapsed across the finish line. The girl lurking there, to whom Nicola’s paper pigeons had flocked, seemed far too occupied to pay attention to this clumsy intruder. Even though Nicola had released the paper birds in the first place, she felt very fortunate, as this gave her a chance to lean against a windowsill and catch her breath.

A cloud of black haze bobbed past just outside the open window, asserting its presence. Nicola looked down beneath the tower and could also just make out the outline of a person standing there. She realized this was the very count who the ghost had supposedly remained to haunt.

Looking back inside, Nicola saw a broken vase at the girl’s feet. Judging by the number of shards on the floor, it had been fairly large when it was still intact. Nicola was relieved to see that she had made it just in time.

After she whipped out a comb and fixed her disheveled hair, Nicola sneakily directed the birds so that the girl could not see her do it. After watching the last pigeons fly out of the open window, Nicola turned to face the girl and spoke.

“Tell me. Were you planning to drop that vase from this window?”

The girl took a moment to respond.

“What are you talking about?” said the girl dismissively as she tidied up her fine locks of hair, which the pigeons had disturbed.

“Were you seeking revenge for Anne?”

“What! You know about my sister...?” said Elsa von Ratzel as her eyes widened.

In contrast, Nicola narrowed her eyes upon hearing “sister.” Elsa had dark brown, wavy hair and amber eyes. Changing the brightness and saturation of Elsa’s hair and eye color just a few degrees would have yielded Anne’s chestnut brown hair and topaz eyes.

There is no smoke without fire. But if that was true, then it could be said the fire came from made-up rumors. Nicola’s guess turned out to be right. Of particular importance was the fact that the ghost of the rumor matched Anne’s appearance exactly. This made perfect sense if Anne’s younger sister was the one who spread the rumor.

“I believe Anne bore the surname Bülow, but you don’t, do you Elsa?” Though Nicola already knew the answer, she deliberately posed the question.

“After my father died... My mother remarried, this time to Count Ratzel. So a few years ago, I became the daughter of a count.”

Besides his other qualities, Sieghart was a good student and had an impeccable memory. Sieghart, who even remembered the most trivial pieces of gossip he heard in high society, had given Nicola the name of someone related to Anne. By sheer coincidence, this was someone she knew very well.

Now I get it, Nicola thought. *That’s why she spoke to me in such a familiar way*. Typically, as one climbed the ranks of the noble hierarchy, one was more likely to find the likes of Olivia or the daughter of Count Flügel, another girl

Nicola had met. These girls spoke in a manner that one might deem ladylike.

The daughters of lesser nobles, such as viscounts and barons, spoke more like members of the merchant class who inhabited the downtown areas of cities. Despite being the daughter of a count, Elsa spoke in the same downtown dialect as Nicola and Karin.

“Tell me, Nicola. If you know about my sister, you also know she killed herself by jumping out of this window, right? All because that man toyed with her emotions,” said Elsa, walking up to the window and pointing down at the ground.

Nicola looked out of the window once again. She saw the training grounds used for swordsmanship lessons and saw a man carrying practice swords. The man was Count Bellmar, the fencing instructor. His name, too, appeared in the records documenting the uproar over Anne’s suicide that Sieghart had found in the student council room. Then, Nicola recalled Anne’s words.

“I carried on a relationship in secret with the son of a count... I truly loved him, and he told me that he loved me. He said that we should forget about the difference in rank between our families and elope together!”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I was beneath the western tower when... That’s right, I saw that man. I heard him tell the silver-haired pretty boy, ‘If you’re going to have a fling with a girl, pick one who knows her place.’”

By “that man,” Anne really had meant to indicate a specific person.

“Say, do you remember what I told you at the tea party the other day? I told you I got a very close look at the Silver Lord sparring with Ernst, didn’t I? Directly after that, I heard that man say to the Silver Lord, ‘If you’re going to have a fling with a girl, pick one who knows her place.’ He added, ‘Otherwise, she’ll make trouble for you afterwards.’ Even after driving a girl to her death indirectly, how could he say such a thing? That man doesn’t feel a shred of remorse.” Elsa gritted her teeth together and clenched her fists.

“So you started that rumor?”

“That’s right. Then the rumor spread so quickly that it even shocked me. I guess everyone is starved for gossip. No one wondered why a ghost from seven

years ago would suddenly appear now," said Elsa, with a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Nicola closed her eyes. One week prior, on the day of Sieghart and Ernst's match, Anne began haunting Sieghart. After school that very day, she had passed on to the afterlife. At the same time, Elsa had picked that very day to start her rumor. The two sisters had coincidentally picked the same time and place to act and were motivated by the words of the same person.

"At first, I simply thought that it would be enough for that man to catch wind of the rumor, just to scare him a little," Elsa continued. "But the rumor spread far more quickly than I expected. It's still the talk of the school. So I thought if he had an unfortunate accident beneath the western tower, people might really think it was the work of the ghost."

As Nicola quietly listened to this confession, her gaze turned to the shattered vase on the floor. Certainly, they could not test for fingerprints in this world. Without a witness, finding the culprit would have been difficult.

Count Bellmar was unquestionably related to what happened to Anne. If anyone besides Nicola had looked into his past, then the rumor would have really taken on a life of its own.

Nicola gazed out the window and muttered, "I don't think...Anne would want you to take revenge for her."

"Oh, how can you be so sure?" Elsa said as she frowned deeply, clearly feeling uncomfortable. "You can't, can you? After all, the dead cannot speak!"

What Elsa said was true. Absolutely so. Elsa's argument was completely unassailable. Nicola could only groan in response as most people obviously could not see ghosts. Unfortunately, Nicola was just special in this regard. Fundamentally, it was not possible to converse with departed souls.

But on this occasion, Nicola had spoken directly to Anne. She would not be able to sleep soundly at night if she allowed one of Anne's surviving relatives to dirty their hands with a crime, murder or assault.

The two girls stood alone at the top of the western tower at dusk, with the sun just setting on the horizon. Suddenly, Nicola sensed a presence behind her.

“Eh? Anne...?” murmured Elsa, looking startled.

She looked not at Nicola, but behind her. Nicola turned around to see Anne floating in the air, as she had no feet. The translucent girl, with her soft, wavy hair, was the very same Nicola thought had passed on following the séance in the student council room.

“But I made that rumor up. This can’t be happening...” Elsa said hoarsely. “I don’t believe it... Is it really you?”

The translucent girl smiled faintly and nodded slightly. Anne then gently floated over to Elsa.

“Listen, Elsa. Thank you for standing up for me. But, you know, I don’t care about that worthless man anymore. So please, don’t do something you might regret,” said Anne before stroking Elsa’s cheek.

Elsa opened her amber eyes so wide that they looked as if they might fall out. She stared at Anne, completely forgetting to blink.

“Nothing would upset me more than the thought of your heart being held captive by that man, even a little. So, Elsa, I hope you can forget all about him and live a happy life.”

After hearing these words from Anne, Elsa bit her lip and scrunched up her face.

“Elsa, please don’t look so upset. I’ve long since put that worthless man behind me. I’m also done regretting my poor choice in men! So please, cheer up?” Anne held her head high, putting on such a brave face it was almost amusing. “That’s why I don’t want you worrying about him either. It’s almost like he has held your heart captive too. That’s what frustrates me. Please, for your big sister, won’t you put those thoughts of revenge out of your mind? Won’t you, please?” An imploring tone crept into Anne’s cheerful voice.

Elsa said something in protest but quickly closed her mouth. She repeated this action several times before a long breath escaped her.

Then, with her lips trembling, Elsa said, “No fair. This isn’t fair, Anne. What else can I do now that you’ve said all of that?” Tears finally escaped from her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

Nicola simply watched this unfold without saying a word. She even tried to breathe quietly.

“Tee hee. The most important words were, ‘for your big sister.’ I wouldn’t want you to make the mistake of doing anything for that man’s sake,” Anne said with an exaggerated gesture of dismissal, almost as if she were playing it for laughs. A half-smile broke across Elsa’s face, even through her tears.

This run-of-the-mill lecture would not have made a bit of difference coming from Nicola, no matter how carefully she chose her words. But when these words came from her departed sister, Elsa could not ignore them.

Nicola would be lying if she said that she did not feel at least a bit guilty. To avoid interrupting the reunited sisters as they spoke, she did everything she could to remain unobtrusive.

“You’re so much bigger than you used to be, but I guess you’re still a crybaby,” teased Anne.

“Who wouldn’t cry after meeting a dead family member?” retorted Elsa in between sobs.

“You’ve really started to look like me, Elsa. I hope your taste in men won’t also resemble mine.”

“No need to worry about that. I love you, sister. But as for your taste in men, you’ve given me a great example of what not to look for.”

“Oh, really? Though I suppose you’re right. You seem more sensible than I was, so I think I can rest easy.”

Though Elsa’s cheeks were stained with tears, the sight of the two sisters laughing together was truly a beautiful sight. Under normal circumstances, such a scene could never have happened. As for Nicola, all she could do was watch in silence.

After a final glance at Elsa, Anne’s gentle smile widened. She then extended her arms to embrace her sister.

“Listen, Elsa. I want you to be happy. I look forward to the day when you can tell me a truly happy love story.”



As if answering Anne’s invitation, Elsa extended her arms to wrap them

around her sister. But her arms sadly passed right through Anne. In the space between Elsa's arms, Anne's translucent body started to lose its definition before dissolving into the air while shining dimly.

"Bye for now." Even as she faded away, Anne faintly murmured those words. Nicola was not sure whether Elsa heard them. Yet Elsa's arms were still outstretched, and she wore a look of frustration on her face. Finally, she let her arms drop.

"Hey, Elsa." Nicola gently offered a handkerchief to Elsa. "Are you still thinking of taking revenge on Count Bellmar?"

Elsa was silent for a moment. "No." After taking the handkerchief and wiping the tears from her eyes, she slowly shook her head. "I can't argue with what my sister said. If she is willing to leave that man behind, then I should also stop looking at the past."

Nicola breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Elsa's expression as it seemed a spirit that had possessed her had finally left.

"Say, Nicola. Could it be that you brought my sister back to see me...?" asked Elsa.

"Who knows? That's a secret. A secret." Nicola then held her index finger up to her lips. "Shhh... A mysterious, very pretty lady once told me that there is no accessory that makes a woman appear as beautiful as a secret."

Elsa furrowed her brow before bursting into laughter. "Why would you make such a needlessly complicated excuse?"

"It's nearly time for our curfew back at the dormitory. Shall we go?"

"I suppose so... Besides, it looks like it might rain."

The two girls looked up to see a heavy carpet of clouds hanging in the sky. They then turned to face each other and nodded to one another. As they made their way back to their dormitory, Elsa looked as if she wanted to ask Nicola something but did not do so. Instead, she amused Nicola with stories about her departed sister.

She told Nicola how Anne had taught her to read and write or had often joined her in playing with dolls. Anne, that dreamy young lady, had been a wonderful sister.

As she had been unable to form any new memories with Anne for seven years, Elsa's recollections had likely become somewhat idealized over time. However, Nicola still enjoyed hearing Elsa's heartwarming stories about her sister.

The two finally parted ways when they reached their rooms in the dormitory. Feeling exhausted, Nicola was about to dive into her bed when she noticed the ball of black haze just outside her window.

"Thanks for your cooperation earlier," said Nicola. Considering how much the apparition had just helped her, she felt it would be heartless of her to leave it out in the cold. She spurred her tired body on long enough to open the window. After Nicola beckoned the ball to enter the room, it cheerfully bounced inside.

The apparition, which had watched Nicola from outside for some time, was the doppelgänger that had impersonated Sieghart and that she had hurled out of a window on her first day of school. It had apparently interpreted Nicola's promise that she would not exorcise it to mean that as long as it stayed outside the building, it would be safe. It had not entered the school building since then but had stuck to simply watching Nicola, so she had been willing to leave it alone until now.

When investigating the recent rumors of a ghost, Nicola realized the doppelgänger had almost certainly been watching her on the day that Anne finally passed on to the afterlife. Thus, she asked the doppelgänger for its cooperation in "staging" Anne's visit to Elsa.

"Still, I wonder why you ended up being quite so friendly," muttered Nicola. The apparition overheard this and immediately floated into the air again and landed on Nicola's writing desk.

On the desk was the ad hoc ouija board Nicola had assembled for the séance with Anne. The apparition bounced across the letters on the board, spelling out entire sentences as it went.

"I have nowhere else to go."

“I have nothing else to do.”

“You’re the first person who has ever noticed me.”

“I want to be helpful.”

“I’ll work hard.”

“Keep me by your side.”

The doppelgänger had spent its entire existence impersonating others, but no one else had recognized it for the impostor that it was. It therefore considered Nicola to be the first person to ever recognize it as an individual, which made it very happy.

“Well, then... How would you like to be my familiar?” asked Nicola. The doppelgänger swiftly hopped over to the spot on the ouija board where the word “YES” was written. “All right, all right.” Nicola forced a smile as she said this.

In order to form a contract with the apparition, Nicola would first need to give it a name. But after getting far more exercise than she was used to that night, she was far too tired.

After collapsing into her bed, Nicola said weakly, “Sorry, but let’s leave your name and our contract for tomorrow... Though, can I ask you one more favor before I go to sleep?” Even Nicola’s eyelids felt heavy, such that she could keep them fully open. Her body felt like it might sink into the earth. “I want you to stand by Count Bellmar’s bed while impersonating Anne. Just to scare him a little...”

Anne had definitely said she did not want anyone to seek outright revenge on the man. Although she did not care about Count Bellmar anymore, she did not say she no longer held a grudge against him. She certainly hadn’t forgiven him either. Nicola had only stopped Anne’s sister from getting her hands dirty for the sake of a man whom Anne had long since written off.

Personally, Nicola did not take kindly to a world in which only women paid a price for their mistakes. She had her own thoughts about a scumbag who had driven a girl to death but felt no remorse.

The rain finally came in heavy drops that pelted the window of Nicola's bedroom. Moments before her weary eyes finally closed, the last thing Nicola saw out of her half-closed eyelids was the black ball bouncing away. She then fell into a deep slumber.

On this appropriately stormy night of rain and thunder, there was no guarantee that she would have been able to overhear the man's grating scream of terror. She only heard about the doppelgänger's successful haunting the next day. The apparition had been pleased to serve Nicola, but it may have been a bit too enthusiastic about the execution of its duty. Nicola realized that she might have made a small miscalculation.

8

"And so, that's what happened." Though the previous night's thunderstorm had abated, the remnants of the rain continued to pour down. While watching the rain run down the window, Nicola told Sieghart everything that had happened. "Thank you for telling me that Anne and Elsa's mother remarried."

"If I was able to help you, then I'm glad, Nicola," Sieghart said, smiling innocently.

It was thanks to Sieghart's incredible memory that Nicola had prevented Elsa from exacting her revenge. The moment Nicola realized Elsa was Anne's younger sister, she was able to make a plan to stop her. Without that information, she was not sure that she would have gotten to her in time.

When Nicola arrived in the student council room to report what had happened and thank Sieghart, she saw Alois accompanying her childhood friend.

Ah, you again, were the casual words that first came to Nicola's mind. Then she realized Alois was becoming a familiar face to her and felt so shocked that she struggled to say anything. According to Nicola's social status, Sieghart and Alois were supposed to belong to an entirely different realm. What a terrifying thing it was to adapt to one's environment.

"All that being said, the way you talked that girl down is impressive, Miss

Nicola," said Alois with a perplexed look on his face. "Surely it's quite difficult to change the mind of someone already committed to revenge?"

"Well, to be honest, I don't think my words alone would have made any difference. So I employed something of a 'cheat.' Hey, Gemini, come here."

A name represents a being. When Nicola summoned her familiar with that in mind, it smoothly assumed the form of Anne and stood in front of them. After dancing in a circle, causing the hem of Anne's uniform to flutter, it vividly changed its appearance to that of Sieghart.

"Hey, Nicola, don't tell me... Is that my impostor from the start of the school year?" said Sieghart, gawking as he pointed at the doppelgänger.

Nicola shrugged and confirmed his suspicions. "Indeed. Well, a lot happened and now it's my familiar. It won't cause you any more trouble."

"A lot happened? What does that mean?"

"By a lot I mean a lot."

Still under the guise of Sieghart, Gemini grinned and nodded. It then smoothly gave up its mimicry and returned to being a black ball before resting on the palm of Nicola's hand.

"Oh, so that little black thing is its natural shape?" said Alois, his eyes shining as he peered down at Gemini.

Looking on, Sieghart seemed perplexed. "Alois, what exactly can you see?"

"What do you mean? I see a round, black orb... Eh, can't you see it, Sieg?" asked Alois, blinking in surprise.

Sieghart smiled wryly and said, "I'm afraid not. Although I can see apparitions that might harm me, others I can't see so well. When it comes to harmless apparitions, all I have is a general awareness of their presence."

"Eh?! So there is a difference in the way we perceive them as well?!" Alois cried hysterically with genuine shock

Sieghart's good looks deviated from the average to such an extreme that he attracted more apparitions than anyone else. In other words, he had come to perceive them over time out of necessity. That being the origin of Sieghart's

ability to perceive apparitions, there was really no reason he would have learned to see entities that did not threaten him.

Nicola thought that Alois's supernatural senses likely belonged to a different type altogether.

She then said, "Your Highness, I am convinced you have always had the potential to see apparitions. Since Ernst was almost always near you, you miraculously avoided dealing with them until recently." After all, Ernst had a guardian spirit so strong that things from outside the human realm would flee at the first sight of him. As long as Alois had Ernst close by, he would not have had many opportunities to see apparitions. For that very reason, that world first came into focus for Alois when Ernst was not around.

If Alois was innately attuned to the spiritual realm, it would be difficult for him to retreat from it. From now on, he would most likely always be able to perceive things outside the human realm.

Sieghart and Alois were troublesome in their own ways. With the two friends in front of her, Nicola could only shrug in exasperation.

"Ah, by the way! I only realized this since I could see these weird things, but you know the ruins just outside the royal capital? Whenever I so much as pass by them, I feel a shiver run down my spine. I've wondered if perhaps they might be dangerous," Alois said pragmatically. But Nicola and Sieghart immediately looked at each other.

"Ah, you know, I think I do know that place..."

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 3

Ghost

A spirit that remains in the world of the living, unable to find rest. I guess ghosts really can be found anywhere. Regardless of the country, wherever there are people, there are ghosts.

Fundamentally, spirits are not reflected in mirrors or water. As they spend year after year idle, they forget their own faces, then their names, eventually failing to keep their shape altogether.

When it comes to defining one’s individuality, I guess names really are important.

Chapter 4: The Portrait Inside the Chest

1

Sieghart recalled a summer three years ago, just before he entered the Royal Academy. Seeking refuge from the heat, he had spent that summer on Viscount Weber's land.

As it was not rare for Sieghart and Nicola to sojourn on the properties of each other's families, Sieghart felt that he was already on quite familiar terms with the viscount. But he knew that he would soon be unable to visit Nicola as frequently as he used to once he enrolled at the academy in the coming autumn, as all students were required to board there.

To make up for the fact that he'd have fewer opportunities to see his childhood friend, Sieghart was particularly clingy around Nicola during that sojourn, staying by her side no matter where she was or what she was doing. At the height of that summer, Nicola told Sieghart something that surprised him.

After tiring of reading books by the side of a lake on her father's property, Nicola suddenly challenged Sieghart to a game of "Who can balance more matches on their eyelashes?" Sieghart took Nicola up on her challenge and obediently closed his eyes.

Nicola, who at thirteen had been even more petite than she was today, offhandedly muttered, "Oh, by the way. You know those ruins just outside the royal capital, the one with the walls covered in wisteria? Please don't go anywhere near there—not even to save your own life."

"After all," she continued, "even I cannot exorcise a god."

2

On a day with no classes to attend, when the autumn rain that had fallen incessantly for three days finally stopped, Nicola enjoyed afternoon tea with some students who occupied high ranks in society.

The attendees included a man who had attained the rank of marquess while still a student, the daughter of the marquess with the greatest influence in the kingdom, and the daughter of a very minor viscount—practically a complete nobody. The party consisted of only three people. Olivia's invitation to Nicola from a few days prior, which Nicola had desperately hoped was a mere social pleasantry, regrettably became true.

Though one of the other students in attendance was Nicola's childhood friend, the other was the daughter of a bona fide high-ranking noble as well as a senior student whom Nicola could reasonably claim she had only just met. This was nothing like the after-school chats she had previously called tea parties, which were between students in the same year and had looser etiquette.

Nicola fretted, wondering if she had made any errors according to the etiquette she barely remembered. As such, she broke out in a cold sweat underneath the simple but somewhat formal dress she wore instead of her uniform.

Contrary to Nicola's turbulent emotions, no cloud in the sky was visible outside the European-style gazebo they sat under. Thanks to the rain that had fallen throughout the previous night, the remaining heat of the recent summer had finally settled down. It was pleasantly cool outside. Dew drops resting on the leaves of nearby trees sparkled so brightly that they dazzled Nicola's eyes.

In this world, a student's primary duty was not to study but to build social connections. Within the campus and dormitories of this academy, there were many salons and gazebos ideal for social functions. If one made an application beforehand, they could even have their tea party catered with a light meal. Olivia had picked one of those very gazebos for today's tea party.

Arranged on a three-tiered tea stand was a selection of sandwiches, scones, and a veritable rainbow of cakes and sweets. Even the teacups were gorgeous and decorated with delicate patterns, as expected from a party hosted by the daughter of a marquess. Nicola recognized these as being of very high quality and could not even risk guessing how much they might have cost. Still, she felt her hand tense up as she grasped her teacup.

"By the way, Nicola, did you trim your bangs?" asked Sieghart.

Nicola paused before responding, “Yeah... I’m surprised that you noticed. I only took a few millimeters off.”

“You look cute,” said Sieghart in a voice so sweet that anyone hearing it would have been embarrassed. In front of Olivia, it made Nicola feel very uneasy.

Olivia followed up with a well-meaning interpretation of this interaction and said, “Aren’t you two close? You’re like brother and sister.”

Sieghart’s expression indicated that he wanted to correct Olivia, but a sharp glance from Nicola dissuaded him from saying anything unnecessary. So he simply shrugged, telling Nicola that he got the message.

“Ah, by the way. Nicola, darling, I believe we spoke about the ghost in the western tower the other day. Have you heard anything since then?” said Olivia. She then touched her blonde hair, which fell in gentle waves upon her shoulders, and elegantly brushed it behind her ears.

“Yes, I did hear something... Something about the fencing instructor having a very scary experience.”

“That’s right! He was so frightened that he could not continue working here as a teacher. In the end, I believe he resigned.”

“Oh, did he really?” said Nicola in a monotone voice before sipping her tea with a nonchalant expression. The doppelgänger had been so delighted by the opportunity to serve Nicola that it had gone about its work a little too enthusiastically.

Sieghart gazed steadily in Nicola’s direction as if he wanted to say something. Even though Nicola thought his face ought to be registered as an artifact of cultural importance, she averted her sight away from him. But her gaze fell on Gemini, currently in pigeon form, who thrust out its chest with pride.

Is that what they call being pigeon-chested? Nicola thought, trying to escape reality by entertaining such pointless ideas.

“Ah... This tea really is delicious,” said Nicola, concealing her discomfort by taking a sip from her cup. As she did so, a sweet aroma and a mellow astringency gently rose into her nostrils. Though she had only said so to change

the subject, the tea was genuinely delicious.

Olivia beamed with delight after seeing Nicola take a deep breath to enjoy the tea's fragrance.

"Why, thank you! My family trades in tea, so I used our connections to procure some. I am so glad that you found it to your liking," said Olivia with a hand placed daintily over her mouth as she chuckled.

A sudden sense of familiarity struck Nicola when Olivia carried out that gesture as she spoke, but even after racking her brains, she could not recall why she recognized it.

"Oh, is something the matter?" asked Olivia.

"N-No. It's nothing. Ah, by the way, I'd like to give you this. Apricots are the specialty crop grown on Weber land. This is a jam made from those apricots..." said Nicola, holding a large, transparent glass jar for Olivia to take. The jar was full of jam with a translucent, refreshing orange color that refracted the sunlight and sparkled enticingly. Even Nicola smiled as she thought about how tasty the jam looked.

When attending tea parties held within the academy, it was common practice to bring foodstuffs made from produce grown on the property of one's family or products sold by the family business. This was an opportunity to introduce the unique products one's family could offer and perhaps even make a sale.

Leaving aside its suitability as a tourist spot for those seeking refuge from the summer heat, the lands of the Weber family offered nothing special apart from its apricots. Whenever Nicola was invited to a tea party, she would always take something made from processed apricots to present to the hostess.

"This jam made from Weber apricots has the perfect balance of sweetness and sourness. It goes very well on scones, but it is even delicious when added directly to tea," said Sieghart, who was mysteriously enthusiastic about helping Nicola promote her family's specialty goods.

Perhaps Nicola should have expected as much from a man who had often said that he would elope with her and start an apricot farm. He was even ready to sell them.

“My, it really sparkles in the sunlight! It looks delicious too. I will have to try some immediately!” exclaimed Olivia, whose eyes also sparkled as she held the jar up to the light. She then took a small spoonful of the jam and stirred it into her tea. “Let me have a taste... Mmm, delicious! The soft pieces of pulp left inside are especially tasty.” Olivia then placed a hand on one of her cheeks and half-closed her eyes, overcome with delight.

Huh? Something did not seem quite right to Nicola, but again, she could not identify what it was. She decided there was no point in continuing to think about it right now, instead electing to nod slightly and respond with an appropriate pleasantry.

“I am so glad that you seem to be enjoying it,” replied Nicola. *Though if we’re talking about delicious things, your tea leaves are of the very highest order.* Nicola thought of following up with these modest words, but managed to swallow them.

“I’m sure it would be delicious with scones as well. It’s a pity that Alois could not make it today,” said Olivia, glancing at an empty chair.

“It sure is,” agreed Sieghart with a somber demeanor.

But Nicola did not know what the other two were talking about. Sieghart noticed her confusion.

“You see,” Sieghart began saying, “Alois and Ernst were also invited to today’s tea party. But, well...”

“Indeed, Alois has been having a hard time of late...”

Olivia and Sieghart shared a glance while wearing ambiguous expressions on their faces. When Nicola asked for more details, they explained that the thirdborn prince of a neighboring kingdom had come to the academy as an exchange student in the same year as Alois, Sieghart, and Olivia. They said that Alois, in his capacity as the sole representative of the royal family at the academy, had taken full responsibility for entertaining this guest. But apparently, the thirdborn prince was quite the rascal—some might even say a spoiled, selfish brat—and had so far taken a carefree approach to his life as an exchange student.

Nicola had to admit that, having often been at the mercy of Alois's malicious whims, she was actually pleased to hear that Alois had found himself at the beck and call of another disagreeable prince.

"Until this morning, he had intended on joining us... But he was forced to accompany the visiting prince into town at the last minute," said Olivia before frowning sympathetically.

Nicola could not feel the same amount of sympathy. This was the same Alois who always seemed to delight in her bewilderment, often going so far as to deliberately provoke her. She felt immensely satisfied as she imagined Alois looking miserable while the spoiled prince dragged him around town. The already delicious tea tasted all the better.

Nicola pretended not to notice Sieghart looking at her reproachfully as she put a scone to her mouth. If Alois was looking after this prince from a neighboring kingdom, that automatically meant that Ernst would also be with them. Given the blinding effect of Ernst's guardian spirit, Nicola could hardly stand to be around him, so she was quite thankful for the absence of both young men. Though there was one detail that troubled her.

"Would this be the neighboring Kingdom of Legrand, by any chance?" she asked. She was fairly sure that, two generations prior to the reign of the current king, the Kingdom of Legrand had gone to war with Daustria over territory.

"That's right," said Sieghart. "Prince Lucas is the thirdborn prince of that kingdom... But after looking at him, I can't help but think that Alois is an upstanding member of our royal family by comparison. I know Alois might seem flippant, but he performs his official duties very well. He is able to separate public and private life..."

"You are quite right. I am not sure whether to describe His Highness, Prince Lucas, as a free spirit or a naughty boy..." mused Olivia.

From Sieghart and Olivia's sour expressions, Nicola wondered if they had suffered merely as students in the same year as Lucas or if they'd been required to spend more time with him as members of the student council.

Nicola resolved that if she ever saw someone matching Prince Lucas's description, she would run away as fast as she could. As she pondered this,

something rustled behind her. She instinctively turned around and saw a black tabby cat leap out of a bush five or six meters away. The cat looked unusually plump and well-groomed for a stray, so Nicola wondered if it might have received food from students at the academy.

However, the cat's fur bristled when it came within a few meters of the group of humans and finally noticed them. It hissed at them menacingly with a nasty look on its face before disappearing into the bushes once more.

"Perhaps she's a mother with a few kittens. That might be why she seemed so nervous. What a pity."

"I don't think so, Miss Olivia. It was probably because Nicola is with us," said Sieghart with a chuckle.

Nicola slumped her shoulders dejectedly before frowning slightly and saying, "Cats just don't seem to like me..."

In her past life, Nicola had a great love for cats. Even as an exorcist, she'd enlisted the help of *nekomata*, a type of supernatural cat present in Japan. During her free time, she often visited cat cafes. Such a strong fondness of cats did not change when she was reincarnated, but she was surprised to discover that cats in this world hated her. Being despised by the thing she loved the most was a bitter pill to swallow.

Although, it's not as if I have no guess as to why they hate me, Nicola thought.

"Nicola likes cats, but they never seem to feel the same way. Ever since we were little, she's always been getting scratched by them, but that hasn't stopped from her trying to pet them. So she keeps getting scratched, again and again, haha..." Sieghart said as he laughed, no doubt recalling such an instance.

"Please don't laugh," said Nicola glumly.

Olivia looked envious of the two childhood friends and murmured, "You two have always been close, haven't you?"

"I wonder," muttered Nicola.

"If that's how we seem, then I'm very pleased," said Sieghart.

Despite these contrasting reactions, Olivia quietly said, "I really do envy you

two.”

“But Miss Olivia, haven’t you and Alois been together since you were small?”

“Indeed. But from the moment we met, it had already been decided that we would be joined in a strategic marriage... So we merely saw our relationship as part of our duty,” answered Olivia before slowly averting her eyes. “That’s why I admire you two so much, for being so genuinely close. I would have liked to be someone’s childhood friend...”

A little while ago, when Alois had insisted on receiving one of Nicola’s sachets, he had certainly said, “It’s not as if we have any romantic feelings for one another.” Perhaps the couple really was not on good terms.

After struggling to come up with a response, Nicola off-loaded that burden onto her childhood friend and remained silent. She looked down at her hands folded in her lap and thought about how her nails had grown a little longer as she waited for the conversation to change.

3

Despite the vast difference in social standing between her and the other guests, Nicola somehow made it through the tea party. A few moments later, though it was already supper time and nearly past curfew, she was behind the dormitory building. She stood with her arms folded, as tall as she could make herself appear, making no effort to conceal her irritation.



In front of Nicola were Sieghart, with whom she had only just parted a few

moments prior, and Ernst, who wore plain clothes and a terribly serious expression. After some prompting from Sieghart, Ernst reluctantly handed Nicola a note, which looked like it had been hastily scribbled down. The note had faint lettering in a few places and messy handwriting. This suggested that the writer had little time to spare and hadn't stopped to add more ink to their pen.

Nicola quickly skimmed the note.

Dear Miss Nicola,

Let me get straight to the point. I ended up having to go to the ruins just outside the royal capital. I'm so sorry. The exchange students from the neighboring kingdom said they were going there to test each other's nerves. I told them not to go, but they wouldn't listen.

I tried everything I could think of to stop them. But if anything should happen to a prince from another kingdom, it would become a diplomatic incident. I knew I couldn't let them go alone since they were set on going. And so, I ended up going with them....

If the ruins really are as dangerous as you say, then could you come after me as soon as you've read this letter? I know I'm asking too much, but please come. I'm sorry.

Alois

Once she had finished reading the letter, Nicola silently crumpled it up.

"Why would you go there?!" she screamed.

"N-Nicola, calm down," said Sieghart. "It's not as if Alois went out of curiosity. You see, he was dealing with a prince from a kingdom that was at war with our own only a few generations ago. If anything happened to Prince Lucas, we really could have a diplomatic incident on our hands. So try to see it from Alois's point of view... Okay?" Sieghart desperately interceded on Alois's behalf, probably remembering what Nicola had once said about mercilessly abandoning Alois if he broke any of her rules of conduct.

This was not enough to convince Nicola, who groaned in the lowest voice she could muster, "Well... I suppose that's true. And it was good of him to attempt

contacting me before going... Besides that, everything about this is awful. Even if I wanted to help him, it's already far too late."

Ernst furrowed his brow and looked down at the ground.

Yes, it's too late. The note Nicola held crumpled up in her hand had only made its way to her as the sun was about to set and just before her curfew. Conversely, Alois had headed out for the ruins with the group of idiotic exchange students before Olivia's tea party had even begun. With curfew just moments away, Alois was still nowhere to be seen.

In summary, the stupid prince from the neighboring kingdom had wanted to go somewhere frightening to test his nerves against the other exchange students, and the ruins seemed appropriate enough. Unable to stop them, Alois had no choice but to go with them.

Alois had entrusted the hastily scrawled letter to Ernst, who did not trust Nicola one bit, refused to pass it on, and arbitrarily joined the game of chicken instead.

As a result of Ernst's unwillingness to share the letter with Nicola and the exchange students preparing to leave the ruins, Alois suddenly vanished. Thinking this was one of Alois's pranks, Ernst and the exchange students returned to the academy. But no matter how long they waited, Alois never came back to join them.

Ernst eventually decided that something must be amiss and sought help from Sieghart. Given his understanding of the situation, Sieghart reached out to Nicola, bringing all three of them to the present standoff.

There was only one location with ruins on the outskirts of the royal capital. Nicola massaged her temples to alleviate her headache. The ruined estate, the one with the buildings covered in wisteria, was not a location that Nicola ever wished to approach.

A few years ago, Nicola and her family had taken a brief vacation to visit the royal capital. They passed very close to those ominous ruins, which seemed to emit a noxious miasma that sent shivers down Nicola's spine. Deep within one of the buildings and past the vines of wisteria so dense that there was hardly a visible gap, Nicola sensed a presence. Although faint, there was a certain purity

to it that was almost holy. Therefore, Nicola had assumed a fallen god most likely occupied the ruins.

It was surprising just how quickly a god, an object of faith, could descend into a cursed existence. Especially in a polytheistic tradition like that of this world, faith was a fickle thing.

After a god experienced such a fall, they became something malevolent, and inhabited ominous places like the ruins. Soit was not uncommon for people who visited that place to vanish. In other words...

“He was *absolutely* spirited away, wasn’t he?” muttered Nicola with a profound sigh. “Very well. For now, I will ensure that Alois isn’t counted absent during the curfew roll call.” As all students were required to board at the academy, the dormitory wardens conducted a roll call every evening after curfew. It almost went without saying that if the firstborn prince of the kingdom was missing one night, it would cause quite a commotion.

“Gemini! Do you think you can turn into the prince?”

Nicola’s familiar, presently in the form of a pigeon, hopped down from a tree behind her onto the ground.

“Of course I can, Miss Nicola.” As soon as Gemini had spoken, standing in its place was a blond-haired, blue-eyed young man indistinguishable from Alois.

“Y-Your Highness?! Where have you been all this time?!” cried Ernst, his wide-open eyes seeming to ask how this was possible. He approached Gemini, but Nicola quickly seized the hem of his jacket and pulled him back.

“Ernst, that is not the real Alois.”

“Wha—What are you talking about?!” Ernst whirled around at a dizzying speed to look back at Nicola. She knew that Ernst would not believe her if she explained things to him, so she kept her mouth firmly shut. It would only be a pain in the neck to try and explain these matters to someone who firmly refused to believe them.

Upon further consideration, she realized that Gemini’s form was visible to regular people, which was very convenient. Unlike her shikigami, it also required no mental effort from Nicola for it to go to work.

When she gave Gemini a pat on the head, it half-closed its eyes with pleasure and rubbed its head against her hand reciprocally.

How cute, Nicola thought, *almost like a cat*. She quickly came to her senses when she remembered Gemini was still in the form of Alois and withdrew her hand in a hurry.

“It’s already late today, so I will go to the ruins tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?! How can you be so complace—I mean...” said Ernst, looking furious for a moment. But then he choked back his words as if he had remembered his folly.

“There is a possibility that we are dealing with a god, which means trouble and that I cannot simply handle it using my techniques. Depending on the god’s desire, we may have an opportunity to speak with it and convince it to release Alois if we pray to it properly. That is our only hope. I will need to make appropriate preparations for this approach.”

When praying to the gods in Japan, it was necessary to take offerings of water, sake, uncooked rice, or salt. But Nicola was unsure what to take in this Western setting.

Early in her career as an exorcist, her mentor had forced her to learn about the occult in Japan and the West. Since she seldom used the latter in her day-to-day work, her memory of it was hazy.

With faith and offerings, it was often the thought that counted the most. So it was not as if she had to do everything in a strictly correct fashion. Nicola considered applying for permission to hold a tea party and receive whatever refreshments she could. She would buy anything she could not get that way at the morning markets the next day. As she mulled this over, she heard Sieghart speak in a lower voice than usual, and raised her head.

“Hey, Nicola. You’re not thinking of going by yourself, are you?”

“Eh? I was,” Nicola responded.

A deadly cold smile crept across Sieghart’s face. Nicola was not sure why, but she realized that she had angered Sieghart and felt her body freeze.

“Absolutely not. I won’t let you go alone. So I’m coming too.”

“But—”

“Absolutely not.”

“But, well...”

“No way.” Though Sieghart wore an elegant smile on his lips, there was not even the suggestion of a smile in the amethyst gems of his eyes. Instead, a perilous light danced within them. Nicola flinched when faced with this sudden anger from Sieghart, who usually never got angry with her no matter what she said to him.

She swallowed her objections and said, “Very well.”

“I... I will also go,” said Ernst.

“Ernst, you too...?”

“It is only because I took my eyes off of His Highness that this terrible thing happened. Let me accompany you. I beg of you,” said Ernst before bowing at a right angle. Perhaps influenced by Ernst’s expression of remorse, the light from his guardian spirit dimmed and seemed dejected. While it was still too bright for Nicola to overlook, she sighed and wished it could always maintain that level of luminosity.

Nicola then spoke softly, “In your case, Ernst, I am afraid that you would be unable to make it to the prince’s side even if I took you with me.”

“And why is that?”

She paused before she said, “This may be hard for you to believe, but try not to interrupt. With that in mind, please listen.” Her eyes then met with Ernst’s blue-gray eyes. “The truth is that your guardian spirit is very strong. If you try to go to where His Highness is now, there is a high chance of your guardian spirit sending you flying back in an attempt to protect you.”

What Nicola’s party planned to do tomorrow was tantamount to intentionally getting themselves spirited away. Ernst’s guardian spirit, which was nearly as powerful as a god, was unlikely to allow its ward to meet with another godly entity.

“It matters not. Let me accompany you.”

“If that doesn’t bother you, I guess you can come...”

Given that Ernst never believed what Nicola said, he likely did not put too much stock in the idea that he would not reach Alois. Yet he nodded approvingly.

Well, thought Nicola, *even if his guardian spirit bounces him back, the only downside will be that he will find himself left outside*. She did not consider this to be much of a problem.

Nicola sighed heavily. One day of her precious weekend had been dedicated to an exhausting tea party, and she would spend the remaining day rescuing Alois. She sulked and wondered if she would ever find a day to relax.

As she considered where and when they should all meet the next day, Nicola thought bitterly about what compensation to demand from Alois when this was all over.

4

The next day, the three met in front of a water fountain in the royal capital city, a local landmark, and walked through the bustling crowds. Having entrusted all the supplies she had either prepared the previous night or purchased in the city to Ernst, Nicola was physically unburdened. Of course, she was not relieved of her mental burden.

She was going to have to deal with a god this time. When practitioners in Nicola’s line of work in her past life were polled, such a task reliably occupied the number two ranking in the list of “Jobs I Want Nothing To Do With.” Gods were big trouble because they were unreasonable, quick to curse people, tough, and simply nuisances.

Incidentally, the number one spot went to jobs involving curses, but these were mainly avoided because they left a bad taste in one’s mouth. Gods were still overwhelmingly considered the more annoying class of assignments. Ultimately, they were just depressing.

However, Sieghart did not look so downcast as he walked by Nicola's right side. Quite the contrary, he almost looked like he was enjoying himself while he held her hand.

"You look quite chipper today," said Nicola in a scathing manner.

"Eh? Ah, well, now that I think about it, it's been a long time since we've walked through town together like this, hasn't it? From one point of view, this could be considered a weekend date." As Sieghart turned to look at Nicola, an innocent smile broke across his gorgeous, marble-white teeth.

Nicola quickly shook her head before looking to the horizon after realizing she was once again in danger of being bewitched by Sieghart's honeyed tone and open affection.

Just behind Nicola on her left, she heard Ernst mutter, "His Grace has quite eccentric tastes..."

To be sure, Nicola's looks were very average and she could not boast about a plump pair of ripe fruits. She could wholeheartedly affirm the claim that Sieghart's tastes were eccentric, but hearing this from an almost perfect stranger still irritated her.

Nicola turned back to look at Ernst and retorted, "If you will forgive me for saying so, I think your lord and master also has quite eccentric tastes."

Though Alois did not fancy Nicola in the same way as Sieghart, the fact that he had taken such a keen interest in her marked him as a true eccentric.

Ernst seemed to try and muster a rebuttal of his own, but he fell silent after opening and closing his mouth a few times. His dejected expression did not suit his gallant features, and Nicola could not help but snort with laughter.

"By the way..." Nicola said. "After you all went to test your nerves at the ruins, what became of the main culprits, the morons who suggested it in the first place?"

"Hey now, you're talking about the prince of another kingdom and his retinue..." said Sieghart, chiding Nicola softly before patting her on the head.

While frowning as he looked on next to Nicola, Ernst answered, "Prince Lucas

must still think that this was just one of His Highness's pranks. The other exchange students seem to think so as well. They have spent the day so far acting as if nothing happened."

In all fairness, Gemini, in the guise of Alois, had returned to the dormitory in time for curfew. Nicola was more inclined to criticize Alois, whose everyday behavior allowed others to think that he would commit such a prank.

As the three conversed in this fashion, they soon found themselves at the very ruins in question.

"This is it..." said Nicola.

Just outside the royal capital, a short distance before one of its brick-paved roads ended, there was a building covered in wisteria vines with verdant leaves. At the kingdom's center, buildings stood near each other within the royal capital. But the further one went outside the city center, the greater the distance between buildings grew. Here, on the outskirts, even the plots adjacent to the ruined estate were vacant.

The nearest intact building was diagonally opposite the ruins, back in the direction of the city center, but it was over twenty meters away. The whole area was deathly quiet.

Thick, green vines of wisteria covered the long-abandoned estate as Nicola grasped a vague impression of its outline by looking at it from the outside. Around the spacious garden surrounding the building was a rusted iron fence, but weeds grew through the gaps in the fence's ornamental lattice.

The more Nicola looked at the place, the more it looked like the perfect spot for young men to test each other's nerves. She was almost impressed that the boys had ventured inside. Not only did it look like a nasty spot at first glance, it also looked like she would find a lot of bugs inside. She absolutely did not want to get any closer.

"When you all came here yesterday, did you cut through this garden, Ernst?"

"No, there was another entrance around the back that servants probably used. So we went through it as we thought we wouldn't have to pass through the garden to get in."

“Well, then, let’s do the same.”

Following Ernst’s lead, they circled to the back of the estate and found an opening in the rusted ornamental fence. This also brought them closer to the building itself.

It looked like those playing chicken tended to use that entrance because they had trampled on the weeds a few meters between the fence and the building, making the weeds appear like a trail left by animals. Through a tiny gap in the wisteria, Nicola saw a small door that looked like it might be a service entrance.

“Shall we go?” asked Ernst.

“No, not yet. We still need to prepare,” replied Nicola, shaking her head. She then rustled through the bag of supplies she had entrusted to Ernst, searching for something she had prepared the previous night. “Ah, here we go.” Nicola pulled something paper-thin out of the bag and handed it to Sieghart.

“What’s this? It looks like a rather unusual...mask?”

“Yes, it is a mask. Please put this on before going inside, Sieghart.”

What Nicola had handed Sieghart was a sort of square mask often used in traditional Japanese court music. On a rectangular piece of paper covered with white silk, Nicola had drawn triangles and swirls that symbolically represented eyes, a nose, and a mouth. She had to admit that it looked a bit funny.

“The gods love things that are pure and beautiful. If you were to go in there with your face visible, Sieghart, there’d be a high chance of you taking Alois’s place,” she continued.

“Taking his place?”

“The god might take a liking to you and not allow you to leave.” Nicola knew full well that if the only objective was to hide Sieghart’s face, she need not have put so much effort into decorating the mask. But since she was being forced to rush in somewhere she would not usually dare tread, she had added some visual humor to the situation as a small act of rebellion on her part.

Sieghart placed the mask over his face and fastened it behind his head with the cord Nicola had provided. Once Sieghart hid his face, she immediately

noticed the dazzling halo the early autumn sunlight cast around the full head of silver filaments that made up his hair.

Nicola grasped a lock of that hair and said, “Sieghart. I hate to say this, but we may need to cut your hair...”

For a moment, she considered covering his hair in dust to remove its luster. But she ultimately contemplated that the offerings she had brought might not satisfy the god. In that event, Sieghart’s hair would make a worthy trump card. Hair was the easiest and least painful offering a human could provide from their own body. Unlike Nicola’s boring black hair, Sieghart’s silver hair, with its mirror sheen, would probably be considered quite valuable. Seeing how glum Nicola looked, Sieghart placed a hand on her head to reassure her.

“I don’t mind cutting it. Personally, I’m not attached to this long hair of mine at all. I only grew it out in the first place because you once said it would be convenient if my gorgeous hair was longer.” Sieghart’s mask moved slightly as he spoke. Without a hint of sentimentality, he added, “I want to be useful in any way that I can.”

Nicola took a moment and answered, “We do not yet know how the god will greet us. Frankly, we may have a fight on our hands if it emerges... But I will avoid cutting your hair as much as possible.”

Did the god have some objective or meaning in mind when it spirited Alois away, or was it acting on a whim? Is it the kind of god we can talk to or not? Without knowing the answer to these questions, they would need insurance.

Nicola knew that she probably put a greater value on Sieghart’s hair than Sieghart did himself, but she could not help but think that it would be a shame to lose it.

“As for you, Ernst, there is a possibility that you might not reach wherever His Highness is or even be able to enter the building. You could also find yourself separated from us inside. If that happens, wait for us. But if you think you might not make it back in time for curfew, please return to the academy then.”

Ernst was silent for a moment before simply saying, “Understood.”

Nicola did not want to think about the fact that this might not be over and

done with today, but with the gods, that was a real possibility.

“Well then, shall we go?” said Nicola.

The three of them then finally slipped past the rusty gate.

5

Although from this side of the ornamental fence there was no need to pass through the garden to get to the building, there were still five or six meters of undergrowth to walk through. As Nicola drew closer to the building, brushing aside tall weeds as she went, she noticed that the wisteria had bloomed out of season. Here and there, she could see clusters of flowers hanging from the vines. Her eyes widened at the tiny creatures gathered around the flowers.

HUMANS AGAIN? HOW RARE A SIGHT. THERE ARE MORE OF THEM. NEW FRIENDS FOR US.

TEE-HEE. WHAT A FUNNY MASK. YOU MUST BE VERY BRAVE TO COME HERE. BRAVE INDEED. HAHAHA, HOW CURIOUS YOU HUMANS ARE!

Unsurprisingly, in this world whose culture so closely resembled that of Europe, fairies were far more common than they had been in Japan. Countless tiny beings swarmed around the unseasonable flowers. The sight of them flitting about with glowing scales falling from their wings really was like something out of a fairy tale. For that very reason, Nicola felt uneasy and stopped in her tracks.

A few years ago, the aura around these ruins had been so ominous that Nicola had felt every one of her hairs stand on end. It had emitted such a repellent miasma that there was no way that fairies would have thought to approach it.

However, looking at the building with fresh eyes, Nicola finally realized she no longer felt the same terrifying chill that she had the last time she passed by the ruins.

Closing her eyes and honing her senses, Nicola could tell that there was still a divine presence, though it was weak. Yet the veil that once hung over the building, that had sent a chill down Nicola’s spine and caused her to never

approach it, was not entirely gone but had diminished. Perhaps it was only a residue. It felt quite different to how it had been a few years ago.

“That ominous feeling might not have come from the fallen god after all, but perhaps...something else...”

“Nicola?” After seeing Nicola abruptly stop, Sieghart looked perplexed. Nicola put aside her peculiar feeling of unease and sprinted through the foliage toward the building.

Facing the small service entrance, the three looked up at a manor covered in wisteria vines.

“From up close, it actually looks magnificent...” murmured Sieghart. The three could barely glimpse the exterior wall of the manor through the wisteria that constricted the entire building. Starting at one of the wisteria’s gnarled trunks, they could see cracks running through the wall like a spider’s web. They even thought they’d heard the building creak.

The vitality of the plant known as wisteria was truly formidable as it extended its leaves toward the sun after putting out vines to constrict competing plants. In the worst case, the plants it constricted would wither and die. Though wisteria looked like a delicate, ephemeral plant, it was in fact quite robust.

As a brief aside, these properties were the reason forestry workers considered wisteria a harmful plant species.

Sieghart, Nicola, and Ernst stood side by side in that order from left to right with Nicola in the middle, taking responsibility for pulling the service door open. The door was unlocked, and even as it squealed unpleasantly, she opened it with no difficulty.

“On the count of three, let us all step across the threshold,” said Nicola, holding both Sieghart and Ernst by their hands so they would not get separated. One of these hands squeezed back in response, clearly used to this custom. The other hand almost pulled away as if its owner had been surprised, but Nicola ignored this and gripped it firmly. “Here we go. One, two, three.”

The moment they stepped through the doorway and made contact with the floor, Nicola was struck by a feeling of being suspended in midair. She could not tell forward from backward, left from right, or up from down as her sense of space was distorted and her vision was shaken. It was an uncomfortable feeling. Then the warmth of one of the hands holding her own receded, as if suddenly pulled away.

“Huh?!”

“Wha—!”

Nicola ground to a halt, barely maintaining her balance, as Sieghart stumbled beside her. After waiting for the feeling of discomfort to pass, she looked around again and noticed that they stood inside a kitchen. The service door they had entered was already closed behind them and Ernst was nowhere to be found.

“I thought there was no point in Ernst coming with us,” said Nicola, shaking her head slowly and sighing. Thinking that there was no harm in having a look outside, she tried opening the door behind her, but it would not budge. Even when Sieghart attempted to open it, the result was the same. It appeared something had already beckoned them into another realm.

“Sieg, from this point on, we should take care to avoid using each other’s real names. My name will be Nica or Nieka. Please use whichever one you prefer.”

“In that case, I’ll call you Nica. As for the person we’re looking for... How about we call him Alo?”

Perhaps because of the number of times they had dealt with apparitions together, Sieghart was quick on the uptake, which was a relief to Nicola. After nodding firmly, she knelt on the bare stone floor, pressed against it, and quietly recited a prayer that helped find a missing item. This would allow her to roughly determine Alois’s location. Fortunately, it did not take her long to discern what direction she should search for him. After shaking the dust from the floor off of her hands, she quickly stood back up.

“First of all, let us go and recover Alo. Please do not stray from my side, Sieg.” If she took her eyes off Sieghart and the god suddenly took him, that would really be a nuisance. After she implored Sieghart to stay close, he suddenly

climbed onto her back.

“Is this okay?”

“As if... You’re too heavy; I can’t even move. Please get off.”

“Perhaps that’s just the weight of my love?”

“My legs... Come on, let’s get going.”

Sieghart chuckled and quickly stepped away from Nicola. *At least he listens to reason*, she thought, but she still let out a *hmph* of irritation.

Dragging Sieghart by the hand, Nicola stepped out of the cramped kitchen with stone floors into a hallway. The moment she did so, the smell of mold and dust one might expect from a long abandoned building caused her to wrinkle her nose in disgust.

The carpet in the hallway was probably once red, but years of dust had piled up on top of it like snow, and it now had an unpleasantly dull hue.



The rampant growth of wisteria outside the windows had resulted in them

getting almost completely covered up, so it was dark inside the mansion. A couple shafts of light shone through the few tiny gaps in the vines, allowing them to see with some effort. Still, it was an extremely claustrophobic setting.

"I want to get out of this unhygienic place as soon as possible. Quickly now, let's go. Quickly now," said Nicola as she pulled desperately on his arm and he just continued walking cautiously. This left Nicola feeling prematurely exhausted. "Enough quivering! You don't have to proceed with that much caution. There's nothing in this corridor."

"You're kidding, right...? Doesn't this look like exactly the kind of place where we'd find *something*?!" Sieghart replied and turned to Nicola with a look of disbelief. A moment later, Nicola realized how he must be feeling.

I guess it's understandable, she thought, with a sigh. The fact that Sieghart could not easily perceive apparitions made a place like this all the more frightening.

Nicola had always been able to see the other world very well—too well. She was often frightened growing up; nowadays, she saw her surroundings with extreme clarity. Despite only seeing a moldering and dirty ruined mansion, she was certain nothing else was with them in the corridor because of her keen supernatural senses. However, things were different for Sieghart who could only see apparitions that attempted to harm him directly. When it came to apparitions besides these, his eyes were no sharper than a regular person's eyes.

Inside this moldering old house, where it seemed spirits might inhabit it, the very fact that Sieghart could not see anything meant that he could never be certain there was nothing there. Everything seemed suspicious to him. Stains on the walls and ceiling would appear to leap out at him like ghosts, and wind blowing through a hole in the wall might sound abnormally loud. It was this state of mind that sometimes caused people to identify innocent, inanimate objects as ghosts.

This was especially true of Sieghart, whose previous encounters with entities outside the human realm gave him the certainty that ghosts existed even if he

could not see them. Knowing that they might be there, but not knowing whether they were there, made this environment all the more terrifying for him.

Even though Nicola understood how Sieghart felt, she could not humor him and wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. This aim would not become a reality if Sieghart insisted on tiptoeing around.

“I’m telling you, there really isn’t anything here. It’s okay,” said Nicola, squeezing Sieghart’s hand tighter to reassure him.

The interior of the abandoned mansion was so eerily quiet that even Nicola found it strange. Simply calling it quiet was misleading because nothing lived there. Just as worms multiplied in fertile soil, a good ruin gathered souls. Ghost stories started as rumors, and as rumors spread, they started to sound real. Once they sounded real, they were real.

Regardless of their past circumstances, it was normal for ruins to attract beings from outside the human realm. So these ruins, which seemed to contain none, could only be described as abnormal—although the reason for it was obvious to her. After glancing at the wisteria growing outside out of the corner of her eye, Nicola came to a halt and turned to face Sieghart, looking him straight in his amethyst eyes.

“Listen, Sieg. The sachets I give you every year during this season contain dried wisteria flowers. The wisteria plant itself has the property of repelling harmful spirits. When its flowers are picked and dried, their effect wears off over time, but the vines outside are far from withering. As long as they continue to draw nutrients from the ground, the warding effect of the plants will continue.” Nicola held up her index finger to emphasize her next point. “In other words, nothing strange will make its way inside this mansion covered in wisteria. There is really nothing else here.”

“I see your point...”

“If you understand, then let’s get moving.” Nicola tugged on Sieghart’s hand and resumed walking.

When they reached the end of the corridor, they found a spacious entrance hall, which seemed to have been constructed to show off the staircase in its

center. Nicola stole a glance at her childhood friend standing beside her. Although she still sensed some resistance from Sieghart's hand as she dragged him along, he had finally matched her pace. But this was not enough to show that the fear had gone out of him entirely.

A partly broken chandelier hung from the ceiling of the entrance hall. Walking underneath it frightened Nicola in a different sense, so she walked around it. As she moved closer to the wall, she saw that the wallpaper had peeled away, revealing bricks and wooden beams underneath.

"Why did you come along this time?" asked Nicola after a pause.

"Eh?"

"You rarely insist on coming with me, even when it frightens you. Why did you come along this time? Is it because I once told you how dangerous this place was...?"

When it came to Nicola in particular, Sieghart had a habit of imposing his presence. But he ultimately knew his place and would do nothing that upset her. He knew full well that he was not of any use in Nicola's territory, so he was always ready to stand aside and leave Nicola's business to her.

So Nicola was surprised that he had insisted on coming this time. The entire time that Nicola spent making Sieghart's mask the night before, she had wondered what she had said to anger him, but she failed to arrive at an answer.

Sieghart came to a stop, which forced her to do so too as she held his hand.

"Hey, Nica. Though there may or may not be a god lurking in here, this is still an abandoned building. Did you ever think to yourself for one second that bandits and vagabonds might have holed up in here?"

Nicola was briefly silent and responded, "No, I never considered that." Now that Sieghart had brought it up, she realized how careless she had been. From the perspective of vagabonds, Nicola realized she was the young daughter of a family that looked like it might have money. There were scoundrels out there who dirtied their hands in human trafficking. They would probably think a young woman strolling into an abandoned building alone would be the perfect prey.

“The fact that the building is abandoned means that we can guess that it is probably severely dilapidated. One wrong step and you could fall through the floor and injure yourself, rendering you unable to move... Did you ever consider that possibility?”

Nicola was silent again before simply stating, “No.” She pursed her lips together and said nothing further. Sieghart’s mask moved slightly, but Nicola was not sure whether he had sighed or laughed wryly.

“I know all too well that you are strong when it comes to the non-human, but you see the world differently. You can do things that normal people can’t, so sometimes your way of thinking is a bit dangerous.”

Nicola could say nothing to refute Sieghart’s words.

“In physical terms, you are just a slender young woman. You should be a bit more aware of the threat of bodily harm.” Though Sieghart scolded Nicola with his words, the hand that stroked her hair and the look in his eyes as he gazed down at her were unbelievably gentle. “Well, I just need to make up for the areas in which your sense of caution is not enough.”

After a moment, Nicola finally said, “Your words don’t carry as much weight when you’re wearing that mask.”

“Haha, I guess not.”

Nicola felt grateful for choosing to give the mask such a comical expression when she made it the previous night.

6

Nicola and Sieghart walked straight past the staircase in the center of the entrance hall, proceeding directly to the passage on its right, which led deeper into the first floor of the mansion. Despite her skills in the occult arts, searching for lost items and people was not her strong suit. Therefore, she only had a rough idea of what direction she should head in to find Alois.

After reaching a dead end at the back of the first floor, they, unfortunately, found no sign of Alois.

“If he isn’t on the first floor, I suppose we’ll have to look upstairs... Though I hope we don’t have to wander around here for too long.” As luck would have it, they did not need to double back to the central staircase in the main hall. What they thought was a dead end had its own staircase leading up to the next floor, which they went up through.

The stairs were simpler than those in the main hall, and the effects of decay on the wood were far more apparent. As they climbed the stairs, the steps creaked under the weight of their footsteps, causing Nicola to worry that they might fall through them at any moment. *If we’re not careful*, she thought, *these boards could snap*.

The two could not find the courage to climb these precarious steps together, so they gingerly went up them one at a time.

It looked like anything of value in the house had either been taken by the former owner upon abandoning it or looted in the years since. There were patches of wallpaper less faded by sunlight, showing that vases were once displayed on the landing and paintings hung on the walls, but these seemed to have all vanished.

Once Nicola and Sieghart had reached the second floor and found their feet on solid flooring, they breathed a sigh of relief. The very moment that they did so, an unexpected shriek pierced their ears.

“Ahhhh!” screamed someone barely visible in the gloom, apparently half-crying. Nicola prioritized bashing whoever did that with the bag she was

carrying instead of covering her ears.

“Sieg! Nico—Gah! Eh? Eh? Why...?” The distance between them was not too great, as Nicola had dealt Alois a critical hit with her bag.

Alois lay sprawled on the floor and glanced up at Nicola with a look of bewilderment. She marched over to him and crouched down to speak to him.

“We do not. Use each other’s names so carelessly. In a place such as this. Repeat what I just said.” Each time Nicola paused for emphasis, she prodded Alois’s forehead with her finger.

“Ooh, sorry... We do not use each other’s names so carelessly in a place such as this.”

“Very good. As long as we’re here, please call me Nica, Prince Alo.”

“Got it.”

“Well then. Just to make sure, you haven’t drunk or eaten anything while you’ve been in this realm, have you?”

“We mustn’t eat anything we find in another world... Right? Don’t worry, I haven’t. In the first place, it doesn’t look like there’s anything *to* eat.”

Nicola stood back up and crossed her arms in a huff as Sieghart lent Alois a hand and Alois rose to his feet. Alois then looked timidly at Sieghart.

“More importantly, is that you, Sieg? You do have silver hair and you’re with Miss Nica, so I cried out ‘Sieg’ without even thinking...”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Erm, what a distinctive mask you have on...”

“Oh, you mean this? Nica said that, since there’s a god here, I ought to cover up my face.”

“I... I see...” said Alois with a glance at Nicola.

Nicola shrugged and said, “There is probably no point in wearing a mask unless it was from the very start, but would you like one, Alo?” She then pointed at the bag she had just used to hit Alois, indicating that she had made an extra mask, but Alois shook his head forcefully.

I guess he really doesn't want to wear one. *Pity, I think these masks are quite charming once you get used to them*, thought Nicola while pursing her lips slightly.

"All things considered," said Alois. "You really came after me straight away. Thank you, both of you." Alois's shoulders seemed to shrink as he cowered in fear, looking at his gloomy surroundings.

Sieghart opened his eyes wide in amazement. "Straight away? At least a whole day has gone by since you went missing..."

"Eh?! A whole day?!" Alois opened his green eyes even wider as if competing with Sieghart. "You're joking, right? I mean, it's only been about an hour since I first set foot in these ruins..."

With carefully subdued expressions on their faces, Sieghart and Nicola both shook their heads.

"Dealing with the gods means occupying another time and space apart from the here and now. You could spend three days in that other space while only one second has passed in reality—the reverse is also possible. These things often happen when interacting with gods or fairies," said Nicola as she shrugged.

"But that would mean... no, it can't be! Don't tell me that selfish Lucas and his retinue have been lost this whole time as well?!" Alois turned uncharacteristically pale. To calm him down, Sieghart explained that there was nothing to worry about on account of Prince Lucas. In the meantime, Nicola's opinion of Alois changed very slightly.

Alois looked genuinely relieved to hear that the visiting prince and his retinue had safely returned to the academy the previous day. From where Nicola was standing, Alois seemed to take his official duties as a member of the royal family seriously.

In all honesty, Nicola could not have imagined that this side of Alois existed, given his typically frivolous disposition and the way he hassled her. Here, she had to admit that Alois was not at fault. Since he had really only been caught up in this while trying to avoid a diplomatic incident, then it was probably unavoidable.

Nicola had once stated that if Alois stuck his nose into supernatural affairs out of curiosity, she would abandon him. But the reverse side of that statement was the guarantee that she would rescue him if he found himself in trouble for any other reason. Having already accepted Alois as her ward concerning the supernatural, Nicola's pride prevented her from failing to protect him as long as he remained faultless.

Nicola let out an exasperated sigh now that she had found the person she was looking for. Next, she needed to meet with the god lurking in the ruins.

After urging Sieghart and Alois to get moving, Nicola started walking again. She thought to herself that they could not afford to be separated again, and she firmly grasped each of them by the hand. They proceeded in a row, with Nicola in the middle.

Perhaps because Alois was so relieved to have been reunited with the others, he was more talkative than usual.

"Say, Miss Nica. Given that Lucas was the one who decided to come here in the first place, why could he and his retinue leave without a problem while I was trapped here?"

"Who knows? Probably because you have such a pretty face?"

"But that idiot Lucas has quite a nice face too, you know? Though he is a complete egotist, he is at least good-looking. At least he's good-looking..." Nicola could detect barbs in Alois's words whenever he spoke about the visiting prince. Clearly, he resented being dragged around by Lucas.

"Then I suppose your face was simply more to the god's liking, Alo," said Nicola.

Alois suddenly got a suspicious look in his eye as he turned to look at Nicola.

"Eh? Could a god have such a half-baked reason as that?"

"If that's the case, then this god is quite irrational," said Sieghart with a smirk as he walked to Nicola's other side. Still holding both boys by their hands, Nicola shrugged.

“Whatever do you mean? More often than not, gods are irrational.” Nicola looked up at Alois and Sieghart in turn. “Listen. Every act a god performs is considered ‘good.’ Even if their actions cause people trouble, or at least are not to the people’s benefit, it does not matter, as the gods decide what is good and bad. Being irrational and unmerciful is what makes a god a god, and it is what makes them an object of faith... Which is why I hate dealing with them. If it were possible, I would choose to have nothing to do with them.” Nicola spat these last words from her mouth bitterly.

All polytheistic traditions began in a similar way: with people praying to be spared from nature’s formidable threats, which were beyond the understanding of early humans.

For example, imagine a typhoon approaching, a flood occurring, or any other catastrophe befalling people. People who believed the gods controlled nature would assume “This is the anger of the gods.” And their thoughts would eventually take shape.

The origins of gods typically went something like that. For that very reason, it was almost guaranteed gods were irrational. It was not for nothing that they had taken second place in the “Jobs I Want Nothing To Do With” ranking.

“But well,” continued Nicola. “Consider what I said about your face being to the god’s liking a joke. In actuality, what’s more important is whether someone had interacted with beings from outside the human realm before.”

If the god had only spirited Alois away because it favored his looks, then it would not have invited Nicola, with her mediocre looks, or Sieghart, who wore a mask, into its realm. Despite the differences in their genders and their social standing, what did all three of them have in common? This was, of course, the fact that they all knew about the existence of the non-human realm.

It was a reasonable hypothesis that the more one knew about the non-human, the closer those unknown entities would approach daily and meddle in one’s affairs.

The structural integrity of the second floor was even more dubious than that of the first floor. Every step produced an unpleasant creaking sound. There was

no third floor. Looking up at the ceiling, Nicola could see countless holes where the rain had leaked through. Perhaps due to the damp conditions, the walls appeared terribly decayed. Overall, the second floor gave an even worse impression than the first. Nicola knitted her brows as an even stronger smell of mold assaulted her nostrils.

"This place was once the estate of a count who really liked wisteria. After racking up too many debts, he ran away under the cover of night," said Alois, telling the others what he had discovered before Nicola and Sieghart had found him. Generally, Western manors were constructed so that the first floor was a place to welcome visitors, whereas the second floor was the resident's private domain. Apparently, Alois investigated the study upstairs and found that some diaries and ledgers were still there.

"That being said, I never would have thought that wisteria would grow so out of control if not properly tended to. I was shocked." Alois continued to speak loquaciously. Nicola and Sieghart shared a glance as they thought that, though they were used to Alois speaking with a complete lack of context, something about him seemed different.

Suddenly, two or three meters back the way they had come, there was a loud creaking sound, as if the whole house had shuddered.

"Eek!" screamed Alois in fear. Nicola opened her mouth to tease him as payback for the way he always treated her, but a moment later she found herself quite unable to do so.

"Eh? Wait a—Aah!"

"Alo?!"

Still holding Nicola's hand, Alois suddenly ran forward at full speed. Even when compared to other girls her age, Nicola was extremely petite, so her legs were naturally far shorter than Alois's. On top of that, in both her past life and this one, she was catastrophically bad at sports because she was fundamentally uncoordinated.

Considering all this, what would become of Nicola when dragged along by Alois with his radically wider gait and sprinting at full speed? The answer was obvious.

Nicola did not even have time to scream at the sensation of her body suddenly lurching forward, placing a greater strain on her limbs than they could reasonably stand. Naturally, she could not explain to Alois that the noise that had startled him was merely a result of the house's deterioration. She desperately flailed her legs to keep up with Alois as he sprinted from the second floor down the central staircase and half-dragged her, but it was useless.

"Alo, stop, stop! At this rate, Nica will die from exhaustion!"

Halfway through Alois's flight, Sieghart had decided that he could not stand by and watch, so he had run after them, supporting Nicola from behind by pushing her. With one hand still on Nicola's back, Sieghart overtook her and grabbed Alois by the arm to stop him.

With her legs suddenly tangled together, Nicola nearly toppled over. But Sieghart deftly positioned himself to support her, averting this disaster. However, Nicola could barely breathe, let alone speak.

"Alo, you can't be doing that. When it comes to sports, Nica is catastrophically and hopelessly inept. If you make her run at that speed, she will very quickly expire."

While Nicola thought Sieghart's choice of words was extremely rude, he was right. Nicola could find no words to refute them—besides, she was still a long way away from being able to speak at all. It took all of her efforts to regain control of her breathing gradually, with her shoulders rising and falling dramatically with each breath for the time being.

Alois finally calmed down after Sieghart consoled him. Then, looking flustered, he looked down at Nicola and apologized.

"Miss Nica, I'm really sorry! Um, but wait a minute. Are you really that tired after running such a short distance? Are you kidding? How could you have so little stamina?"

With an expression of utter disbelief, Alois turned to look at the stairs they had just descended before turning back to Nicola again. She could not help but feel irritated by this, so she glared back at Alois.

To be fair, they had only run a distance of about twenty meters. Neither Alois

nor Sieghart looked to be even slightly out of breath.

Nicola certainly lacked any athletic ability, but this treatment still engrained a mixture of anger and frustration inside her. She alleviated this by stomping on Alois's foot with all her might. She then took five whole minutes to calm her breathing before groaning.

"First of all... Why did you feel the need... To freak out like that? You should be able to see... At a glance... That there isn't anything here."

"Eh?" Alois blinked.

Once again, Nicola was confused. She could not understand why Alois seemed so surprised. Alois should be able to "see" almost as well as Nicola, so why was he so shocked by her assertion that he ought to tell the house was empty?

"But this place is so ominous... Is there really nothing here? Are you sure...?"

"Ah... I see." Nicola covered her face with one hand before looking up in the air. Alois's sense of terror had been stoked in a different fashion compared to Sieghart.

The fearsome miasma that had once caused even Nicola to decide to avoid the place had largely faded away. At present, only the last vestiges of that presence still hung in the air.

From Nicola's perspective, because she could compare the current remnants of that fearsome presence to what they had been a few years ago, she could judge that the source of the miasma had already left this place.

However, for someone with no knowledge of its previous state, the remnants of the miasma would likely still be quite disturbing. Even though Alois could sense that disquieting presence, he still saw nothing but an empty house. That might make this place even more spooky for him. Nicola let out a heavy sigh, the force of it expelling all the air from her lungs.

"I'm telling you, there really isn't anything here besides the god. That ominous feeling you're getting is just what something completely different has left behind. Everything is fine," Nicola said reassuringly before taking Sieghart and Alois by the hand once more. "Now then, all we need to do is go and greet the god. Let's get this over with quickly and go home."

Their new destination was at the back of the first floor, on the other side from where they had passed through to get to the second floor earlier. Through that passage was the divine source of the purifying energy Nicola barely sensed emanating from these filthy ruins.

7

When they came to a dead end on the first floor, a door that had once been stylish but was now filthy stood in front of them.

Most of the door's paint, which was probably once white, had peeled away. The stained glass fitted in the very center of the door, however, still seemed quite vibrant, though somewhat dimmed by the layer of dust upon it.

After a brief pause, Nicola said, "Most likely, the god is just beyond this door." From either side of her, Nicola heard each boy gulping nervously. "Let's go."

She then released the boys' hands and slowly opened the door, which revealed a greenhouse connected directly to the mansion via that single door. It looked like glass windows had been fitted all over in the past.

The frame that had once held the glass windows remained even after decades of neglect that made it nothing more than a supporting structure for the wisteria that grew wildly around the estate. The panes of glass that had probably once rested inside the metal frame now lay scattered in shards on the floor of the greenhouse.

A series of square tiles formed a harlequin check pattern on the floor. Here and there, in between the tiles, were flower beds surrounded by stone edging, but not a single plant grew in any of them. Perhaps that was to be expected.

After all, the dense wisteria vines outside the greenhouse blocked any sun from reaching the interior. Any plants that once grew in the flower beds would have long since withered and died before returning to the soil beneath them.

The floor, with its harlequin check tiling, was also in miserable condition. They had probably once been laid out perfectly, without a single gap between them. Yet the wisteria vines had extended their roots into the ground beneath the greenhouse, eventually protruded through the ground, and displaced some

tiles. It almost looked as if moles digging through it had disturbed the ground.

With the few shafts of light that could make their way through the gaps in between the wisteria leaves shining down upon it, an enshrined statue of a goddess stood in the middle of the miserably dilapidated greenhouse. Though it appeared corrupted, a mystical air surrounded the statue.

No one needed to say a word as the three visitors understood what the goddess wanted from them.

Wisteria vines that had overturned the tiles on the floor tangled around the stone statue of the goddess. Nicola's group approached the shrine.

The statue was small. If one excluded the pedestal on which it stood, it was less than one meter in height. Nicola gently ran her fingers along the vines that crept over the statue. The vines that wound around the pedestal had constricted it so tightly that many cracks ran across the stone surface.

The vines around the statue itself were still green and slender, but it was not difficult to imagine what the future held for it. In the event that the statue still had consciousness, then this prospect was probably most unwelcome.

"Meatol. The goddess of fertility, I believe. By extension, she is also the goddess of mercantile prosperity," recalled Sieghart.

"Of course you would know that..." said Nicola, looking up at Sieghart as she had stopped to breathe.

Out of fear of provoking the wrath of the gods, Nicola had attempted to at least learn the basics of this world's mythology. But this did not include religious sculptures. They all looked the same to her; she could not tell one from another. At times like these, she was grateful for Sieghart's needlessly powerful memory. Though now that he had identified the goddess, Nicola could see that the statue held some kind of grain to its chest.

Fertility and prosperity were the functions of the goddess Meatol. These overlapped significantly with the kami Ukanomitama, which was worshipped at Inari shrines throughout Japan. Given its direct connection to the lives of common people, Meatol was a fairly major deity herself.

Because of her prominence, there were undoubtedly many temples dedicated to Meatol. The manor's former master had probably requested the statue transferred here from such a temple.

"Should you invite a god into your home, you had better be willing to worship it to the very end. If you cannot do that, then you had better make it up to the god..."

Though Nicola did not know whether the former master of this estate was even still alive, she sighed as she thought of his careless decision to run away in the night. She then rolled up her sleeves.

"All right. Shall we start by removing these vines?" said Nicola.

"Yes, let's do so," said Sieghart and Alois.

The three divided themselves to perform the separate roles of cutting the vines and pulling them away. Bit by bit, they eliminated the wisteria entangling the statue.

As Alois used the knife Nicola had concealed in her bag to cut away the vines, he suddenly murmured, "You know, at the end of the day, anyone could have removed these wisteria vines, couldn't they?"

"True. I think anyone could manage this, whether they had strange powers like Nica here," said Sieghart, nodding in agreement even as his hands worked.

Indeed, the goddess could have just as well spirited away the boys who had come here to test their nerves, thought Nicola. *However...*

She then said, "It is not uncommon for those taken in by a god to come unprepared to undertake such a task." Nicola traced the delicate clothing patterns carved into the statue with her fingers. "If the goddess herself appeared with all her strength, that would be one thing, but there is only a small part of her spirit here... If she invited people who do not question their belief that there is nothing beyond our human realm, they would probably never know why they were brought here. They would see nothing but an inanimate object covered in vines and pay no mind to it."

That was the reason the goddess had put her hopes in Nicola and her friends, who had all been involved with beings beyond the human realm before, and

spirited them away to this world.

“So we’re at quite a big disadvantage, aren’t we?” said Alois with a glance at Nicola while pouting discontentedly.

“Didn’t I tell you as much? That nothing could be better than for you to live your life without getting involved with the other side.”

Alois was silent for a moment and responded, “I think I might finally understand what you and Sieg actually meant when you said that.”

“Still, it’s too late now...” said Sieghart, smiling wryly.

Nicola slumped her shoulders, and the three continued working in silence after this exchange. It did not take them long to remove all the vines that they could reach with the knife.

8

“I think we’re just about done.” After cutting away the last vine tangled around the statue, Sieghart rose to his feet. Thick vines still wound around the pedestal on which the statue stood, but cutting these would have involved a considerable amount of labor. If they wanted to remove these, exchanging the knife for something like an axe would probably have made the process quicker.

At the very least, they had cut away the vines tangled around the statue and brushed the dust off it. It was so much cleaner that it was almost recognizable, so Nicola hoped the goddess would let them off at this point.

To represent the blessings of the earth, Nicola brought sweets made from fruits and grains as her offerings to the goddess. After placing these on the pedestal, she poured wine on the surrounding ground. Once this was done, Nicola noticed that her bag felt much lighter as they had used up most of its contents.

“All that’s left to do is to have someone from a temple come and take this statue back with them.”

“Well, a member of the student council is the son of a priest. I’ll tell him about it,” offered Sieghart.

“Please do,” said Nicola, accepting Sieghart’s offer without hesitation, as she could finally relax. As she began to stretch to relieve the fatigue of the labor she had just helped perform, she suddenly realized that she could hear Ernst’s voice. He had been searching for them this whole time and calling out to them. It appeared that the goddess had returned to their original space and time, satisfied with their offerings.

The voice calling out to them steadily grew in volume and clarity. Ernst was getting nearer to them.

“Your Highness! Your Grace! Where might you be?! Miss Weber! Where are you?!”

“Hey, Ern! We’re at the back of the first floor! In the greenhouse connected to the mansion!” exclaimed Alois.

“Your Highness!” screamed Ernst. At the sound of his thundering footsteps, the three members of their party who had made it into the mansion exchanged glances and shrugged their shoulders. It looked like it would be better to simply wait for Ernst to catch up rather than rush to meet him.

“Still, it’s strange,” murmured Sieghart as the three decided to at least step outside the greenhouse. Nicola overheard him and looked over her shoulder at him.

“What’s strange?”

After noticing that Sieghart stared back thoughtfully at the statue, Nicola suddenly looked quite perplexed.

“Well, I mean, the master of this manor was a count, right? I thought that it’s rare for a nobleman to worship the goddess of commerce.”

“You’re right, it is.” Now that Sieghart had mentioned it, Nicola realized it was remarkable. She could understand why farmers and merchants worshipped the goddess of fertility, but it was very peculiar for an aristocrat to do the same thing.

Alois did not seem to share their confusion. After walking up to a corner of the greenhouse, he looked down at several rotting wooden boxes that sat there

before speaking up.

“I could be wrong, but I think that he really wished for his business to prosper.”

Nicola and Sieghart approached the same corner and peered down at the wooden boxes that black mold had eaten away. There were roughly thirty of them, lying toppled in a pitiful heap on the floor. On closer inspection, there was a wooden frame fitted inside each box. After slowly pulling the frame out of one of the boxes, Nicola noticed it was made up of a regular pattern of hexagons.

“Is this...?”

“A beehive?” Nicola turned to look at Sieghart.

“Yeah. It looks like the master of this house tried keeping bees inside this greenhouse. He intended to raise money before he fled in the night to escape his debts. I remember reading something about that in the ledgers and diaries I found in his study,” explained Alois. Despite his earlier freak-out, it seemed that he had carried out a fairly sensible investigation until Nicola and Sieghart arrived.

“I see,” murmured Nicola.

In this world, people often enjoyed honey spread on scones or stirred into tea. Though it was something of a luxury item, there was still plenty of demand for it. On top of that, beeswax was a versatile substance when processed and had applications as varied as sealing wax, candles, flooring wax, and even the manufacture of cosmetics like lipstick. Beekeeping must have seemed like a genuine possibility when the master considered how to recover the financial stability of his declining household. In the end, it appeared the count had been unsuccessful in this attempt and had genuinely struggled to make a living until the night he fled.

Upon further examination, the floor was scattered with what looked like bee wings. Nicola’s thoughts took on a somewhat mournful perspective.

The bees would have been fine even after the count fled... As long as flowers still bloomed inside the greenhouse, that is... But without someone around to

water them, the flowers eventually withered and died. Of course, after that, the bees, confined to this glass greenhouse, began to starve.

The moment Nicola realized this, she felt the blood suddenly drain out of her face. She stood rooted to the spot.

Bees are related to wasps and hornets. Like the hornet, they possess a venom that can induce anaphylactic shock, albeit in smaller quantities. A vast number of these venomous insects were trapped in this greenhouse's confined space. Assuming they killed and cannibalized each other, there could only have been one result...

If her thinking was correct, Nicola finally had an explanation for that feeling of terror that had chilled her to her very core a few years ago. But even if she was right, the source of that terror was no longer within these ruins. This left her with the question: why had it left?

She thought she could confirm whether the bees had eaten each other by taking the remains of one of them and looking closely at its abdomen. However, nature must have already done its work by decomposing the bees' remains. Besides the wings scattered on the floor, Nicola could find no trace of them. There was, therefore, no way for her to test her hypothesis.

"Your Highness! Are you all right?"

The formerly stylish door to the greenhouse suddenly swung open with such force that its hinges finally reached the end of their lives.

Ernst bounded into the room like an enormous dog before immediately rushing over to Alois to ensure that the prince had not been hurt in any way. He then bowed in Sieghart's direction.

"I am relieved to find that you also appear to be unhurt, Your Grace. However, I must apologize for my impatience in saying this... If we do not return to our dormitories at once, we will break our curfew."

"This is bad!"

"No way! I'm sure we entered the ruins this afternoon."

Nicola shook her head at Alois and Sieghart and said, "I told you, that's how

being spirited away works. Incidentally, Ernst, how long do we have until our curfew?”

“Fifteen minutes!”

“Huh...? Eh? Only fifteen minutes?” It was Nicola’s turn to look foolish as her mouth hung open in disbelief.

All four of them rushed through the broken door to the greenhouse, then through the corridor leading to the mansion’s entrance.

“Did you say fifteen minutes? If we run as fast as we can, I think we can make it, but with her legs, that’s absolutely impossible for Nicola!” cried Sieghart.

“Your Grace! If I run while carrying her, I think we can still make it in time!”

At first, Nicola had no words with which to respond to this. Like the other three, she ran toward the service door through which they had entered the mansion, but she could only watch helplessly as the boys far outpaced her. She decided she was willing to make a sacrifice in order to get home in time.

“Please carry me...”

They ran through the corridor, the kitchen, and out the service door. Looking up at the sky, they could see that dusk was fast approaching.

Once they passed the iron fence that surrounded the manor, Nicola quickly found herself carried atop Ernst’s shoulders. She felt like the daughter of a wealthy merchant, suddenly kidnapped by bandits.

Ernst lifted Nicola with no apparent effort and continued to run without slowing down in the slightest. This was quite a shock to Nicola, who felt her eyes roll back in her head. She was subjected to a regular rocking motion as Ernst ran more than twice as fast as she possibly could. Once she became accustomed to this, she glanced back at the ruins as they receded into the horizon.

The wisteria vines that tangled together as they grew toward the heavens seemed to utterly envelop and confine that place.

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 4

God

The very act of thinking gives an image form, or what we call imagination. In mythology, gods are given names and personalities. People then create sculptures and paintings that establish a common understanding of a god’s outward appearance. The very words “The gods exist” could be said to form an incantation that makes them real.

People’s prayers for protection from nature’s formidable threats, which are beyond human understanding, are the foundation for their faith in gods. With origins like this, it is all too common for irrationality to be at the very core of a god’s identity... In most cases, the gods are more than the average human can handle.

Chapter 5: If You Curse Someone, Dig Three, Four Graves

1

“I feel like you might be bringing me a few too many pieces of unfortunate business lately,” said Nicola. This was after she and her schoolmates had somehow just barely made it back before curfew, following their tour of the ruins where Alois was spirited away.

Hiding in a blind spot between the boys’ and girls’ dormitory buildings, Nicola stood with her arms folded, making no attempt to conceal her displeasure. In front of her were three young men who had just finished sprinting as fast as their legs could carry them for fifteen minutes straight—one of them with an added burden named Nicola. They were all understandably quite out of breath and needed to lean against a wall to remain standing.

One of them possessed a beauty bordering on the sublime; another had sweeter, boyish looks; and the last was more ruggedly handsome.

The sight of these young men in their abundant variety, breathing heavily with their cheeks all flushed and their eyes watering somewhat, was a very tempting sight for Nicola. However, though they resembled an oil painting, there was something that she desired more desperately at this moment—some tranquil time to herself.

In this world, Nicola was not a professional exorcist or any other kind of professional. She was a mere first-year student at this academy. Why should she have to persist in doing this miserable work for free, dealing with beings from beyond the human realm? An exorcist was supposed to be able to demand generous compensation to make up for the danger involved.

But when it came to helping Sieghart—and now Alois—she was a complete volunteer. If they continued to ask her for help as frequently as this, she would be unable to keep up with her studies.

In fact, the assignment Nicola had been given for that weekend still rested on the desk in her room, completely untouched. She believed she was entirely justified in her feeling of discontentment.

“Please give me some time to myself. Do not bother me with any pointless complaints. If you have a genuine problem, but it is only a small one, please just be patient for the time being. All right?” After Nicola finished getting this off her chest, inviting no objections, Sieghart and Alois reluctantly nodded.

“Got it,” they said.

Only Ernst was completely silent, but Nicola thought there was no chance of him coming to her with concerns about the supernatural anyway, so she did not mind.

“Well then, everyone. I bid you adieu,” said Nicola. Then, after giving them a deliberately abrupt curtsy, she headed straight to the girls’ dormitory.

Once back in her room, Nicola could not help but notice the untouched weekend assignment sitting on her desk. She slowly turned her gaze away from it, then sat in silence for ten seconds.

After taking off her dusty clothes and throwing them in a messy pile on the floor, she immediately collapsed onto her bed.

“Just a quick nap... Surely I can at least take a nap...” Though Nicola marveled at her lack of stamina, no one was around to criticize her for making excuses. In no time at all, she fell into a deep sleep.

◆◆◆

Now that I think back on it, the nightmares had most likely already started at that time.

Though they were unpleasant enough that I nearly leapt out of bed upon waking up each time, I could not remember any details of them at first.

Only when I rolled up the sleeves of my pajamas could I see that sweat covered my arms and the downy hair on them glistened gold in the moonlight.

2

Nicola's eyelids trembled as a bright light roused her from her sleep. After half opening her eyes, she realized the rays of the morning sun streamed into her room through a gap in the curtains.

"Ah, it looks like I messed up," she murmured, hardly able to believe what was happening to her. Though she had only intended to take a nap, it appeared that she'd slept soundly through to morning.

Nicola glanced at the clock, then at the assignment with which she had yet to make any progress, before sighing heavily. The hands on the clock told her that she still had plenty of time to complete her morning routine before attending her first class of the day. However, there was decidedly not enough time for her to complete her assignment.

After stretching her arms far above her head and groaning as she fully awakened, she quickly bathed while thinking of an excuse to tell her teacher.

Despite filling the tub with hot water as quickly as she could, Nicola could tell that it would go cold before she had filled it all the way, even though it was still only autumn. In a state of half-desperation, she took a quick dip in the lukewarm bath and returned to her room freezing. When she looked at her desk again, she noticed Gemini rolling around on top of it.

"Ah, welcome back. Thank you for your work over the past couple of days."

Gemini performed a little hop of pleasure when Nicola praised it for its work in impersonating Alois. It then rolled across the letters of the ouija board that still lay open on the desk. Nicola quickly leaned across the desk to make out the message Gemini spelled out.

CHECK UNDER THE DOOR

THERE IS A LETTER

Just as Gemini instructed, Nicola turned around to look at the door to her room. A piece of paper was indeed lying on the floor beside it. After picking it up, she found that calling it a letter might be too generous. It was far simpler

and rougher than the letters Nicola was used to, being nothing more than a sheet of notepaper torn out of an exercise book and folded in half. She opened the note, then involuntarily whistled in surprise at its contents.

“Wow.”

I sincerely hope that misfortune befalls you.

Nicola could only smirk at the formality present in this piece of hate mail. It was so overly formal that it took her back to her past life.

“Gemini, did you see who delivered this?” Nicola looked back at the desk as Gemini bounced over to the word NO on the ouija board.

“I see. Well, whatever.”

As Nicola dismissed the letter as nothing more than a childish prank, not even amounting to a curse, she folded it up again.

If thinking could make one ill, it could also make a curse come true. Humans were such clever creatures that they could even die simply because of overthinking things.

Less severe curses were only activated once the cursed individual began to think, “Someone has cursed me.” The very notion that one became cursed would eventually harm one’s health, which would naturally lead to further misfortune.

They had a saying in Japan: “If you are going to curse someone, dig two graves.” However, this was the kind of curse that may never even be activated. Everything depended on the state of mind of the one who was cursed, so any rebound effect on the one who made it would also vary. Really, it was mere child’s play, far from what Nicola would deem a curse.

As she knew it was just a gimmick, there was no chance of this working on Nicola. Therefore, she had little interest in determining who the culprit was.

Though she no longer felt tired, Nicola yawned as she changed into her uniform. With more time to spare than usual, she strolled to her classroom in a leisurely fashion.

Although... Nicola thought. Though she might not have felt like trying to find the culprit that morning, feelings can be fickle.

“After thinking about it, I’m actually pretty angry,” she muttered, frowning while ignoring the last lesson she had that morning.

When she really thought about it, it was quite unnerving to have someone unknown and unseen wish her misfortune. Although the curse was not active, whoever had sent that letter had succeeded in offending Nicola.

“Hey, Nicola. Do you want to get told off for talking in class? You’re already in the teacher’s bad books for failing to get that assignment done,” said Karin.

“Well, the teacher was pretty sarcastic about it. I can understand how she feels,” replied Elsa.

Luckily, since this lesson was being held in a lecture hall with students from several classes, Nicola’s mutterings were not overheard throughout the room. It seemed, however, that her immediate neighbors had heard her perfectly.

Karin and Elsa, sitting on either side of Nicola, apparently thought she was directing her anger at the teacher, so they did their best to comfort her. None of this surprised Nicola.

After giving her teacher the excuse that she had fallen ill over the weekend and failed to finish her assignment, she was subjected to some nasty remarks in front of everyone at the start of the class. On top of that, it was not as if the assignment had gone away. She had merely managed to extend the deadline to tomorrow.

Internally, Nicola seethed with irritation at the teacher’s unnecessary level of nastiness. It was not as if she had simply squandered her weekend. This was added to her discomfort at someone unknown wishing misfortune upon her; the two injustices swirling together in a vortex of negative feelings. She was on the verge of turning nasty herself.

“You’re too cute to keep pouting like that, you know?” said Karin.

“Hey, was that sarcasm?” Nicola was so on edge that she snapped at her

friend for these well-meaning, if empty, words of flattery.

“My, no. You are always putting yourself down, Nicola, but your facial features themselves are really not too bad. I think you would look lovely with a bit of makeup.”

“Yes, yes. But despite that, you won’t wear makeup at all. Hey, are you trying to look unfashionable on purpose?” agreed Elsa.

With two girls who were definitively cuter than her staring intently at her face, Nicola edged back as far as she could in her narrow seat. She would have liked nothing better than for the two girls to be told off for whispering to her during class, putting an end to their chitchat. Regrettably, as their group was near the back of the lecture hall, the teacher had not noticed their behavior. Nicola cowered as Karin and Elsa leaned toward her.

It was probably fair to say that Nicola’s looks were only very middle-of-the-road. Her features were not so fatally misshapen to not be amenable to some trickery. A plain face like hers really could look quite a bit better with makeup. Having worn makeup every single day in her past life, she knew this all too well.

Nothing Nicola knew required more experience and familiarity than applying makeup. Of course, there was a vast difference in the results she had achieved as a teenager in her past life, when she had only just started wearing makeup, versus what she had achieved in her twenties when she knew very well what would and would not suit her.

But in essence, wearing makeup would do nothing more than make her look slightly more refined. Her two friends had hit the nail on the head. By deliberately remaining unfashionable, she could continue to look common.

“That’s not true at all,” Nicola said in a complete monotone voice. The other two girls looked at her reproachfully, so she decided she could only stare off into the distance while she waited for them to stop.

Nicola hoped, however, that no one would observe her speaking to what appeared to be an empty space. If anyone saw that, it would surely be difficult for that person to continue to think of Nicola as common. The fact that, without makeup, Nicola was neither pretty nor ugly was actually quite convenient in

that way.

With perfect timing, the school bell rang at the end of the class. Feeling fortunate, Nicola rapidly gathered her textbooks and rose to her feet.

“Look, I’m really hungry. How about we head straight to the dining hall?” suggested Nicola.

“Ah, Nicola, you’re always changing the subject!” remarked Karin.

“Let us give you a makeover this weekend,” said Elsa.

“No thanks,” responded Nicola.

The three girls allowed themselves to be carried out of the classroom by the wave of students clamoring behind them. After walking through the hallway for a little while, they heard a shrill voice cry out somewhere ahead of them, prompting them to look at each other. The shrieking spread amongst the crowd in a domino effect, eventually making its way back to the three girls.

Karin, who stood on her tiptoes with her head above the crowd to better see the front, looked back at her friends with an innocent smile.

“If we wait just a little longer, it looks like we’ll get to walk past the Silver Lord!” reported Karin to the other two girls. It seemed that she was as loyal to the Sieghart bandwagon as ever.

It was just as Karin said. It took almost no time at all for Sieghart to appear in front of them on the other side of the hallway. Today, as always, his noble visage—which was so gorgeous that it could conceivably even tip the balance of the entire kingdom—appeared to be in outstanding condition.

Nicola could not see Alois or Ernst walking beside Sieghart. In their place was a flock of over ten female students surrounding Sieghart as he walked toward Nicola’s group.

Although it should have been difficult for both Sieghart and the young ladies to walk in this fashion, they all maintained it with composure, never once breaking formation. Nicola could not help but be a bit impressed.

The girls surrounding Sieghart were most surely eligible young maidens from the most respectable families in the kingdom. Their flock also boasted a variety

of hair colors, hairstyles, and facial features.

What they had in common was that had they been born in the world of Nicola's past life, their looks would have placed them in a sufficiently high percentile to become a television announcer.

But Sieghart simply wore a smile that, although exquisite, was clearly manufactured, worn like a mask to humor the young ladies. He was polite but remained an island that they would never reach.

He did not, however, even so much as glance at Nicola as he walked by her. As to why this was, Sieghart was simply respecting Nicola's desire that he should never give off the slightest hint of their connection in front of regular students. He had never once done so since Nicola had arrived at the academy.

Sieghart only ever approached Nicola after first checking thoroughly to make sure no one else was around. Nicola always trusted her childhood friend to take these measures because she had faith in his commitment to their agreement. That was the only reason she was remotely willing to tolerate how he sometimes bounded toward her like an oversized dog, even at school.

With the exception of Alois—who was probably Sieghart's most trusted friend—only Ernst, his retainer, and Olivia, Alois's fiancée and Sieghart's fellow student council member, knew of their relationship. So Sieghart had never once broken his promise to Nicola on any occasion.

In the end, Nicola and Sieghart passed each other in the hall without their eyes meeting once, and he just walked away until he was out of sight. From members of the crowd in front of and behind Nicola, she could hear sighs to the effect of, "His look of melancholy is especially lovely," and "His clouded countenance is truly captivating." This was all enough to prompt Nicola to cast her eyes down slightly. She could not help but feel a little sympathy for her childhood friend when the girls who crowded him interpreted his stone wall of a smile, which had almost no expression, in such a manner.

Sieghart's external advantages—his outward beauty and demeanor, which accentuated his charm to its fullest—were all nothing more than a suit of armor to him. What lay underneath was a boy who, in private, acted very much his age.

As a result of years of unwanted affection and malice born of that affection once spurned, he acted mature beyond his years in public. But he behaved more childishly than he really ought to and was his true self in front of those he felt comfortable around. Having grown up alongside Sieghart and observing the unfortunate circumstances under which he had matured firsthand, Nicola struggled to clearly reject his affections.

Despite this, she did not reciprocate them either and was aware that her personality was quite flawed.

“You know, the Silver Lord doesn’t have a fiancée yet, does he? I will really envy whoever gets to marry such a gorgeous man,” said Karin while blushing.

In response, Elsa followed up with a blunt remark, “Really? As a piece of artwork, I do think he’s beautiful, but I would never want to be by his side. Don’t you find the very thought of being placed alongside a face as beautiful as his unbearable?”

After hearing Elsa say this, Nicola nodded violently, as if shaking the idle thoughts from her head.

“It totally is, for real.”

“Totally?”

“For real?”

While the two other girls racked their brains to process these unfamiliar phrases, Nicola ignored them and proceeded absentmindedly towards the dining hall.

◆◆◆

There was a spider.

It was about the same size as the palm of my hand. I rarely saw somewhat large spiders like that in my dormitory or around the school building. But I came across them once in a while in a setting surrounded by nature, like the royal village.

Compared to the average person, I have never particularly liked or disliked bugs. For some reason, I really did not wish to get anywhere near this spider

and I turned around to walk away.

After glancing back over my shoulder, I saw the spider seemingly crawl straight toward me. The very moment I was overcome with an indescribable feeling of dread, I was already awake.

When I shifted in my bed, a cold breeze from outside made its way through a gap in my pajamas, causing me to shudder. I seemed to have become drenched in sweat without even realizing it. I looked at my bedside clock and found it was not yet morning. After lying back down to try and go back to sleep, sleep soon enveloped me once more.

Once my dreams returned, so did the spider—this time at twice the size.

3

Perhaps because her weekend had not felt restful in the slightest, or perhaps because this week had just started, Nicola paid little attention to her afternoon classes that day as well. She spent the remainder of her day in a daze.

Once her final lesson had finished, Nicola chatted with her friends after school before having dinner and taking a bath. She ended the day still in a stupor, her head somehow not clear enough to work on her assignment, whose deadline had only been extended to tomorrow.

She instead worked on routine mathematics problems, sluggishly dragging her fountain pen across the pages of her notebook. It was not as if she had to give this homework much thought, but from time to time she folded her arms and gazed vacantly up at the ceiling or rested her arms on her desk.

The deep indigo fountain pen her childhood friend had given her fit her hand perfectly, as one might expect from a product of such high quality. As she twirled it around with her fingers, a flash of silver appeared in the back of her mind, as much as she tried to suppress those thoughts.

Nicola remembered the scene from that afternoon.

Just as the girls around him had said, Sieghart did not have a fiancée just yet. Unlike Nicola, who had only just started at the academy that year, this was Sieghart's last year. Graduation was on the horizon, so his days of freedom to put off choosing a fiancée would soon come to an end. Though he probably wished he could forsake this duty, this was the time to pick his prospective wife.

For a fiancée, Nicola thought he might as well pick freely from the flock of girls with television announcer looks who had surrounded him that very day, or any other daughter of an aristocrat he fancied.

Sieghart had the good fortune to choose his bride, so he should cease chasing after this surly girl who was not even cute. He should just hurry and get engaged to a beautiful young lady from a suitable lineage. Nicola could not help but feel this way.

But if Sieghart found himself a fiancée, it would certainly be difficult for Nicola to protect him in the way she always had.

Nicola would also have difficulty giving Sieghart her handcrafted amulets once he had a fiancée. Any potential bride he found would most certainly frown at the sight of her fiancé carrying a handmade gift from another woman.

Nicola had given Sieghart a shikigami that would automatically activate if he ever found himself in mortal danger. Should it ever appear in front of his fiancée with Nicola's face, Sieghart would not know where to look.

That could not happen. From the perspective of Sieghart's unknown future fiancée, the shikigami would seem like nothing more than an intruder ruining one of their dates.

"Really, what am I to do...?"

The drawn-out, ambiguous relationship that Nicola and Sieghart had continued until this point would have to definitively change its nature fairly soon.

Gemini, who today had taken the shape of something like a triangular building block, tumbled across Nicola's desk, clearly hoping to be given something to do. As Nicola gently patted her familiar to comfort it, a knock came at the door of her room. *Tap, tap.*

Nicola turned around to face the door, wondering who it could possibly be at this hour. The clock hanging on the wall caught her eye. The hands would soon point to two o'clock in the morning. In the Japanese tradition Nicola was familiar with from her past life, this was considered the witching hour.

Certain that she had not arranged for anyone to visit her room so late at night, Nicola racked her brains for an explanation.

Tap, tap, knocked the visitor again, more forcefully this time. A thought suddenly occurred to Nicola, and she approached the door.

Just to be sure, without opening the door, she knocked back four times from inside. *Tap, tap, tap, tap*. Two knocks responded once more. *Tap, tap*. Nicola frowned; this confirmed her suspicions.

The knocking seemed to come from a spot at a height that was surprisingly close to Nicola's feet.

That was not all. Compared to the rather muted sound that Nicola's knuckles would produce when knocking on a door, this sound was somehow more rigid in quality.

If she had to compare it to something, it was almost like the sound of someone tapping a piece of pottery.

"Gemini, go around the door from outside and see what's there."

After twirling atop the desk, Gemini's form changed from a triangular block to its pigeon form. Nicola opened the window for it.

Nicola's room was situated in a corner of her building. Where the corridor to her room ended, there was a window. If Gemini peered in through that window, it should be able to tell her whatever was standing outside her door.

It was not long before Nicola welcomed the pigeon back into her room. After shaking off its pigeon form, Gemini hopped onto the ouija board.

A DOLL

"Seriously?" Nicola then muttered, "Gimme a break."

Judging from the rigid sound that was almost like tapping on porcelain, it was probably something like a bisque doll.

Come to think of it... Nicola recalled the malicious letter she had received in the morning. *Looks like I'll have to deal with that now*, she thought with a scowl.

"Hey, about that doll. Do you think it can open the door by itself?"

Gemini spun atop the word NO on the ouija board.

"Really? Right then, we'll leave it alone for today. I don't have time to be dealing with anything like that right now."

She recalled that the assignment that was mostly made up of blank pages still sat atop her desk. The thought of it made her head hurt.

Nicola could hear the doll scratching at the door coming from behind. *Scritch scratch scritch scratch scritch scratch scritch*. She did not bother turning around again.

"Shut up. I'll play with you tomorrow, so be quiet for now," said Nicola, resolving to ignore the doll completely.

◆◆◆

Without fail, each time I slept, the spider appeared once more at twice its previous size and chased after me again.

Thinking that bad dreams do sometimes recur, I did not consider this further and foolishly went back to sleep several times the first night it happened. By now, the spider was already as large as an average dog. It crawled much faster than before.

As I fled as fast as my legs could carry me, I heard it coming after me, its claws scratching against the cobblestones. *Snick-snack-snick-snack-snick-snack.* The sound made me feel sick. I was frightened, disconcerted out of my mind.

I woke up struggling to breathe.

My heart pounded violently in my chest. Sweat poured down my entire body, soaking through my pajamas.

My heart truly sank when I thought to myself that the next time I slept, the spider would be twice as large again.

4

After school the next day, Nicola wandered around the area behind the school building.

“Our ancestors once said: Most matters can be settled with fire... Kidding.”

With supernatural beings like this, burning them was usually the best solution.

In search of a place to build a fire, Nicola had come to a place where she could be sure no one would see her. She also wanted to hide what she had burned afterward and be fairly confident that the fire would not spread.

But there were not many places at the school that fulfilled those requirements. People frequented most places without vegetation that might cause a fire to spread. The inverse was also true, which meant that meeting every precondition was surprisingly difficult.

“*Mrow...”*

Looking over her shoulder, Nicola saw the brown tabby cat that had hissed at her during her recent tea party with Olivia. Her gaze snapped in line with the cat.

Nicola slowly approached the cat, which was sitting under a gazebo not two meters away with its legs and tail tucked underneath its body. She knew it would hiss at her if she continued staring at it, so she averted its gaze.

Once she was close enough to reach out and stroke its fur, she waited for a moment to confirm that it would not run away. Nicola decided to reach out and touch the cat, but the cat scratched her again without mercy.

The cat stood up and let out a slightly derisive “*Mrow,*” after glancing back in Nicola’s direction, then scampered away.

Looking down at the three red lines running across the back of her hand, Nicola sighed and muttered to herself, “I guess there’s no use in trying anymore,” before letting her shoulders slump.

Cats hated Nicola as much as they would a venomous serpent. In her past life,

stray cats she had never met had often come up to her of their own accord to seek her affection. She had been quite the cat lover. However, circumstances had changed completely since she had been reincarnated.

After letting her get close enough to touch them, cats scratched her without fail once she actually reached out to do so. She had only one guess as to the reason—the fact that her life had been offered as a sacrifice in the transition from her previous world to this one.

She could still remember the smell of the blood that she had choked up with her dying breaths, as well as another foul stench that permeated the room. Even now, she sometimes saw her final moments in her dreams, meaning her memory had not faded in the slightest.

“Probably... Whoever killed me used cat’s blood as well...”

Nicola remembered the letters written in blood on every surface of the room. It was a huge quantity of blood. Nicola’s killer must have also killed a lot of cats to obtain it.

A cat has nine lives. This meant that they were of great value to offer as sacrifices, so they were used in rituals to summon demons here and there. Or so her mentor in her past life had told her.

“It’s so unfair. I was a victim too,” said Nicola while pouting, but this changed nothing.

Now that she was marked with the smell of blood spilled by their brethren, cats would most definitely never like her again.

Still crouching down by where the cat had been, she gazed off in the direction in which it had fled.

As far as true cat lovers were concerned, just the chance to be near their lauded masters was precious. Even if she could not touch them, just looking at cats up close was still very restorative.

But then Nicola remembered that, at the tea party the other day, the cat had hissed at her when she was five or six meters away. She sighed and hung her head.

“Eh...? Uh... Huh? Hold on... No... No, no, no, that can’t be right, can it?” muttered Nicola, opening her eyes wide as a completely baseless bit of speculation suddenly occurred to her. “But, well, come to think of it...”

Nicola felt as if she had seen the answer to a mathematical formula in advance and was just now seeing the corresponding formula.

Almost paradoxically, she could identify what had been bothering her this entire time.

“Whoa... I don’t really want to know if I’m right. But even if I am, what am I supposed to do about it? Yeah, forget about it. That would be best.”

Nicola finally stood back up, her joints popping as she stretched her body.

In the first place, I still haven’t found a place to build a fire.

Thinking that if the gazebo area was no good, then the western tower might be appropriate. Nicola set off in another direction, only to be unlucky enough to bump into another person. The contents of her school bag were scattered across the ground and she sighed deeply.

“Excuse me.” After apologizing properly, Nicola looked up. It seemed that she had bumped into a young man walking at one end of a group of several other male students.

“Ah, that’s all right,” said the young man, picking up one of the textbooks that had fallen out of Nicola’s bag. Nicola crouched down hurriedly to gather her study materials.

However, the young man ran his finger across the spot inside the cover of Nicola’s textbook where she had written her name. He then muttered the following, sounding like he had just discovered a new toy to play with.

“Huh, you’re Nicola von Weber, are you?”

Nicola was confused. She was not so conspicuous that a boy she had never met should know her name. An instinctive feeling of dread overcame her once another shadow fell across her.

“Oh, so this is the girl?”

“She’s plainer than I thought she’d be.”

The shadows cast over Nicola grew rapidly in number. She realized it would be a bad idea to look up now. As she backed away, she saw a pair of leather shoes that were too well worn to belong to another first-year student.

She realized that she must be dealing with a group of senior students, though she still had no idea why they knew her name or why they were bothering her.

After counting the feet on the ground, Nicola saw that there were about four of them. One of them grabbed her arm and roughly pulled her to her feet. The boy leaned down low before rudely peering at Nicola's face from below. His gaze then slowly fell, almost as if he were dragging his eyes across Nicola's body. Being examined by this young man's eyes made Nicola terribly uncomfortable. She frowned as she felt her skin begin to crawl.

"Hmmm. Looks like their taste in women sucks, despite their standing."

"Maybe she makes up for it with her technique?"

"Now you've got me excited."

"What do you think you're doing walking around here by yourself? You're asking for it, aren't you?"

There was not even the slightest shred of refinement in the vulgar laughter that followed among the boys. From the way they spoke, they either belonged to the merchant class that occupied the downtown district or were sons of lower nobles. So Nicola thought to herself, perhaps to escape from the horrid reality before her. And there was no sign of the situation improving. Nicola bit her lower lip tightly.

"How about you play with us this time? Give us your head." The boys continued to cackle vulgarly.

Nicola was not so dense as to fail to understand that by "play," they were not referring to a game of checkers. She was not about to feign innocence either.

"I am afraid that I cannot remove my head at will, so I will not give it to you. Please ask someone else." Nicola twisted her body to shake off the hand grasping her arm, but it did not even budge. On the contrary, the boy strengthened his grip further, causing Nicola to bite her lip again from the pain. At that point, Nicola truly felt foolish for coming here alone.

“What might you be doing?” said a sudden frosty voice. Nicola’s assailant loosened his grip on her arm. Though the voice had caused the boys to recoil, it was the most reassuring voice Nicola could have heard.

“Didn’t you hear me? I asked you what you’re doing here. Have you forgotten your words?” Even describing the voice as icy would make it sound lukewarm compared to the coldness it contained. As the young man with the transcendently beautiful visage walked toward the young man, the other boys backed away.

He wore a smile that was simply too gorgeous, without a single flaw. With each step he took, the sense of power he exerted over the boys only increased.

“Ah, uh...”

“Eh? Edelstein! Y—You’ve got the wrong idea! The bitch tempted us first... Ah! Ah, wait, you’ve had your fun with her along with Müller and the prince, haven’t you?! It’s our turn!” This boy, who seemed to be considered the leader of the gang of four, babbled pathetically. Nicola still winced upon hearing the uncomfortable contents of his imploration.

After hearing that, even Sieghart lost his smile and was entirely expressionless. A blank face reminiscent of a Noh mask replaced the cold smile he had donned for the sake of appearances. Not even Nicola had ever seen him like this, and she felt a chill run down her spine.

“You seem to be laboring under a misapprehension, so let me explain something. This young lady here, daughter of Viscount Weber, is not the woman of loose conduct you have heard about in rumors. Her half sister happens to work in the royal palace as a maid in waiting for the crown prince. That sister fell ill the other day, so Miss Weber and Alois looked after her together. Ernst attended as Alois’s bodyguard, and I merely went to refer them to an able physician I know. Your rumors are completely baseless.”

“Rumors...?” *Ah, now I see*, thought Nicola, finally understanding. At the same time, she felt like tutting at Sieghart. Nicola was an only child. The half sister Sieghart was talking about did not exist.

But when Sieghart said, “the other day,” Nicola could guess what had happened. She had been at the center of a vicious rumor without even realizing

it.

“When it comes to ‘free romance’ within the academy, I think you can do what you like. But as student council president, I can’t overlook an assault on a woman in the absence of consent.” Sieghart glared at the boys with disdain in his amethyst eyes. The male students took the full brunt of his glare and cowered beneath it. “In the coming days, you will be dealt an appropriate punishment. For today, you can simply be gone from my sight.”

Anger on the face of a beautiful man like Sieghart seemed even more severe and fearsome. The gang of boys, overwhelmed by his presence, finally clicked their tongues in frustration before leaving the scene in a hurry, never once looking back over their shoulders.

Nicola, who had stopped breathing for a while without realizing it, finally exhaled slowly and quietly. To hide the fact that her hands were shaking, she thrust them behind her back and clenched them into fists.

Once she could no longer see the male students who had assaulted her, the tense atmosphere hanging over the scene finally dissipated.

“Miss Weber. I would like to explain the details of what just happened to you. May I have a moment of your time?” asked Sieghart in a stiff, aloof voice.

“Very well,” was all Nicola could say in a quiet manner.

After returning to the school building via the nearest entrance, they went up the closest staircase. As they entered an empty classroom on the second floor, Sieghart urged Nicola to sit down. She immediately obliged.

“There were no applications to use rooms in this building after school today, and since I’ve been asked to monitor the halls this evening, I can assure you that there won’t be any other council members on patrol. You can calm down.” Despite having just stated that there was no one else around to see them, Sieghart did not cling to Nicola like he usually did.

Nicola took a moment to find her words and said, “That day, when we managed to return just before curfew, somebody saw us, right?”

Sieghart silently nodded in response. His shapely eyebrows were knitted

together in consternation.

“Yesterday and today, rumors of that sort spread almost instantly throughout the boys’ dormitory. I was looking for you today to tell you.” Sieghart kept the fine details of those rumors to himself, but in broad terms, Nicola thought she had probably been called a floozy who had Sieghart, Alois, and Ernst wrapped around her little finger. She recalled what Anne had told her about what had happened to her. That was a case of a fling between a boy and a girl of differing social ranks.

Without knowing it, Nicola had put a target on her back as one such girl who “didn’t know her place” in such a romance. At least she now knew why those jerks had bothered her.

“I’ve already made the rounds to squash those rumors, but it would be better if we avoided attracting any more attention for now. I’m really sorry.” With a clear spirit of deep repentance, Sieghart repeated that apology over and over.

Nicola suddenly blurted out, “It wasn’t... Your fault, Sieghart. I was careless too.” In the case of Alois being spirited away, Sieghart truly was without fault.

Besides, when they made it back just in time for curfew, there were no students around as far as Nicola could see. They had all conferred among themselves to make sure of that.

If someone had spotted them even after they went to such great lengths, that person must have very keen eyes indeed. It would not be fair to only blame Sieghart and his friends for what happened.

“It wasn’t... Your fault, Sieghart. Please raise your head.”

“Nicola...” Sieghart started to reach out toward Nicola before quickly pulling back his hand. A shockingly awkward smile spread across his face. “Sorry. I won’t touch you carelessly for a while... I saw how your hands were shaking after what happened with those boys.”

But I hid them... He is sharp. It was Nicola’s turn to smile awkwardly.

It was not as if she had particularly objected to Sieghart touching her until now. She had only worried about someone else seeing them, which could lead to trouble in the end. That was all.

Nicola reached for the hand Sieghart had withdrawn with both of her own hands, gripping it tightly.

“Do I really need to tell you this?” Despite herself, Nicola bit her lower lip once again, and her eyes wavered. “I know I can trust you. So I’m not at all frightened.”

Nicola only said this because she could not stand for Sieghart to lump himself with those uncouth, vulgar young men who had assaulted her that day. She had no ulterior motive.

Sieghart’s silver hair brushed against her cheek, falling over Nicola’s face, almost like a curtain. Silver suffused her field of view.

In a slightly hoarser voice than usual, Sieghart whispered from above Nicola’s head, “I only wish that... At that time, I would have said ‘What do you think you’re doing to my Nicola?’”

Sieghart gently embraced Nicola’s slender frame, as if cradling something fragile.

“Hey, how about we quit the aristocracy and go somewhere far away from here? We could grow apricots on the borders of your father’s land. We could even offer shelter to Alois from time to time.”

Sieghart buried his face in Nicola’s shoulder, happily talking about his dreams with a lovely voice that matched his gorgeous looks.

“Without my social rank in the way, I can protect you openly, Nicola. Whether it be a beast or bandit, I know I can protect you from anything. And I will no longer have to walk home from fancy balls covered in malicious spirits. It would definitely save you a lot of work.”

Nicola knew that if she only nodded, things would go off without a hitch. Her parents had been over the moon when they saw Sieghart continue to pursue Nicola over the years. If she eloped with Sieghart, she was sure that her parents would send them away with their blessing.

The skilled and clever Sieghart would probably have no trouble doing the work of a farmer. He would probably really stay by Nicola’s side until his dying breath.

Yet Nicola did not nod in agreement because she still lacked the resolve to go through this dream of his.

“What you feel for me, Sieghart, is merely a case of imprinting.” Nicola slowly turned her eyes away from Sieghart.

The reason Sieghart yearned so deeply for Nicola was due to a case of early imprinting. She had thought about this for a very long time. Just as a hatchling develops a bond with the first thing it sees, by pure coincidence, Nicola had simply been the first person to save Sieghart from his torment.

“Imprinting, you say. Perhaps in the first place, that really was the case.” Sieghart showed no sign of being hurt by Nicola’s comment. Instead, he smiled slightly as he gently caressed her cheek. “But you know, Nicola. Human beings are not such simple animals as to hold on to a mere imprint for ten years.”

Seeing Sieghart wistfully half-close his eyes, Nicola drew her lips into a jagged grimace. When he saw this, he chuckled wryly and pulled away from her.

Even so, Nicola did not feel prepared to join Sieghart in his dream.

If it had not been for her, Sieghart might well have spent his whole life as a nobleman. Nicola could still not bring herself to take responsibility for interfering and changing someone’s entire life.

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I thought that if I changed my pillow or the place where I slept, the nightmares might end. With that thought in mind, I submitted a request to spend a night outside the school. However, this did not change anything.

The spider was now twice as big as the average dog. I could no longer outrun it in a straight line, so I had no choice but to force myself to dodge and weave as I ran away.

It’s going to catch me. That was the only thought in my head. As I fretted, I lost the ability to think straight.

The harsh noise of its claws scraping against the cobblestones was already behind me.

5

“There is something I would like you to help me with,” Nicola eventually mumbled, her eyes darting from side to side. She had spent the last few moments in Sieghart’s arms, turning red and cycling through a myriad of awkward facial expressions.

These were not the words Sieghart had been hoping to hear, but they still constituted a concession on Nicola’s part.

This was the greatest concession Nicola could make for Sieghart, who had found himself unable to openly protect her even when she was nearly assaulted. Nicola, who was opposed to relying on others, was begging for Sieghart’s cooperation, involving him in her problems of her own accord.

The fact that this alone was enough to delight Sieghart—that his love for Nicola was such a weakness for him—actually frightened her.

When Nicola told Sieghart that she had been looking for a place to burn something discreetly and where it would be easy to conceal the act, Sieghart suggested the garbage dump behind the western tower.

The garbage dump was an unassuming hut made of bricks, and beside it was a furnace used for burning garbage. No weeds or trees were growing around it, and—even more importantly—the student council was in charge of the key to its door. Nicola immediately decided to employ Sieghart’s suggestion.

They elected to meet in the dead of night, at 2 a.m.

At the agreed-upon time, Sieghart slipped out of his dormitory without a sound, wearing a hooded cloak.

He would have liked to walk to the meeting place with a lantern in hand. But Sieghart realized this would be too difficult, as he’d risk being discovered by the dormitory warden.

Luckily, the moon was bright that night, though whenever he stepped into a

building's shadow, the darkness suddenly deepened. Sieghart felt his way to the meeting place with one hand on the nearest building. When he arrived at the garbage dump, he found Nicola was already waiting for him and spoke.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"No, I only just arrived myself. I see you came wearing a cloak."

"Well, my hair does tend to stand out..."

"Well, I suppose it would."

Sieghart's silver locks strongly asserted themselves even in the darkness of night. His hair certainly was not suited for clandestine operations.

In stark contrast, there was no need to take any measures to hide Nicola's smooth, luscious black hair, which billowed softly in the nighttime breeze.

"Let's go," said Nicola, taking Sieghart's hand and setting off.

For a while, they proceeded along the walls of the buildings that led to their destination in silence. When the buildings came to an end, they slipped between the gaps in the trees that followed. Finally, they came to the main thoroughfare that led to the schoolhouse, and the light of the moon poured down upon them once more. Having made it this far, they were now in a blind spot when viewed from the dormitory buildings and were able to breathe a sigh of relief.

Nicola stepped lightly across the cobblestone path as if dancing beneath the shining moon. Her gait was as light as a cat's, showing how she seemed to be in a good mood.

"Autumn is very short, is it not? I like to go walking this time of year when the weather is neither hot nor cold, but just right. Look, the moon is lovely as well."

"You're right. It is a lovely full moon."

With nothing to block out the moon, their surroundings were so bright that they almost did not need a lantern.

"Sieghart. Please hurry up and find yourself a fiancée," muttered Nicola as she looked up at the moon.

“No way. I won’t have anyone but you, Nicola.”

“You cannot go on saying that forever, can you? I will try to think of a way for me to go on protecting you in the way I always have, so please hurry...” Nicola turned her gaze away from the moon hanging directly overhead to stare straight through Sieghart with her deep ocean-blue eyes.

The moonlight seemed to twinkle as Nicola’s eyes reflected it. Sieghart gently traced the outline of her eyes with his fingers.

“What is your expression meant to tell me?”

Nicola hesitated for a moment. “My expression isn’t meant to say anything.”

Sieghart did not find tears clinging to his fingers. But he still wished to believe his subjective observation—that something had caused Nicola’s eyes to moisten.

“Really... But whether I am to be engaged or even married, I won’t have anyone but you.”

“You are so darn stubborn.” Nicola’s eyebrows lowered very slightly. It was difficult to judge whether she felt troubled or relieved.

Sieghart chuckled bitterly, wondering who the stubborn one here really was.

“You know you have as many options as there are stars in the sky,” she continued.

“The sky could grant me any star, and it would mean nothing. After all, I already have my eye on the moon.”

“Who asked you to say something so witty?”

Sieghart just chuckled. After that, they both fell silent.

They had had the same exchange many times before. The outcome had been the same every time until now, so a resolution certainly was not likely to appear out of the blue. They knew this all too well, so the silence that followed was not especially tense.

Once they had both closed their mouths, their attention turned to the sound of the undergrowth swaying in the cool night air and crickets chirping.

After walking for a while with their ears trained to these sounds of nature, Sieghart noticed another sound blended with them. Realizing something was amiss, he stopped in his tracks.

Tap tap tap tap.

Scrape scrape scrape scrape.

The sound appeared to be footsteps, but they were so faint that Sieghart had to strain his ears to avoid missing them. Whatever was being dragged behind those footfalls grew steadily louder and seemed to gradually draw closer.

“Nicola, I think I heard something.”

“Oh, it looks like our guest has finally made an appearance.” Nicola turned to look behind her with a pleasant smile as if she had been looking forward to this moment.

As if lured by Nicola’s enthusiasm, Sieghart also turned around to see what stood there.

The tiny figure, which seemed out of proportion with the broad thoroughfare they all stood upon, dragged behind it a pair of rugged dressmaker’s shears that were as long as it was tall. With each step it took, the blades of the scissors it carried rasped against the ground. It stood just over ten meters away from Sieghart and Nicola.

“A-A doll is walking around...”

It looked to be about thirty centimeters in height.

A patina of dust had rendered its hair somewhat dull, but its blonde, curly hair still glittered dimly in the moonlight. Its pallid face was smooth as porcelain and its large eyes never blinked. Instead, they remained unnaturally wide open.

The hem of the deftly made bisque doll’s wine-red dress, which was also dusty, swayed as it slowly walked toward Sieghart and Nicola.

A creepy shadow fell across the doll’s face as it bathed in the moonlight. Though the faint smile carved into its face should not have changed, the corners of its mouth now curled upward in a foolish grin.

“I’ve... Found... You!”

Sieghart felt his throat close up as the unnatural scene unfolded in front of him. He could not even scream. He shuddered in terror as he felt a sensation like a cold hand running its fingers down his spine.

When he came to his senses, the night air was still. Nothing but dead silence surrounded the ground where they stood.

“Hey, Sieghart. I’d quite like to destroy or capture this little one. It might be a bit hard to confront her here, so let us move to the garbage dump at once,” said Nicola, pointing to the doll. She seemed to think nothing of the abnormal scene before them. Her tone was so casual that she might have been talking about tomorrow’s weather.

“How can you be so calm and collected?!”



Normally, dolls could not move by themselves. Nor did they smirk devilishly or

approach people holding deadly weapons. Seeing how calm Nicola looked, Sieghart briefly wondered if it might be his sense of normality that was wrong.

“I mean, well, she came to see me yesterday as well. Since I couldn’t play with her then, it looks like she got angry and decided to come armed this time,” said Nicola, ignoring the dumbfounded look on Sieghart’s face for the time being. She then pursed her lips dejectedly and muttered, “I really couldn’t play yesterday. I had to finish my assignment... You really are impatient.”

There was not a shred of tension behind these words, which came straight out of left field as far as Sieghart was concerned. He felt his sense of shock and terror fade away. His tensed muscles relaxed, and he even managed to smile, though it was bitter.

Sieghart looked down at Nicola’s head, which did not even reach his shoulder. Despite the fact that she had quaked in fear when surrounded by strange boys, she did not exhibit the slightest hint of fear when confronted with the kind of apparition that would make any normal person shudder in terror. Sieghart saw how unbalanced his childhood friend really was.

Now that he thought about it, with Nicola by his side, there was nothing he should fear in this world. In that case, it was simply unnecessary for him to act frightened.

He had received a rare request for help from Nicola. He knew he needed to do whatever he could to assist her. After taking a deep breath, he took full command of his senses.

“Nicola, our objective is just around that corner. You want to confront her in the storeroom, don’t you? Let’s run.” Though Nicola was small, she was the only person who could rescue Sieghart from his terror. He grabbed her dainty hand and ran.

Judging how fast he could run without exhausting Nicola was one thing Sieghart was best at.

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The next time I slept, I knew it would be twice as big and twice as fast. At that

point, I was certain that it would catch me.

And so I greeted the next day without having slept a wink. As I returned to the academy by horse-drawn carriage, the regular rocking motion caused my consciousness to fade away for an instant. The moment I drifted off, I found myself being chased again.

I desperately ran back and forth to escape the spider that was now the size of a lion, but I could already tell what the outcome would be.

I awoke with a sharp pain in my arm and felt the fabric of my sleeve clinging to it, wet with something. The fluid dripping from the end of my sleeve was red. This left me with no choice but to accept that whatever wounds I sustained in my dreams would be reflected in reality. With the specter of death creeping upon me, my teeth began to chatter, the sound clearly escaping from my lips.

Something welled up from inside my stomach, but then I felt my throat close up. In the end, I only choked rather than actually vomiting.

6

With Sieghart pulling her forward by her hand, Nicola turned a corner to find the building she was looking for directly in front of her.

The rubbish dump was an extremely simple hut built out of bricks. Next to it was another brick structure that roughly looked like an incinerator or a large kiln.

The academy probably had its garbage collected and stored in the hut before incinerating it in the hearth next door. The latter structure had a prominent chimney on top of it—even in the moonlight, Nicola could see that soot covered it.

She also noted that the surrounding area was uniquely free of any vegetation, even though there was a large pile of firewood next to the furnace.

“Sieghart, would you like the use of a weapon?”

“If my opponent has scissors, I guess I’d rather not be unarmed. Let me borrow that.” After taking a comparatively long and slender instrument in hand,

Sieghart swung it lightly a few times to get used to his weapon.

“Now then, let us wait inside the hut,” said Nicola.

The hut’s interior differed in no way from what one might imagine when looking at it from the outside. It was nothing but a simple square space.

Perhaps some garbage had just been incinerated that weekend, and that was why there was so little of it inside the hut. The foul stench Nicola had prepared to speak of was not present either.

After they closed the door behind them, the only light source was the moonlight peeking in through the skylight above them and a small hole there for ventilation. Perhaps because it was a full moon that night, it was not so dark that they could not see anything.

Nicola slapped a paper talisman that read “ward off all evil” on the piece of firewood Sieghart was carrying before handing him a second talisman that read “seal.”

“You can either destroy her limbs, head, and torso or stick this slip of paper on her the first chance you get. I don’t mind which method you use. I know it’s a little late to ask since I’ve already involved you in this, but can I count on you?”

“Leave it to me,” said Sieghart with a fearless smile. It was a far more pleasant smile than the one he always wore around the academy, which made him look like a doll himself. He also looked more like his own age. Nicola nodded in satisfaction.

Tap, tap. As expected, the knock on the door came from a height not too far above their own feet.

Nicola grasped the doorknob and found a blind spot behind the door that she could hide in once she had opened it. Sieghart stood just off to the side of the doorway, holding his firewood in both hands.

After the two exchanged a glance, Nicola yanked the door open. The moment she did so, the bisque doll leaped inside with frightening speed, holding its shears in both hands. It moved to stab Sieghart straight in the eyes with the blades of its scissors.

But with a swing of a piece of firewood, Sieghart casually repelled the doll's attack. Once the doll was slammed against the wall of the hut, it rose to its feet again with surprising agility. It was not like muscles or springs were at work beneath its porcelain exterior.

"Are you supposed to be Chucky or something?" muttered Nicola, paying the doll a certain amount of respect.

The battle was not to be won in a dramatic fashion as it would be in a movie. It would be decided so easily it was almost disappointing.

Or at least, that is what Nicola had hoped. From the moment the battle had begun, except for the initial strike at Sieghart's eyes, the doll had directed every swing of its dressmaker's shears at Nicola.

Sieghart should have beaten the doll, which continued aiming its blades at Nicola, with his arms that were longer than the doll's by far. There should not have even been a contest.

After Sieghart had sent the doll flying with his length of firewood a few times, the scissors fell out of its hands. That very instant, Nicola kicked them away, then Sieghart slapped the talisman reading "seal" directly onto the doll's face.

The bisque doll's arms and legs writhed one last time before it fell totally still, as if something had snapped inside it.

"Thank you so much, Sieghart."

"I'm glad I could be of service." Sieghart gave a happy, innocent smile. He had not even broken a sweat.

"Now, then..." What followed was in Nicola's wheelhouse. Seizing the bisque doll with one hand, it surprised her to find that she stumbled as she tried to lift it. "Huh, wait a minute, this is heavy!"

Putting aside the fact that it was a bisque doll—and therefore made of porcelain—it still had far more weight than Nicola had imagined. Still, she found it difficult to lift with one hand as she had puny muscles. After dragging the doll over to the brick furnace with both hands and giving it a final, insincere, "I'm so sorry," she grabbed its head firmly.

Nicola pulled on the doll's head while twisting it. After a few seconds, it popped right off. Standing beside Nicola, Sieghart looked quite taken aback, but Nicola ignored him.

"What is this...?" Nicola wondered. Looking down at the doll's neck, she could see that it was stuffed full of wheat. Grabbing the doll's neck with one hand and its feet with the other, Nicola turned the doll upside down and shook it. Following gravity, the wheat filling inside the doll's torso fell through the neck and to the ground, rustling as it went. At the same time, the hem of the doll's velvet dress flipped over its head, revealing that someone had tied a red string around its waist. This made Nicola think about a *haramaki*, a cloth band traditionally worn around the waist for warmth in Japan.

Nicola's expression stiffened as an unpleasant sense of déjà vu suddenly came over her.

"Sieghart, could you bring me the shears the doll was carrying?"

Sieghart did not need to be told twice. He immediately handed Nicola the dressmaker's shears, which she used to cut the red string. It seemed that the doll's torso had been broken, leaving a wide hole open. The string had been wound around its waist to close up that hole.

The frown on Nicola's face grew steadily deeper.

"Is this some variant of Hide and Seek Alone...?" Nicola muttered.

Hide and Seek Alone was an urban legend that was popular in Japan in the 2000s. The rumor claimed that by playing hide and seek with a doll that one had specially prepared, one could experience a supernatural phenomenon. The legend spread like wildfire.

Nicola could not help but think that the state this bisque doll was in resembled the preparations involved in Hide and Seek Alone.

Step one: Give your plush doll a name.

Step two: Tear the doll in half and take out any cotton or other stuffing you find inside.

Step three: Replace the cotton by stuffing it with rice instead, along with your own nail clippings, hair trimmings, or blood.

Step four: Sew the torn body back together with red thread. Make sure to leave enough length in the thread to wrap around the doll a few times.

These were the steps involved in preparing a doll for Hide and Seek Alone.

Though Nicola could not tell whether this doll had been given a name—and, being a porcelain doll, it would have been impossible for the one who prepared it to sew it back together—there were simply too many elements that reminded her of Hide and Seek Alone. Nicola said nothing and frowned heavily. Although she had shaken all the wheat out of the doll, it still rustled when she shook it.

Nicola gently reached inside the doll and searched its contents once more. Her fingers touched something—a scrap of paper. She pulled it out and unfolded it, only to gasp in shock.

It was a small but thick piece of parchment that displayed a tiny portrait of a black-haired girl wearing the Royal Academy's uniform. When Nicola turned it over, she saw her name and date of birth written there.

Life did not give one many opportunities to have one's portrait drawn on a piece of paper that could fit in the palm of one's hand. Nicola immediately recognized it as the portrait they had forced her to sit for when she enrolled at the academy.

Sieghart gently cradled Nicola's shoulders in his arms.

"Who would do something so spiteful?" he wondered.

Nicola could understand why Sieghart had chosen the word "spiteful." Her face in the portrait appeared to have been cut to shreds with a knife.

She felt a slight chill go down her spine—the intent to curse Nicola was far clearer here than it had been in the letter she received praying for her misfortune. In all honesty, she was grateful for the warmth Sieghart's embrace provided. She took the hands resting on her shoulders in her own hands and squeezed them tightly.

Nevertheless, she could not help but continue to marvel at the intent behind the curse—it certainly was spiteful.

Nicola's eyes wandered as she tried to find just the right words to express the vague image that had emerged inside her head.

"Well... How can I put it...? It's not only this or that detail, but... Right behind the nastiness, I feel a certain stuffiness that reminds me of Japan... Something like that." As she thought out loud, her mind became clearer. Suddenly, she opened her eyes wide in wonderment.

Putting a lid on the thought that had just crossed the back of her mind for the time being, Nicola slapped her own cheeks to rouse herself from her reverie.

"Right, let's burn it. Burning it would be best," Nicola muttered, sounding rather like a firebug, before rising quickly to her feet.

While issuing instructions to Sieghart, Nicola piled up firewood in front of the furnace in a crosshatch pattern. What she ended up with was the basis of a small campfire.

She laid the doll in the center of the campfire before thrusting a branch that the school gardener had probably pruned into it and lighting it with a match. In the blink of an eye, the fire blazed aggressively.

"In all times and all places, fire has been said to possess the powers of destruction and regeneration. It can also cleanse the unclean and return it to a state of purity, I suppose."

"Aaaah! Aaah! Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaah! Aaaah! Aaaah! Aaah! Aaaah!" As the fire incinerated it, the doll in its death throes let out a scream that did not sound like it belonged to anything in this world. Nicola silently averted her eyes but felt no sympathy for the doll.

"I feel like I've just remembered something from when I was little. Before I met you, Nicola, I remember dolls around me often moved by themselves. But at some point, I simply forgot about it," Sieghart quietly murmured while gazing at the fire.

“By its nature, it is very easy to insert one’s will into dolls. They have heads, they have limbs, and are typically hollow on the inside. Even without putting an explicit curse on someone, like in this case, it is not rare for dolls to start moving by themselves.”

“Nicola, by any chance, did you do something about the bisque dolls that my little sister used to keep in our mansion?”

Nicola took a moment to respond. “Erm, well...”

She recalled her first time visiting Edelstein Manor. When she arrived, it was already on the verge of becoming an appalling example of a haunted mansion. In horror, she cradled her head in her hands and nearly fainted.

“I pulled the dolls’ heads off one by one and stuffed them full of talismans.”

“So that’s why you pulled this doll’s head off with such a practiced hand... I know this is belated, but thank you,” said Sieghart, a smile breaking across his needlessly composed visage.

Nicola let out a sniff of disappointment upon seeing Sieghart try to recompose his expression, which had melted to an almost slovenly extent. Once again, she thought his smile just now had been preferable to the unassailable, masklike smile he usually wore.

“Ah, come to think of it...” Nicola fished around in her pockets for a moment before taking out the letter she had received, the one that prayed for misfortune to befall her. She tossed the scrap of paper on top of the dancing tongues of flame, which landed over the doll—whose death cries had already ceased. The fire then singed it black, starting around the edges, before disintegrating it completely.

“Sieghart, please promise me that you will never curse anyone. If you are going to curse someone, you must dig two graves. If you wish misfortune on another, that misfortune will return to you undiminished. You cannot escape this principle.”

Sieghart was silent for a moment. “Does that apply to the person who sent this doll to kill you?”

“In this case... I am afraid not,” replied Nicola, shaking her head as she looked

down at the dancing flames. “The instigator has the penalty for inflicting a curse on another reflected on them upon its fulfillment. This doll failed to harm me, so the curse remains incomplete. Whoever cursed me will receive no penalty.”

“I see... I think it is a bit unfortunate that someone who wished for your misfortune will not pay the price for their actions. But I understand. I will never curse anyone.”

“Please keep that promise.” Though Nicola had given Sieghart a firm warning, she was not especially worried about him. Due to other people’s unrequited affection for him, he had to deal with their negative emotions throughout his life, which had manifested as apparitions and attacked him. Not only that, but even fairies and gods had even harassed him. Nicola looked up at her childhood friend’s face out of the corner of her eye.

She knew very well that, despite all this misfortune, Sieghart had never resented any of the people or other beings responsible for it. He was simply too affable a person. And so Nicola believed unconditionally that, having never held a grudge before, he would never curse anyone in the future.

When Nicola’s attention returned to the surrounding room, she noticed a few fairies happily flitting around the fire she had built. As tiny scales fell from their wings over the flames, they glittered beautifully in the air.

The sight of this gave Nicola the irresistible urge to hold Sieghart’s hand, so she did and gripped it firmly. At first, Sieghart opened his eyes wide and gasped, but then a childish twinkle appeared in his eyes.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” he said with a smile.

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The next time I fall asleep, it might be my last. So I thought as I lay restlessly in my bed before deciding I would be less likely to fall asleep if I went for a midnight walk. I stumbled unsteadily down the hall and slipped out of the dormitory.

7

When the doll had finished burning, Nicola and Sieghart gathered the charred remains and threw them into the nearby furnace before standing up to leave.

Now that the fire was out, they naturally felt their surroundings turn somewhat chilly and headed back to their dormitories much faster than they had come.

Along the way, Nicola became tired from walking so quickly and her pace slackened again. When Sieghart offered to give her a piggyback ride, she unexpectedly nodded in agreement. From how her eyelids kept drooping, Sieghart could tell she was sleepy.

After lifting Nicola onto his back, Sieghart draped the cloak he had brought over her. Perhaps thanks to this added warmth, Sieghart soon heard Nicola breathing gently in her sleep and chuckled wryly to himself.

Taking advantage of the fact that Nicola was asleep, Sieghart slowed his pace, taking his time strolling along the cobblestone path. With the peaceful sound of Nicola breathing in her sleep next to his ear, walking along the deserted path on a moonlit night was more enjoyable than he could have imagined.

Making up for his everyday lack of time with Nicola, Sieghart walked along the thoroughfare without a care in the world.

Confident that no one else would have dared to sneak out of their dormitory and gone to the schoolhouse in the middle of the night, Sieghart had completely let down his guard.

By the time Sieghart and his fellow delinquent were aware of each other's presence, they were already close enough to make out each other's faces. Then their eyes met.

"Sieg...?"

"Alois...?"

The two boys blinked as they each saw a familiar face beneath the moonlight. It still took a few seconds for them to find their words once they had recognized one another. Alois was the first to come to his senses.

"So the student council president likes to walk at night—what kind of example

is that? Having trouble sleeping, huh?" said Alois in his normal jocular tone before chuckling to himself.

But even with the moon as his only light source, Sieghart could clearly see the dark circles around Alois's green eyes. Sieghart narrowed his own eyes.

"You look to be having a hard time yourself. Just how long have you gone without sleep?"

"Just a little while, I guess..."

"You don't seem aware of this, so I think you should know. Whenever you say 'just a little,' you really mean a heck of a lot. Always."

Alois took a moment to respond. "You might be right about that." Then, as if he had just realized something, Alois raised his hands and admitted, "The truth is, I'm in trouble."

Once his eyes fell on the bloodstained bandages peeking out from under Alois's sleeve, Sieghart gently shook Nicola, who was still resting on his back, to wake her up.

After being lowered to the ground, still bleary-eyed from her slumber, Nicola looked up at Sieghart, then slowly turned her gaze toward Alois. Then she blinked a few times.

She then fell to her knees upon the cobblestones before covering her face with her hands and wailing, "I thought I told you. Yes, I definitely told you. I asked you not to come to me with any more unfortunate business for a while... It's only been three days. The moment I take my eyes off of you..."

8

The unexpected late-night encounter between the three friends occurred at 3:30 a.m. After this, they proceeded immediately to Alois's bedroom.

The dormitory warden's patrols were most frequent on weekends. On weekdays, the schedule was more lenient. This was even more true today as it was smack-dab in the middle of the week.

While marveling at the fact that they had sneaked into the boys' dormitory

with surprising ease—without crossing paths with the warden—Nicola removed the hooded cloak she had borrowed from Sieghart and returned it to its owner.

By the time they had made their way to the dormitory building, Nicola and Sieghart already heard everything that had happened to Alois over the past few days. Straight out of the mouth on his ghostly pale face.

According to Alois, from the very night after they had returned from the ruins outside the city, he had had the same nightmare constantly. He dreamed about running for his life from a spider that chased him—Nicola and Sieghart could not help but shudder.

The worst part about it was that each time he awoke and slept again, the spider came back twice as big, then twice as big again the next time. Of course, the speed at which it pursued Alois was also proportional to its size.

Though only three days had passed since the nightmares began, the spider was already the size of a lion. Naturally, the next time Alois slept, it would be twice that size. And its speed would be astonishing even when compared with the brown huntsman spiders found in Japanese homes. Simply put, the past three days had been hell for Alois.

Nicola had to admit that it was almost a miracle that Alois was still alive. Just hearing about it was enough to keep her perpetually covered in goose bumps.

Moreover, his dreams were lucid—though Alois knew he was dreaming, he could not run faster than he could in reality, let alone fly through the air.

“So I really can’t do anything but flee in the same state I’m in right now... I don’t quite know how to say this, but it is almost like someone has entirely taken control of my dreams. That’s how it seems to me,” admitted Alois, with a dejected look.

Regardless of where he tried sleeping, such as the palace under the pretense of having to perform official duties or in his carriage, he could not escape the nightmares. For all his struggles, he had finally sustained a wound in the dream that carried over to reality once he woke up. Nicola could only cradle her head in her hands at the hopelessness of Alois’s circumstances.

She could only think of two possibilities. *Either Alois brought something*

strange back from those ruins, or else... But if he did pick something up in those ruins, surely I would have noticed something at the time... Nicola racked her brains. But after pondering this nagging doubt for a while, she realized she was getting nowhere. She reflected on the fact that the apparition appeared in Alois's dreams and inspected the area around his bed.

Nicola opened the curtains, letting in enough moonlight to allow her to look around Alois's room.

One look at the room's furniture and other amenities reminded Nicola that she was dealing with a member of the royal family—the academy had treated him much more favorably than it had her, a daughter of lower nobility. The size of the room alone was clearly more generous than that of the one Nicola occupied.

The first thing Nicola inspected was the duvet on the bed. When she turned it over, she was struck by how soft it felt on her skin.

"Wow..." she quietly murmured to herself.

Next, she pushed down on the mattress with her finger. It was surprisingly springy, bouncing back immediately when she withdrew her hand. She felt deeply envious of Alois at the thought of him sleeping on such a bed every night. She then picked up one of the equally luxurious pillows. But nothing she inspected indicated why Alois had been cursed with his nightmares.

On the brink of giving up on this line of investigation, Nicola casually turned over the pillow in her hands before realizing that the underside was slightly uneven.

"Oh, bingo?" whispered Nicola. Perhaps thanks to the moonlight, the bump cast a dark shadow on the pillowcase, which was probably why she noticed it.

Once Nicola removed the pillowcase, a small scrap of paper fell out of it. She turned back to look at Alois, who shook his head in puzzlement. He did not seem to know anything about the piece of paper.

When Nicola took the folded piece of paper over to the window, her only light source, Alois and Sieghart went over and peered down at it too.

Something about the texture of the paper gave Nicola a feeling of déjà vu. Once she unfolded it, she found something black and crumpled in its center.

“Wah, what is this shaggy thing?! Gross!” After holding the black object to her eyes, Nicola finally realized what it was. She reflexively averted her eyes and threw it away.

“Eh, what?”

“What was it?”

Nicola was much shorter in stature than the two boys. They were fortunate enough to have their eyes far removed from Nicola’s hands and apparently could not identify the object themselves.

In a strangled voice, Nicola cried out, “It’s a spider! The dried carcass of a spider! Waah, that’s so gross. After taking a moment to think about it, it feels even more gross... Urgh...”

The only reason she had not immediately identified it as a spider was because its legs had crumpled up when it died. She strongly regretted having held the thing up so close to her face.

Nicola gingerly picked up the paper that had enclosed the spider with her fingertips. After shaking it open again and looking at its contents, she unreservedly screwed up her face with displeasure.

It was only natural that the paper felt familiar to her. Just one hour earlier, she had held a note with the same texture—this was yet another scrap of parchment.

On the back were Alois’s full name and date of birth. On the front, a portrait had been drawn. Just like in Nicola’s case, his face had been mercilessly shredded with some kind of blade.

“Don’t tell me... Is this the portrait I sat for when I enrolled here?” Alois took the scrap of parchment from Nicola and frowned. As he did so, Sieghart furtively stole a glance at Nicola’s face.

However they looked at it, this was the modus operandi of the person who had cursed Nicola. Nicola knew what Sieghart wanted to point out, but she

silently shook her head from side to side. There were still too many things that she did not understand. Besides, the incident involving her curse was already over. There was no need to give Alois further information to worry about.

Though Sieghart seemed to have a hard time accepting this, he eventually opened his mouth to say, “Hey, Nicola. If we burn this spider’s carcass like the doll from earlier, maybe Alois’s nightmares will end.”

Nicola took a moment to respond. “No, unfortunately, I don’t think they would... After all, he could not escape them by sleeping in a different location. The curse has already manifested entirely as an apparition within His Highness’s head.” She shook her head as she refuted Sieghart’s suggestion.

“Then what should we do? Is there no way to put an end to my nightmares?” asked Alois, looking at Nicola with an entreating glance.

Nicola placed her hand on her chin and, with some hesitation, said, “Fundamentally, one can end a curse by destroying whatever object served as its medium, by fire, or by some other means. But well, in this case, I think you would have to kill the spider in your dreams...”

“You want me to kill that by myself? And without a weapon...? You’re kidding, right?” Under the pale moonlight, a look of despair fell over Alois’s haggard face. He looked at Nicola like the subject of a grim painting, but she could not look directly at him.

Nicola thought that if someone told her she had to kill a ridiculously huge spider by hand, she would likely have the same expression on her face. Even she could not help but feel guilty, so she quickly followed up with a few words of encouragement.

“I think you might be able to take a weapon with you into your dream... Besides that, well, I *think* I could enter your dream as well... Although...”

When Nicola started speaking, Alois was all smiles, as if someone had finally offered him some hope, some expectation of a resolution. But as she trailed off, his expression turned to one of even more abject despair than he had shown before.

Nicola felt especially guilty realizing she had inadvertently gotten his hopes up

and let him down. Yet she finally delivered her conclusion.

"That is to say, to be honest... I think I would only get in your way..."

Alois's spirit seemed to have been completely snuffed out at this point—his face turned as pale as ash. Sieghart kindly placed a hand on Alois's to comfort him before turning to look at Nicola.

"So, Nicola, you mean to say that, even if you enter Alois's dream, you won't be able to defeat the apparition the same way you always do?" asked Sieghart, who seemed absolutely shocked by this revelation. He had never once seen Nicola fail to vanquish something from outside the human realm.

Though the faith Sieghart put in her made Nicola proud of her accomplishments as an exorcist, she could only sadly nod to confirm his suspicions.

"For better or worse, the dreamer's consciousness forms the basis of their dreams."

People could not dream of things they had never seen or even heard of in their lives. In other words, dreams consisted entirely of things the dreamer had seen before.

"Right now, the spider's curse has interfered with His Highness's dreams and seems to have taken control of them, but what lies beneath all of that is His Highness's own consciousness. Incidentally, Your Highness, where do you find yourself fleeing from the spider in your dreams?"

Alois slowly raised his head to answer Nicola's question.

"The palace... It is a wide open space, and I know it well, so until now I have managed to escape by the skin of my teeth," he answered in a parched voice.

"Most likely, that is because it is the place you are used to and can find your way around most easily. The fact that the palace is the setting for your nightmares is mostly because of your own defensive instincts, Your Highness." *Alternatively, it could be that his shiftless guardian spirit has finally shown up for work.*

Nicola squinted hard but saw no sign of Alois's guardian spirit anywhere, then

she then looked at the two boys.

“Your Highness, please consider what you already know about me. I have no stamina and cannot exert myself physically at all. Do you really think someone as physically puny as me could do anything against a spider twice the size of a lion, even if I entered your dreams? And in the palace, a location I am entirely unacquainted with, at that?” said Nicola.

Alois and Sieghart, sitting next to each other on the bed, quickly averted their eyes from Nicola at the same time. This was a little rude, but it was the right reaction.

“Besides, you are not fully aware of just what I can and cannot do. Are you, Your Highness? In other words, there is a possibility that I will not have all the techniques I typically employ at my disposal in your dreams. Honestly, I will be nothing but a normal, puny girl within your dreams. I probably won’t be of any help to you...”

Alois and Sieghart both hung their heads in disappointment.

Of course, Nicola wanted to help. However, she really would not be of any use if she entered Alois’s dreams. If she was not careful, she would only contribute another body to the spider’s casualties. She hung her head in shame. After the despondent trio had pondered their predicament for a while, Sieghart suddenly raised his head as if he had thought of something.

“Hey, Nicola. A moment ago, you said that we might be able to take weapons into Alois’s dream, right?”

“Well, I can probably at least manage that. But that alone wouldn’t...”

“In that case, can you send me into Alois’s dream rather than yourself?”

Nicola and Alois both looked up in surprise, their eyes wide open.

“I think... I probably could,” replied Nicola.

“Thank goodness. In that case, we can confront the spider together, armed with swords. If we defeat it, the nightmares will end, right?” With a smile, Sieghart added he had been to the palace a few times before and knew the layout.

From the look in his eyes, Nicola could see that he had already made up his mind. She could say nothing to dissuade him.

It certainly sounded like a better plan than having Nicola cross over into Alois's dreams. If a weak person would not be of any help, then there was nothing else for it but to send someone strong to support Alois.

"Your Highness, would you say that you are skilled in swordplay as well?" asked Nicola.

"I'm only average," replied Alois.

"Nicola, he's being modest. If you placed him among the swordsmen of this kingdom, he would definitely rank in the top half." Sieghart rarely flattered others for such matters. If Sieghart appraised him as such, then Alois must be fairly skilled.

"I can never match up to Sieg or Ern, so I've still developed a bit of a complex," explained Alois before pouting like a spoiled child. His complexion was still sickly, but Nicola could definitely see some color returning to his cheeks. She felt just a little relieved. Though Alois was often a nuisance to her, it was not as if she actually wanted him to die.

A part of Nicola had even begun thinking of Alois as her annoying older brother when she considered how unreservedly he always teased her. She had to admit that there was a bond between them now. Still, she could not help but sigh when she realized what a pushover she was.

"It would be very reassuring if Ernst could come with us as well," noted Sieghart.

"It will be a bit of a gamble whether Ernst can cross over into Alois's dreams... But I think it would still be worth it to try asking him," said Nicola.

"I'll try asking Ern, then," said Alois.

The three looked at each other and nodded.

"For the time being, Your Highness, please try to make it till morning without falling asleep."

“I’ll stay with him until then. I’m already awake at this hour. It won’t make much of a difference if I hold out for that time,” said Sieghart with a gentle smile, looking out toward the mountains far off in the distance and noticing that the sun had just started to illuminate them.

“I will return to my room for now and gather the things we shall require. Your Highness, do you think you can hold out until after school?” asked Nicola, peering closely at Alois’s face.

Alois cheekily narrowed his big, round, green eyes and said, “Of course. I’ll be just fine,” before nodding.

Nicola borrowed Sieghart’s cloak again, pulling the hood over her head so that her face was concealed, before turning back to take one last look at the two boys.

“Please prepare three swords—real swords, not fencing foils. Well then, I shall see you here again after school,” said Nicola before turning on her heel again to leave.

“Thank you so much, both of you...” said Alois.

Without looking back, Nicola waved goodbye and silently closed the door to Alois’s room behind her.

9

The next day seemed to pass in the blink of an eye. Even during her classes, Nicola furtively prepared for the task ahead, hiding her instruments from her teachers. As soon as the day ended, she made a beeline for Alois’s room.

Even though it was still daytime, Nicola realized it would be scandalous for her, a girl, to be seen striding into the boys’ dormitory by herself. Now that there were already deeply uncomfortable rumors that she had all three boys wrapped around her little finger, she could not enter the boys’ dormitory without some countermeasures.

Let me not walk in the waking world but on the other side of the veil. Nicola quietly recited an incantation inside her head, casting a spell of invisibility upon

herself. With this, she would be completely hidden and no one would be aware of her presence.

Nicola felt something like a cold membrane envelop her body, then nodded in satisfaction. Seeing nobody being able to condemn her, Nicola stepped across the threshold into the boys' dormitory.

Unlike the previous night, when it was dead silent, the boys' dormitory was a hive of activity in the daytime. Nicola passed quite a few students in the hallway. However, they all walked by her without giving her so much as a glance.

Thanks to the spell she had employed, Nicola easily made it to Alois's room. Without knocking, she opened the door and quietly slipped inside. There she found Alois, Sieghart, and Ernst already assembled. It seemed that Nicola was the last to arrive.

"Excuse my lateness..." said Nicola, dispelling her invisibility. When she did so, each of the boys reacted uniquely.

Alois's eyes shone with curiosity; Ernst's eyes widened in shock, his mouth hanging open; and Sieghart, who was clearly used to this, greeted Nicola with a gentle smile.

Although Nicola had broadly expected each of these reactions, what surprised her was what Alois did next. She had been sure that he would, as always, pester her with an endless series of questions. Even though she had come ready with a series of answers to humor him, Alois's look of unbridled curiosity almost immediately receded.

Defying Nicola's expectations, Alois turned to her with a serious look on his face.

"Let me say this once more. Miss Nicola, thank you, really," said Alois, taking Nicola's hand and squeezing it. With only the moonlight to go by, Nicola had only understood Alois's face to be extremely pale the previous night. Now, in the daylight, she could see that he was deathly pale. The circles under his eyes were pitch black. They stood out all the more thanks to his naturally marble-white skin. His gauntness could not have been any more conspicuous.

Nicola had often heard that a true beauty could be attractive even in the deepest gloom, but now she knew it to be true. Although the way Alois always teased her was irritating, she missed it now—she preferred him when he was in sound health.

She exhaled heavily before readying herself for the challenge ahead. It hadn't been long since she started to count Alois among her wards. After deciding that she would save him no matter what it took, she squeezed his hand back with all her strength.

She took a quick look around the room. Everything seemed quite different in the light of day compared to the moonlight of the previous night, but this was not so remarkable. Finally, she fixed her gaze on Ernst, who was standing by the window, then looked up at the other two.

"Have you explained the situation to Ernst yet?" asked Nicola.

Alois and Sieghart nodded firmly.

"What about the swords?" she asked.

"They're right here," said Ernst, pointing to a wall across the room. When Nicola turned to look where he was pointing, she saw that there were indeed three swords leaning against the wall. These were not the weapons aristocrats often wore for show, covered in far too many decorations. These were a more functional and practical kind of sword.

Nicola put her hands on her hips before nodding magnanimously and smiling fearlessly.

"Very good. Well then, shall we go nightmare hunting?"

◇

Nicola busily laid the items she had prepared after returning to her room the night before across Alois's bedside table.

Even if the curse had taken control of Alois's dreams, his consciousness still formed the foundation of his nightmares. For better or worse, his preconceptions and assumptions would come into play.

"Surely Nicola will have some technique to allow us to use weapons in my

dream.”

“I’m sure Nicola will be able to send Sieghart and Ernst into my dream.”

Indeed, whether Nicola really could do these things depended on if Alois believed them. It was all up to Alois’s state of mind. She was not, in fact, going to use any of her exorcist techniques to provide the bridge into his dreams.

Though she could not help feeling like a bit of a charlatan, she did not give voice to these feelings. Instead, she proceeded to clearly and eloquently explain the knowledge that she hoped Alois would believe she was going to employ.

She spoke of Shinto and esoteric Buddhism, the way of Yin and Yang, and all the other techniques she employed as an exorcist to seal away evil spirits.

Of course Nicola was not omnipotent. While there were many things she could do, there were also many things she could not. However, she needed to appear like a sorceress capable of any mystical feat before Alois.

From amongst the items laid out on Alois’s bedside table, Nicola took a red string to tie it around the pinky fingers of each of the three boys, connecting them all to Alois in the center of the trio.

Nicola did not know whether or not the folklore of this world spoke of an unbreakable red string of fate. But she chose a red string so that it would be clearly visible, making them aware of their connection.

“Now that you are bound by this thread, I would like you all to sleep on the pillow containing that cursed spider. Once His Highness is dragged back into his nightmare, Sieghart and Ernst should be automatically drawn in after him.” Nicola declared this with absolute conviction as if explaining a universal truth. She almost sounded like a cram school instructor explaining a mathematical formula. “Once you are inside the dream, please kill the spider.” To keep the vision of victory clear in their minds, Nicola spoke slowly and imbued her words with spiritual energy. “Even a ridiculously huge nightmare spider will slow down significantly if you cut off one of its legs. Do not worry. Once you’ve cut off all its legs, the spider will be nothing more than a silly round lump.”

Alois looked back at her with a serious look in his eyes and nodded.

“Fundamentally, the medium carrying the curse will pay no attention to anyone but the object of the curse,” said Nicola, recalling the encounter with the bisque doll the previous night.

The doll had looked comical when it had stabbed at her relentlessly with its scissors, only for Sieghart to easily send it flying in the air with a blow from behind. Thus, she summarized the event while explaining this concept to the others.

“If the spider pursues Alois single-mindedly in the same way, it will not pay any attention to a third party. In that case, it shouldn’t be difficult for Sieghart or Ernst to blindside it and take one of its legs off, right?” added Nicola as she glanced at Sieghart and Ernst, who nodded firmly. As the last confrontation with a curse had only occurred the previous night, this vision of victory was probably clear to Sieghart.

Nicola pointed at the items she had prepared in her spare time during the school day and gave the boys a smile brimming with confidence.

“I shall support you from out here. For example, with this.” Nicola picked up several large, flat pieces of wood carved out in the outline of a human figure before fanning them out like playing cards. “These will be your standins. All we need to do is write your names on these, so each one will take damage in your place exactly once. For example, if one of you received a wound to your arm, the arm would snap off of one of these pieces of wood. If your leg is wounded, one of these will lose its leg instead.”

“That’s amazing,” murmured Alois.

“Those would be most welcome,” said Sieghart.

Both of them peered at the pieces of wood in Nicola’s hands, their eyes shining with hope.

The highly fragrant wood used in making the sacrificial standin was frighteningly expensive, even from the perspective of a viscount’s daughter. For that reason, Nicola would only use them in very desperate situations. Unfortunately, the present circumstances required her to pull out all the stops.

“While you are sleeping, each time I see a standin break, I will ensure to supply a new one.” Nicola smiled while swearing an oath to herself that she would bill Alois for their cost once this was all over.

As for Ernst, he continued to listen to Nicola’s explanation with an expression halfway between acceptance and complete doubt.

I can’t expect too much from this one. Though it looks like he’s halfway to believing all this, so I guess he’s made some progress. She then reached out for another of the items. “The final item I can offer in support is this. This is called a dream catcher. It is a charm said to entangle bad dreams.”

The dream catcher, which Nicola had neatly woven during one of her classes, was a string tied like a web around a hoop in its center. It was a charm that originated among the Native Americans.

Although the idea of trapping a spider with a string woven in the shape of a web sounded a little strange, it was still unquestionably a bad dream. The dream catcher should provide some protection.

“With these items, I will make every effort to impede the spider from outside the dream... Please, try to finish it off as quickly as possible while you are in there.” Though Nicola would have liked nothing better than to swiftly exorcise the spider as she usually did with apparitions, Alois’s life was just barely hanging by a thread. She had no choice but to entrust him and his two friends with saving him.

All she could do right now was speak eloquently in the manner of a charlatan while throwing support items their way. While she would not admit it, the truth was that Nicola felt extremely frustrated.

“And please... Please come back soon.” Nicola bit her bottom lip before closing her mouth tightly again. Sieghart and Alois looked at each other before chuckling softly and ruffling Nicola’s hair.

10

Nicola sat at the very head of the spring mattress on Alois’s bed and looked down at the outlandish scene before her. Just beside her knees was a single

pillow, which the three young men shared as they slept, forming tight parallel lines across the bed.

Their pinky fingers were tied together with a red string. In their dominant hands, they each held a sword meant for combat. Nicola could not help but giggle at the bizarre scene, which looked almost like an altar prepared for some ritual.

“I wonder what would happen if someone barged into the room right now... Undoubtedly, they would start an even crazier rumor,” she muttered.

Alois and Sieghart, having stayed up through the previous night, fell asleep about thirty or forty seconds after closing their eyes. Seeing the two furrow their brows as they continued to breathe regularly in their sleep, Nicola laid three wooden standins upon their chests, with their respective names written upon them. No sooner had she done so than a small crack appeared in one of Alois’s standins.

The spider’s claws must have scratched him, but as the standin had not completely snapped, Nicola judged that he must be fine and turned her gaze away from Alois. Next to the two who were already asleep, Ernst alone sat up, still fully awake. Looking down at Alois in the middle, then Sieghart on the other side of Alois, and noticing their strained expressions, Ernst’s own expression clouded as he quietly came to a realization.

“It looks like His Grace has made it inside His Highness’s dream,” said Ernst. Just as he said this, Nicola saw a crack appear on the arm of one of Sieghart’s wooden stand ins.

“It would appear so,” she quietly agreed. *There’s not much point in having them tied together if Ernst cannot enter Alois’s dream.* As such, she untied the string around Ernst’s finger.

After slowly getting off the bed, Ernst looked down at Sieghart and Alois and remained silent thereafter.

Nicola finally wrested her gaze away from Ernst, then muttered to herself, “Well then, perhaps I’ll see what I can do to hinder the spider,” before grinning widely. Even after she began rummaging inside the pillowcase, Alois and Sieghart showed no sign of waking up. As soon as her fingers brushed against a

scrap of parchment, she seized it and pulled it out. This was the portrait of Alois used to wrap the spider carcass.

She could not completely rid herself of the disgust brought when touching the spider, even through the parchment. But she had no choice except repressing her revulsion and pressing the dream catcher she had made against the parcel of parchment.

“Ah.” However, the white string inside the dreamcatcher immediately turned dark red until it snapped apart entirely. “Oh?” Nicola murmured to herself, raising an eyebrow before a smile that some might have described as wicked crept across her face. “I hate to tell you this, but I didn’t just make one dream catcher! Take this, and this, and that!”

Reaching over the bedside table, Nicola picked up five dream catchers at once and rubbed them all together, with the parchment in the middle of them. The string around one or two snapped, but given that they had not all snapped, the remaining ones were bound to have an effect.

“I mass-produced these without even thinking during class. Eat this! And that! And this, for good measure!” Perhaps spending the night with no sleep had gone to Nicola’s head, but she grew steadily more excited. She continued to pile on one dream catcher after another while rubbing them all against the parchment. While she did so, she felt someone’s steady gaze on her, and they clearly wanted to say something to her.

“What is it? I did not get any sleep last night, so I might be a bit excitable. Do you have a problem with that?” Nicola quickly shot back at Ernst.

“No...” conceded Ernst. However, his evasive answer disturbed Nicola’s rhythm enough that she opened her eyes wide in surprise. Ernst was normally so aggressive that every line he spoke ended in an exclamation mark. He was unexpectedly meek today.

Nicola did not mind being hard on Ernst when he was his usual oppressive self, but he now appeared almost like a puppy that had been scolded. She felt somewhat apprehensive about abandoning him in that condition. So, she decided to try and draw something more out of him.

“If there is something you would like to say or ask, please tell me.” Once she

had laid out this fertile ground for communication, she had a hard time calming herself down.

Ernst looked up in surprise, but then his eyes wandered, as if he were a lost child. Then he looked down at the bandages around Alois's arm and finally broke his silence.

"His Highness was injured right before my eyes. In a carriage where we were the only two passengers, I heard him cry out in his sleep. By the time he opened his eyes, he was already wounded. I could see no sign of his assailant anywhere!" Ernst frowned heavily, then groaned in a low voice. "The same thing happened the other day. I know I stepped into those ruins holding your hand, but the next thing I knew, I was standing inside the mansion by myself... I looked all over the abandoned house. I even searched the greenhouse. But in the end, you and His Grace reappeared with His Highness in tow..."

Ernst bit his lip in frustration before completely baring his soul.

"The same thing has happened again. Why is it that when His Highness is truly in peril, I cannot be by his side? Is it because of the guardian spirit you say follows me around? If that's the case, then I do not need such a guardian spirit!"

"Hey now, you must not say such a preposterous thing." Nicola shook her head, admonishing Ernst even as she wrote Alois's name on a new wooden standin after throwing one of the three that had already broken underneath the bed. "Your guardian spirit is truly powerful. If you had entered the dream, I think you could have helped His Highness more than anyone. Adding in your martial prowess would have also turned the tables very much in His Highness's favor. I think the nightmare would have been over before it started."

Nicola had not mentioned that there was always a high probability of Ernst being unable to enter Alois's dream. On the other extreme, Alois could have hidden behind Ernst if he had been able to enter. In a roundabout way, the guardian spirit had likely protected Alois while attempting to protect its wielder.

Though Nicola knew little of the martial arts, she understood Ernst to be so skilled that even Sieghart had to admit that he could not compare to him.

If Ernst had been able to cross over into Alois's dreams as well, then the

spider might have been vanquished in mere minutes.

“It was not your guardian spirit that prevented you from entering His Highness’s dream today, Ernst. The problem rests within you.”

“Within... Me?”

As Nicola fiddled with another dream catcher, she looked up at Ernst and cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“It was only to be expected. After all, your eyes are closed.” As she resupplied Sieghart by placing another wooden standin on top of his chest, replacing an almost broken one, she fixed her gaze squarely on Ernst. “You still reject the world that we inhabit. In your heart of hearts, I think you still believe that nothing exists except that which you can see with your own eyes. No matter how hard you look, you will not be able to see things you do not believe in. You certainly will not be able to touch them.”

Ernst was silent. He looked down at the sword in his hand—the sword he had had no chance to use—and gripped it even more tightly.

“But you know,” concluded Nicola, “there are many mysterious things in this world. Bizarre things that might surprise you.” While holding up one of the broken dream catchers over one eye, peering at Ernst through the hole, she smiled wryly at him.

Until now, Ernst’s guardian spirit had always kept him away from the stranger things in this world. As a result, nothing truly inexplicable had ever happened to him, so he had grown up as a realist.

Yet Ernst had witnessed some events that could not be explained away with common sense. Such instances involved Alois spiriting away and later getting wounded in front of his very eyes.

Compared to when he first met Nicola, Ernst had most likely developed something of a foundation for believing in the supernatural.

“If you really want to protect His Highness... Do not reject the other world. Open your eyes wide and focus on whatever it is that means to harm your master. How about it?”

“Open my eyes... And focus...” said Ernst to Nicola before he was lost in thought, though he continued to mutter to himself. After this, Nicola’s voice no longer seemed to reach him.

He really is earnest but perhaps too serious. Still, Nicola much preferred this Ernst to the meek individual she had found a short while ago.

She noticed Ernst’s guardian spirit searing with light behind him—perhaps it wanted to tell her, “Don’t put any strange ideas in his head!” In any case, it was shining most aggressively.

Nicola believed it was fine to tell Ernst anything he wished to know about, so she turned away from the spirit dismissively.

Even if Ernst got involved with entities from the other side, he would probably not encounter any that could get past his spirit. There would be no problem there.

When Nicola finally looked back down at the two dreamers, she saw both of their eyelids flutter at the same time. The strained expressions on their faces and the furrows in their brows finally softened. Nicola realized that the conflict on that side looked to have ended. She let out a sigh of relief.

“Ernst. It seems that the battle is over.”

“R-Really...?”

All that was left to do was untie the string binding Alois and Sieghart.

“Watch out for cooties... Kidding,” said Nicola as she leaned across the bed to untie the string.

At that very moment, without warning, *something* else appeared. Nicola’s heart leaped forward in her chest. She began to sweat in terror. All of the wooden standins resting on Sieghart and Alois’s chests began to loudly snap in half, one by one. The shikigami in Sieghart’s jacket pocket fell out and manifested itself spontaneously.

“Y-You’ve got to be kidding me...” Nicola suppressed her immediate physiological response of vomiting. With her hands still shaking, she swiftly formed a sign in the air.

In the blink of an eye, despite being at the center of all the layers of protection Nicola had woven, Alois and Sieghart doubled over in their sleep and threw up blood.

Amid all these ill omens, Nicola felt her lips tremble as a wave of terror washed over her. From behind all of the barriers she had prepared...

Her eyes met those of the bee.

A Certain Interlude, From Before She Was Nicola

Rikka Kurokawa tried to open the windows with surprising force, but whoever had incompetently fitted them prevented her from doing so. She clicked her tongue in irritation. After a long, agonizing struggle, she finally managed to open the window slightly and saw a thin trail of smoke seep outside.

“You know. I wouldn’t have thought anyone would smoke without even opening a window. Don’t you have any common sense?” said Rikka, frowning and looking over her shoulder. Behind her was a man in his thirties with the magical combination of long hair he had casually tied back, a stubble beard, and sickly eyes. The man held his cigarette deep between his middle and index fingers as he exhaled a plume of smoke. He took another drag and covered most of his mouth only to exhale again. Following this, he gave Rikka a cynical smirk.

“Shut up, dumbass, and say what you like. Though I guess you already did, huh? But this is my office, meaning I’m the law around here, huh?” The man elongated each “huh” to accentuate his sarcasm.

“Could you not talk like that? It’s really irritating.”

The rude man was Sousuke Matsukata, who Rikka bitterly called her mentor. Moreover, he was the one who first instructed her in the art of opposing beings from beyond the human realm. These circumstances certainly made their relationship unusual.

She had met Matsukata a long time ago and could trace her time with him all the way to when she was about ten years old. They really did go back a long way, and she felt fairly indebted to him. As his apprentice, she had to acknowledge his skills and wisdom as an exorcist.

Putting all that aside, Rikka had an answer for anyone who asked her if she respected Matsukata as a person. Considering his conduct, she would say “no.”

“But really, in the first place, my whole job is to teach you brats the kinds of

conjuring tricks that common sense can't explain. Why the hell would ya expect common sense from the likes of me?" said Matsukata, reclining in his chair while rudely resting his feet on the desk beside him.

"Hey, your feet..."

"My legs are long, aren't they? Sorry about that!" Despite Rikka's reproachful glare, Matsukata remained undaunted, a smirk still plastered across his face.

Fed up, Rikka turned her gaze from Matsukata to a sofa he used for client meetings. The leather upholstery had begun to peel away in places. A junior apprentice lay sprawled on the sofa, counting talismans and looking very bored.

"Youta, say something," insisted Rikka.

"Huh? But I really don't mind the smell of cigarettes. And isn't it kinda late to complain about Sousuke's lack of manners or his general disdain for humanity?" The junior apprentice lazily turned his head toward Rikka before yawning to display his lack of interest.

Looks like I have no allies here, thought Rikka. She sighed deeply before looking out of the open window at the street below. Beyond that was a narrow alley where no one passed through a block away from the main street. Though shabby buildings with various tenants crowded the area, it was awfully quiet here.

One such building across the alleyway had window panes full of cracks covered with duct tape. A poster advertising vacancies for new tenants had started to peel away from one of the windows, hanging freely and rattling against the glass as it flapped in the wind.

Among their other neighbors were a massage parlor that had clearly already gone out of business and a consumer loan firm whose slogans, at least, sounded kind—both part of a row of businesses all displaying dubious pink neon signs.

The exorcists' office stood in the middle of this tableau, crammed with all manner of dreariness.

The inconceivable and abnormal were phenomena following unknown principles that reason alone could not explain. However, the people in this

office were experts who could resolve any such trouble caused by beings from beyond the human realm.

The exorcists' clients often paid quite well when they were at their wits' end. As far as Rikka could see, there was no real need for them to keep an office in such a filthy, crowded building just to save a few dollars on the rent.

"Hey, hey, novice, have you really thought about it? What'd you think would happen if we tried running a business like this in a clean, trendy little office? We'd look so damn suspicious that nobody would come near us," Matsukata had said one day. Despite her reservations, Rikka had really found this explanation extremely convincing.

Though she could not help but think that this line of work—one where she could not freely discuss anything she saw with others or have a nice office since it would actually put people off—was not respectable. She looked at the alley again before sitting down on the sofa opposite the junior apprentice with an air of resignation.

"Hey, by the way, Sousuke. Out of all the jobs you've had 'til now, what was the worst problem you had to deal with?" asked Youta, the junior apprentice, as he sat up on the sofa. He appeared to have grown bored of counting talismans on which the ink had dried, then been thrown on the desk in front of him. A glance at them revealed that, as always, the characters scrawled on them were a mess—looking as if an earthworm dipped in ink had crawled on them.

Matsukata removed his cigarette from his mouth, looking up at the ceiling briefly as if lost in thought.

"Ah, well that's easy. Definitely the *kodoku*. It comes up in fiction now and then, so I bet you have a pretty good idea of what it is," answered Matsukata in an uncharacteristically serious manner, scowling and spitting the name as if it tasted bitter in his mouth. After a pause, he muttered, "Well, I guess this is a good opportunity to show you."

He slowly rose to his feet and walked straight to a nearby bookshelf from which he took out a well-used, slightly yellowed volume titled *The Modern Apparition Compendium* before quickly flicking through its pages.

“The *kodoku* is the curse of venom—also known as *kojutsu*, the cursed art, and *fuko*, a form of witchcraft. After trapping several venomous insects or other small animals in a vessel and encouraging them to cannibalize one another, the last one remaining will become a spirit known as *maji*, the cursed. It will proceed to curse and kill someone of its creator’s choosing... So it says. Well, it’s a really shitty kind of curse.” Matsukata puffed more smoke before explaining further. “It’s considered orthodox to use snakes, centipedes, spiders, frogs, ants, somethin’ like that.

“It originated in Ancient China and was introduced to Japan no later than the eighth century, only to be banned under the *Ritsuryo* legal code. Hmm, what else... Few people know this, but as a simple byproduct of the curse, the user’s family will supposedly prosper... Or so some people say.”

“Huh,” muttered Rikka. The *kodoku* had often been used as subject matter for fiction, but she had never heard of this byproduct of its use.

“But, well...” added Matsukata. “Even so, we all know that if you curse someone, you’d better dig two graves. Any surviving family will enjoy said prosperity once the curse has rebounded and killed the one who used it.”

“Ah, I guess it would. However you look at it, the curse would have to rebound before any prosperity came, wouldn’t it?” agreed Youta, apparently satisfied by this explanation.

Certainly, there are almost no cases of righteous people using it in fiction, mused Rikka. It was almost a given that the villain in a story would use it. Reassuring the reader that, “After the death of the villain, his family enjoyed newfound prosperity,” would be a superfluous exposition at best. It was understandable that this property of the curse was not widely known.

“Okay, Youta. For example, can you tell me how this curse is different from the one placed by visiting a shrine in the dead of night?” asked Matsukata.

“Huh, I wonder how... Rikka, do you know?”

“I think I do, but try thinking about it yourself,” Rikka replied with a look of exasperation. She was sure he would get it if he really tried thinking about it, but the junior apprentice had very little patience for thinking.

“Hmm... Ah, wait a minute. I think I’ve got it! Is it that the effect is restricted? After all, when you curse someone with a visit to a shrine at night, you’d call it successful no matter what misfortune befalls your target. But with kodoku, the curse is only successful if your target dies.”

“That’s exactly right. For once, you’re correct,” Matsukata responded. “The nastiest thing about kodoku is that you can only kill your target using it, and the only outcome when it rebounds on you is death. As a bonus, it’s a real pain in the ass to dispel a curse that makes use of an animal. After all, animals have thoughts and feelings too. Ah right... In other words, this is my point.”

Matsukata scowled while running his fingers through his casually tied-back hair before staring deep into the eyes of each apprentice.

“What I really wanna say is that if you take a request that deals with this curse, there’s a high chance that you’ll end up seeing both the curse’s target and the one who placed it on them to die. If you don’t like how that sounds, think twice before accepting such a request. Choose your own jobs.”

He took a moment to squint and continued, “Supposing you take on a job like that, you’ll never escape that principle. Don’t go into it with mercy in your heart for the one who placed the curse. You should just let some people die and not need to feel so bad about that. There’s no need to break your back just because you accepted a job. Anyone who curses someone is bad. That’s all.”

Rikka and the junior apprentice exchanged a silent glance, surprised by how serious Matsukata’s tone had been as he delivered this final warning.

After a moment, Youta said, “Hey, Rikka. Is it okay if I assume that he’s concerned about us, no matter how out of character that might sound?”

“Maybe tomorrow it’ll rain land mines.”

“Hey, you two, I can hear you. You know, I really can’t stand you two when you aren’t acting cute.” As if to hide his embarrassment, Matsukata roughly gave each of his apprentices a noogie. “Say what you like. The fact that I would go so far as to warn you about kodoku tells you what a sickening nuisance they really are. No one who makes or uses one of those is right in the head. If you ever actually see one, you’ll know what I mean.”

These words, delivered with a shocking amount of gravitas, were burned into the back of Rikka’s mind and never really left her.

The Final Chapter: A Contemptible End

1

As she gasped for breath, Nicola glared at the honey bee hovering on the other side of the barrier. She was relieved, seeing that she had barely raised the barrier in time. Noticing that her hands were shaking, she clasped them together to keep them still.

“This is... Kodoku.” It was no ordinary apparition but a most stupefying example of abject malevolence. Nicola gulped as a heavy omen of death crawled over her. The pressure emanating from it seemed to wring the sweat out of her—a feeling of terror that would not abate. *It looks like the worst-case scenario I predicted in the ruins surrounded by wisteria was correct*, she thought while biting her lip.

As honeybees were related to wasps and hornets, they also possessed venom that could induce anaphylactic shock, though in comparatively small quantities.

Following the escape of the ruined manor’s former master, the large colony of honeybees trapped in the glass greenhouse had fought and eventually cannibalized each other to survive. Surviving this battle had transformed the bee into the kodoku, a venomous creature bearing a curse.

“Your Highness?! Your Grace?!” cried Ernst.

It looked like the many-layered barrier Nicola had frantically put up, surrounding her and the other two on the bed, had separated Ernst and the shikigami of Nicola that had just manifested itself.

While banging on the invisible wall in front of him, Ernst raised his voice and cried, “You, Miss Weber! What’s going on?! Isn’t the nightmare over?!”

“The spider is over and done with! Now it’s this bee’s turn!” Within her mind, Nicola knew that this would mean nothing to Ernst. But she was in a state of confusion herself. In the absence of a rational explanation, this incoherent babble was the best she could muster.

“Look at the bee behind you!” she continued.

“We’re not dealing with a spider now, but a bee!” said the other Nicola.

“Ah, gimme a break! Please, open those eyes of yours and look! The thing that’s making your lord and master vomit up blood is right there at this very moment!”

The shikigami Nicola had given to Sieghart to carry, which she had enchanted so that it would activate whenever he was in mortal danger, at first only approximated what Nicola said. But with this last appeal to Ernst, they said exactly the same thing in perfect unison.

With the two Nicolas looking at him threateningly, Ernst did what they told him and turned around. At first, he kept his eyes firmly shut but soon found his nerve and opened them wide.

“A bee?! Did you mean this honeybee?” After zeroing in on the correct direction and adjusting the inclination of his head, Ernst looked straight at the bee.

“Yes! That’s it!” cried both Nicolas.

“Wha—? Come to think of it, why are there two of you now?! Did you have a twin this whole time?!”

“No!” said the original Nicola.

“I’ll explain later!” added the shikigami Nicola.

There’s really no time to get into that now, thought Nicola. The original Nicola turned the still unconscious Alois and Sieghart so they were both lying on their sides so they wouldn’t choke as they continued coughing up blood.

Luckily, the menacing bee could not get any closer to them, thanks to the barrier Nicola had created. It looked like matters would not get any worse for the time being, and she was able to calm down just a bit.

When Nicola turned Alois and Sieghart over on their sides, their wooden standins fell off their chests. She noted that three of Alois’s had snapped, whereas only one and a half of Sieghart’s had broken.

Besides her instinctive aversion and disgust toward this unspeakable menace,

she was not particularly affected by its presence. Ernst did not seem affected by it either. That being the case, she could only think of one explanation: Someone had used this kodoku to curse Alois specifically.

The bee had appeared just before Nicola had finished untying the bond between Alois and Sieghart. Because of Sieghart's continued connection to Alois in his dream at that moment, he ended up sharing a portion of the damage suffered by Alois. At least, that was Nicola's hypothesis.

I did find it a bit mysterious this whole time. No, perhaps it would be more correct to say I felt uneasy about it. How did the menace known as the kodoku—the last bee left that was reborn as an apparition—manage to escape from that manor, covered from top to bottom as it was in wisteria, which has a warding effect against evil? Perhaps someone who knew its value and how to use it must have taken it with them...

"Hey, Miss Weber! I don't exactly understand what's going on here, but if I kill that bee, will that change our situation?!" barked Ernst, turning back to look at Nicola.

Nicola exchanged a glance with her shikigami, but she had no answer either.

This was only natural. The shikigami was a clone of Nicola with the same knowledge and the same memories. If the original Nicola was uncertain about something, there was no way that her clone could judge the matter any better.

After a moment, Nicola answered, "We won't know unless we try."

"Then I'll just do it!"

Nicola wrote Alois's and Sieghart's names on all the remaining wooden standins before removing the barrier between Ernst and the kodoku. At that very instant, Ernst suddenly vanished from sight and had already cut the honey bee down in the blink of an eye.

"D-Darn he's fast...!"

Even after the honeybee was sliced in two, it did not fall to the ground. Instead, one of the remaining halves began to regenerate from the cross section left on its side, the unnerving buzzing of its wings not ceasing for one

second. With another two, then three flashes of his blade, Ernst cut the bee into shreds, but it regenerated again. The buzzing still continued.

“Hey, me!” cried Nicola.

“Leave it to me, me!” answered her shikigami.

After Nicola glanced at the shikigami, the clone immediately grabbed Ernst’s hand to run out of the room, leading him behind her. Before the bee could regenerate completely, she formed a sign with her hands in the air, restoring her barriers.

“No one who makes or uses one of those is right in the head. If you ever actually see one, you’ll know what I mean.” Suddenly, the words of Nicola’s mentor crossed her mind.

With an unspeakable menace that could make its target cough up blood just by getting near them before her, Nicola could only mutter to herself, “He was so right.”

She felt a trail of cold sweat run down her spine as this was the beginning of a deeply unpleasant endurance battle.

2

Without delay, “Nicola” grabbed Ernst by the hand and rushed into the corridor. As she started running, she cast a spell of invisibility over them.

“Hey! Miss Weber, where are we going?!”

“No matter how many times you cut that thing up, it won’t get us anywhere. But if we can find the culprit behind this curse, the chance of us making some progress is...not entirely absent.” She could not quite bring herself to say that the chance was “not zero” and bit her lip with anxiety.

Nicola, in this case, was Nicola’s copy. This shikigami was not the usual pawn but could carry out her own spontaneous actions. She would do so with the same intellect, personality, knowledge, and memories as the one who had summoned her into being.

Against her own will, the warning her past mentor had told her about this very situation replayed in her head: “If you deal with the kodoku, you’ll end up seeing both the target of the curse and the one who placed it on them die.” To put this out of her mind, she ran as fast as she could, which was unusual for her.

“You said there was a culprit, right? Do you have some idea who it might be?” asked Ernst.

“It’s not. As...if I have no idea,” she panted. “Though I don’t know why... That person...would do such a thing!”

Ernst ran alongside Nicola as he spoke—not breaking a sweat—with a look that seemed to say he was shocked by how slow she was. Nicola had never cursed her own lack of athletic prowess as much as she did at this moment.

But one explanation for her sixth sense was that it had developed in order to make up for her outstanding physical shortcomings. Should she be asked to accept her lack of coordination as the price for having her spiritual abilities, she would just have to give up on athletics. If she had any chance to save the two lives in front of her, only her knowledge and experience could pave the way to a solution.

“We’re going to see the person you think is the culprit now, right?!”

“Y-Yes!”

Currently, the only clue was the scrap of paper used as the medium for the curse, which had the portrait of the target’s face slashed up. On the reverse side was written a name and a date of birth. This element resembled that of whoever had cursed Nicola with the bisque doll.

The very instant that the spider had been rendered useless, the kodoku had appeared without delay. Therefore, Nicola believed that the same person had placed both curses. Yet the thought that there really could not be more than one person at the school capable of enacting such a curse was also prominent in her mind.

In any case, she had no choice but to use the clues she had at her disposal. She decided that if she was wrong, she would cross that bridge when she came to it. With that in mind, Nicola kicked the ground with even more force as she

ran to her destination.

By the time they came crashing through the door to the boys' dormitory, Nicola's breathing was so ragged that she could no longer hold a conversation. Ernst, understandably finding this difficult to watch, suggested that she take a short break. Though she felt pitiful for doing so, she accepted his suggestion.

"Come to think of it, I don't think anyone noticed us running through the dormitory just now," mused Ernst.

Nicola took a moment to respond. "Ah... Th-That's true. That's because...I cast a spell... To that end..." Though her breathing was still somewhat ragged, she was able to answer with a nod. She leaned against a wall as she continued to catch her breath.

"A spell, you say?"

"Earlier. When I arrived at His Highness' room...it looked like I appeared out of thin air. Did it not? You may consider me to have been invisible at the time... If you like..."

Strictly speaking, she had not become invisible but merely insusceptible to being noticed by others. Though it would be accurate to say this, she did not need to explain every little detail to him.

Ernst listened to Nicola's rough explanation in silence, though he went through a myriad of facial expressions as she spoke.

For once, he's quiet, but his face still won't shut up, thought Nicola, even if she had to admit that this demonstrated skill on his part. He probably wanted to say, "That can't be!" but had long since lost the confidence to deny Nicola's claims.

"Please believe that is the case. Please do not doubt me. Please, accept it."

"Grr. All... All right." After Nicola glared at him, Ernst nodded reluctantly. It seemed that he was steadily adapting to his new environment. Though there were still some facts of this new world he could not quite bring himself to accept, he did not voice any further objections.

After much waiting, Nicola's breathing finally calmed down. As she peeled her back away from the wall she had been leaning against, she suddenly detected movement out of the corner of her eye. When she reflexively turned to see what it was, she noticed the brown tabby cat she had last seen the other day. It still looked slightly too well-groomed to be a stray.

Just like the day she had first met it, the cat stared up at Nicola from four or five meters away. When Nicola moved, the cat's gaze followed her. Even though she had not yet removed her spell of invisibility, it seemed that the cat could still see both of them.

As folk wisdom would have it, cats could see ghosts. Perhaps this old superstition was not mistaken after all.

Nicola silently tugged on Ernst's sleeve before saying, "Ernst, there is something I would like to confirm. Please catch that cat for me."

"The cat? Hey, is that really necessary?!"

"It is. Please do it."

Though Ernst did not seem entirely convinced, he did not object further. He approached the cat and extended his arms toward it. It looked like the cat really could see him too. But it did not try to run away or resist as he picked it up.

It really was too fat and well-groomed to be a stray, seeming used to humans. Perhaps some of the students at the academy had been taking care of it. Once the cat was in Ernst's arms, it seemed to search for a more comfortable position, acting more and more like a figure of importance and dignity.

Nicola placed her spell of invisibility on the cat as well, then looked up at Ernst.

"Ernst, our next destination is the girls' dormitory."

"In other words, you're telling me the culprit is a female student?"

"I don't know for sure yet. That's what we're going to confirm."

Although classes had finished for the day, she could not be certain that the one she sought was presently in her dormitory.

If she was not there, they would have no choice but to scour the entire schoolhouse. Considering that she had likely just set the kodoku on Alois, it was more likely that she would be in her room rather than wandering around the school.

“Is there something I can do?” asked Ernst.

Nicola quietly shook her head. “Nothing in particular. Only... If I, the shikigami, am destroyed, the original Nicola will have roughly the same damage reflected upon her. Ernst, you should only help me if it looks like I am about to be killed. Otherwise, please just stand by and watch.”

Ernst looked as if he was going to object to this begrudging request from Nicola, but in the end, he kept his mouth shut.

Nicola continued, “No matter how surprised you might be by the suspect I reveal or how little of our conversation you understand, please stay silent. If you want to save His Highness and Sieghart, please keep this promise. I beg you.” Nicola bowed deeply to Ernst. Given that he inhabited a world that resembled Europe, he would probably not be used to this Japanese gesture. Indeed, he seemed perplexed for a moment, but he ultimately said nothing to object to this.

After exhaling heavily, Ernst said, “All right. I assure you that I’ll keep that promise.”

“Thank you very much.”

Nicola set off again for the girls’ dormitory as fast as she could move without getting out of breath again.

There isn’t a moment to lose. We need to make a breakthrough, thought Nicola before breaking into a run. Slowing herself down so as not to exhaust herself again, she headed for the suspect’s room.

3

“We definitely are invisible, aren’t we?” muttered Ernst doubtfully as he looked down at his body.

Nicola's spell of invisibility was in full effect. As Ernst was a male student holding a cat in the middle of the girls' dormitory, he should have stood out. But no one looked at him suspiciously. They passed through the hallway without drawing attention from anyone, almost as if they were not there. Seeing what a good job she had done, Nicola allowed herself to feel a modicum of pride as she led Ernst through the girls' dormitory.

Finally, they arrived on the floor with the room Nicola was looking for and noted that it was over six meters away. The cat in Ernst's arms immediately hissed and bared its teeth before growling menacingly. Once they came within five meters of the door to the room, the cat's fur stood on end, as if it could not stand to get any closer. It extended its claws and fought to escape Ernst's clutches.

When Ernst hurriedly let go of the cat, it immediately jumped down and ran away as fast as its legs would carry it.

Ah, just as I expected, thought Nicola, silently averting her eyes from the cat. The cat's behavior spoke more convincingly of the veracity of her theory than any evidence she had found yet.

Nicola removed the spell of invisibility from only herself before knocking on the door. *Tap, tap, tap, tap*. In this European-style society, knocking twice was reserved for toilet doors. She recalled that the first time she had encountered the occupant of this room, she had done so in such a manner.

"This is Nicola von Weber. There is something I simply must check. Won't you please let me into your room?"

The door opened slightly, and the room's occupant, with her long, luxurious locks of blonde hair, peeked out from behind the door. Once she recognized Nicola, she smiled gorgeously.

"My, what's the matter? Let's see... I have an appointment a little later, but if you don't mind only staying for about twenty minutes, please come in," replied Olivia von Lüneburg, the daughter of a marquess. She was a young lady whose body boasted such voluptuous proportions that even other girls could not help but envy her. Showing no signs of caution, she readily beckoned Nicola into her

room. “The private rooms in this dormitory are a bit too cramped, aren’t they? For the moment, please feel free to sit anywhere you like. Ah, right, would you like some tea—”

“No, thank you,” said Nicola, ignoring Olivia’s hospitality and cutting her off. She would get straight to the point because every minute, every second, was precious right now. There was no time for a long-winded preamble.

Knowing her words may sound disjointed, Nicola suddenly said, “You know, cats hate me too. That wasn’t the case in my past life, but in this world, they always end up scratching me. Putting it another way, while I can get close enough to them that they can scratch me with their short little front paws... They seem to hate you even more.” With a hint of sarcasm, Nicola allowed her lips to form a smile.

On the day of Olivia’s tea party, the very same cat started hissing when it was only five or six meters away as if it could not stand to come any closer. It was not because of Nicola that the cat fled but because of Olivia’s presence.

Nicola continued, “In your past life, you offered me and a cat as sacrifices, right? And you made a wish to the devil. Am I wrong?”

Olivia’s hand froze just as she was about to pick up a teapot resting on her desk.

“Past life? Devil?” Olivia looked at Nicola with a look of confusion, and her head tilted to one side as if she had not the faintest idea what Nicola was talking about. “Ah, I get it! Nicola, darling, could it be that you’re writing a story? That must be it!” Olivia clasped her hands innocently in front of her chest, pretending this thought had genuinely just occurred to her.

But Nicola did not really mind if Olivia wanted to play dumb as she had no intention of entertaining this farce. Ignoring everything Olivia had just said, Nicola continued undeterred.

“At first, I had only a vague sense of déjà vu. Something that was familiar, something that didn’t sit right. Yet I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was.” The sensation had been like having a tiny fish bone caught in her throat. It was only a momentary feeling of unease, which she had forgotten each time after a short while.

Nicola remembered what had happened after school the previous day when she was searching for a place to burn the bisque doll. When she tried to touch that cat and it scratched her, that was the catalyst for her epiphany: “What if Olivia was the one who sacrificed me in my past life?” Paradoxically, her awareness of that possibility explained every little feeling of unease she had experienced up to that point.

“Hey, can I tell you something? Only the Japanese cover their mouths with their hands when laughing. I think it goes without saying that no one besides the Japanese will explicitly say, ‘Let me have a taste’ before trying some food.”

During their tea party, Olivia had explicitly announced her intention to try the apricot jam once Nicola had offered it. This action happened soon after Olivia had chuckled to herself with a hand placed daintily over her mouth. At the time, Nicola could not explain what had bothered her. She had simply felt something was out of place, seeing certain familiar mannerisms for the first time in over a decade.

“I do understand. Such deeply ingrained customs are hard to get rid of,” said Nicola, taking a step toward Olivia. In the past, Nicola too often unconsciously repeated habits from her past life.

But in her case, the young Sieghart was there to innocently remark on her habits, saying each time, “That’s unusual.” Thus, Nicola realized her actions were not in keeping with this world, whose culture closely resembled that of Europe. She remembered how, little by little, she had adjusted her behavior in order to fit in.

At some point, she had become entirely used to the customs of this world and chided herself for not discerning what the source of her unease was sooner. She smiled grimly as she noted it was simply the consequence of how much time she had spent in this world.

“Hey, you were the one who cursed me, weren’t you? Sending that bisque doll to kill me.” Nicola reminisced about the urban legend of Hide and Seek Alone. She’d noticed how the doll had been stuffed with wheat instead of rice and tied together with red string.

That doll, too, had knocked only twice on Nicola's door when it came for her and arrived at precisely 2 a.m. Although Western culture held the concept of twilight being a time of misfortune, they had nothing that precisely matched the Japanese witching hour. For these reasons, Nicola's thoughts immediately turned to Olivia when she understood the curse had been carried out in a distinctly Japanese fashion.

Even so, Nicola did not initially think of going to Olivia herself to confirm this or working to uncover the truth at all. Supposing she discovered what had happened to her in her past life, it was not as if she would get that life back. No matter how many times she found herself cursed, she was content to deal with it herself.

As long as Nicola was the object of these curses, she was confident that they would not succeed. As long as the curses were not successful, they would not rebound on the one who cursed her. She had no intention of taking further action as long as she was the target. This was why she felt terribly conflicted when Alois was cursed under much the same circumstances.

"Hey, Olivia. Why did you curse His Highness? Why did you wish for your own fiancé's death?" Nicola drew closer to Olivia's writing desk. On one side of the desk, Olivia had haphazardly placed the jar of jam Nicola had given her at their tea party.

Nicola picked up the jam jar and held it up to the light. Through the glass, she could see no jam left inside. In its place were a few strands of golden hair—which had grown very familiar to her as of late—that sparkled in the sunlight streaming through the window. An echo of the same dreaded miasma she had detected in the ruins outside the capital also resided in the jar. She grimaced as the circumstantial evidence had already confirmed almost everything she wanted to know.

"Hey, why did you do it... Olivia?" Wiping any trace of emotion from her face, Nicola returned her gaze to Olivia, who was already looking at her. There was only one thing left that Nicola could not understand, no matter how hard she tried. Why would Olivia have wanted Alois to die? That was the only thing.

Olivia raised the corners of her mouth in a disturbing smile that looked like a crescent moon.

“Why? Because God made a mistake, that’s why.”

“Eh?”

For a moment, Olivia seemed to stare off into space in an ecstatic trance, only to suddenly stomp on the floor like a child having a tantrum.

“I mean, it’s not fair! I did what I was told! I sacrificed a cat and an exorcist, then made my wish! But God had me reborn in the place of Alois’s fiancée! ‘Olivia’ is not even the protagonist! She’s a supporting character! In the first place, it wasn’t Alois I wanted to romance, but Sieghart!”

Nicola was dumbfounded for a moment. “Huh?” She could not understand what Olivia was saying and hung her mouth open in shock.

However, Olivia did not seem to notice Nicola’s reaction. She simply continued as if talking to herself.

“I mean, Alois was in the way.” Olivia’s expression was calm now, like her fervor from only a moment earlier had never happened. In fact, all the emotion seemed to have fallen from her face. This sharp contrast sent a shiver down Nicola’s spine, especially as Olivia resumed her childish rant. “After all, as long as Alois is alive, I won’t be able to progress along Sieghart’s route. He’s in my way.”

Olivia’s warped state of mind asserted itself with the infantile tone accompanying her words, making them sound even more eerie. Now that she had entirely abandoned her affectations as a young lady, she was susceptible to violent fluctuations in her mood. At this stage, Nicola could only stare at her in shock.

Romance. *Route*. These words seemed somehow familiar to Nicola. All of a sudden, it hit her like a slap in the face.

“Don’t tell me... Are we inside a game?”

“You’re telling me you lived this long without figuring that out? That’s funny.” Olivia began to cackle as if she thought this was the most amusing thing she had

ever heard. Raising both arms, she threw her head back as she laughed before facing heavenward in a most exaggerated display. “That’s right, this is a dating sim for women! I wished for the chance to throw away the garbage life I had in reality and be reincarnated as a character in my favorite game. Despite being granted this new life, not only was I not made the protagonist but became the fiancée of a character I never even liked. Isn’t that messed up?”

She’s not right in the head. *Actually, you’re the one who’s messed up*, Nicola thought. After shaking her head, she managed to swallow these words.

At the moment, Olivia’s eyes were entirely those of a maniac as she had dilated pupils and her eyes seemingly unfocused. Everything she said sounded completely unhinged and definitely did not seem sane to Nicola.

Nicola could not help but feel enraged when she learned Olivia had killed her for such a stupid reason. She could not imagine for one second why Olivia would have been willing to kill another person just for the sake of a pointless game.

As much as it pained her, she understood that directing her anger at this clearly deranged person would achieve nothing. Nicola bit her lip and exhaled heavily, waiting for her rage to subside. She then tried to stay calm as she opened her mouth to speak again.

“But why now? You’ve been engaged for a long time. Why wait till—” Before Nicola could finish speaking, Olivia slapped her in the face. A muted sound echoed throughout the room.

Olivia seized the front of Nicola’s uniform, shook her violently, and snapped, “Because you appeared! You, a mere background character!” She glared at Nicola with her mouth opened so wide as she wailed that her teeth were visible.

In another corner of the room, Ernst started to move, but Nicola bade him stay with a glance. Nicola pushed Olivia’s arms away from her body by herself. Olivia breathed so heavily that her shoulders rose and fell with each breath, still glaring resentfully at Nicola.

“You know, when I first came here, I hoped for an ending where I could elope with Sieghart myself! That’s why I allowed Alois to remain as my fiancé while I

joined the student council and worked to gain Sieghart's favor, little by little! But in spite of that, you had to show up! A close childhood friend of Sieghart's who didn't even exist in the game! That's why!"

"So you decided you would be happier if your fiancé died, then?" asked Nicola in a low voice.

The corners of Olivia's mouth curled up once again. With an absentminded smile, she said, "Well, when you look at our families' social standing, Sieghart and I are a match, aren't we? If Alois dies, we will naturally end up together as two children of marquesses who are still unbetrothed." Just for her desires, Olivia was willing to trample on the lives of many people and animals. The more Olivia spoke, the more nauseated Nicola felt.

Having taken Olivia's hands off of her clothes, Nicola shoved her. She pushed Olivia away with less effort than expected, making the older girl stumble back and plop down on top of her bed.

After a brief silence, Nicola asked, "How did you obtain that honey bee?"

"Hmm, I wonder? God must have caught it for me. All I've done is follow God's advice," said Olivia, looking away from Nicola as if she had no further interest in this background character.

Nicola frowned, then closed her eyes. A being that would seek a sacrifice for granting a wish as vulgar and foolish as this could not possibly be a god.

"The one who granted your wish was not a god. It was the devil himself."

"Either way, I couldn't care less. As long as he could grant my wish," muttered Olivia, without so much as a glance at Nicola, still staring into empty space.

Facing Olivia from one side, Nicola quietly asked her, "You know that we say, 'If you curse someone, dig two graves.' You will most definitely pay a price for the curse you enacted on someone to die and will not escape your own death. In the Heian period, fortune tellers commanded by aristocrats to hex someone always dug two graves—one for the target and one for themselves. They faced their fate... Are you prepared to do the same?"

Olivia looked up at Nicola with a derisive expression. With a snort of laughter, she said, "That's just a moralistic story people told each other. They just wanted

to stop people cursing each other, right? I mean, I killed you, offered you as a sacrifice, and I'm just fine! So, I can curse you and Alois, and I'll be just fine! Aha ha ha ha!"

The act of offering a sacrifice to the devil was a contract; this curse was another matter entirely. Only an amateur like Olivia could conflate two such different things. Despite her ignorance, she had stumbled into territory she should have never ventured into and had run wild with her half-baked knowledge of the occult. There was no point in Nicola making any further effort to explain this to her.

"Is that so?" was all Nicola said.

The perpetrator would only receive the penalty for cursing another person when said curse was successful. Nicola had to share some of the blame for Olivia's misapprehension.

After making eye contact with Ernst, Nicola turned on her heel and left Olivia's room behind.

4

Still sitting on Alois's bed, Nicola quietly cut herself off from her shikigami's sight and hearing as she waited for her to bring back Ernst.

The duo had stopped to visit Nicola's room on their way back. She was sure that they would bring back an item that she wished she had right now but had omitted to bring when she arrived at Alois's room that afternoon.

Finding herself with nothing to do for the time being, Nicola gently stroked Sieghart's head. Sweat currently drenched his usually silky-smooth strands of silver hair and made them heavier, which was brought on by the fever induced by the curse.

"Guess what? Olivia told me that we're in a game right now. It sounds like you're one of the romanceable characters, Sieghart. There is apparently a route where you elope with your lover. I guess that's why you were always talking about doing that. As if..." Nicola bit her lip suddenly.

She had thought of the past fifteen years she had spent in this world, following her reincarnation, as a second chance at life. Even if someone told her now that characters in a game surrounded her, she had long since seen them as people whose lives were equal to hers. When they got injured, they would bleed; if their hearts stopped, they would die. All of this and more made them living, breathing human beings.

Alois's face contorted in agony as his nightmare continued. Nicola wiped the blood staining his mouth before looking at the wooden standins on the two boys' chests.

Each of them had only two left—all the others had already been broken. On the other side of Nicola's barrier, the bee still seemed intent on hunting them down as the disquieting buzzing of its wings continued.

Once the standins were all broken, Sieghart and Alois would start coughing up blood again. When Nicola's spiritual energy ran out, she would no longer be able to maintain the barrier keeping the bee at a distance. She was nearly at her limit.

Ernst and the shikigami returned to Alois's room in less than ten minutes. The shikigami clutched the crucial glass jar, which she must have snatched from Olivia's room, and shared a glance with the original Nicola.

Both knew each other's minds as if they could read them, even if that was not the case. If the shikigami had brought that thing back, she must have done so with the same resolve Nicola felt. Nicola hopped down from the bed and stumbled toward the edge of her barrier.

"I'm sorry, me." Nicola and her copy both placed their hands on either side of the barrier before letting their foreheads rest on the same spot.

The shikigami closed her eyes and smiled awkwardly. She then said, "It's okay. We're exactly the same, so I get it."

In one synchronized motion, Nicola and the shikigami looked at the bed.

Ten years. Nicola looked down at her slightly older childhood friend, who always called her name in such a sickly sweet tone. Despite his perfectionism,

he acted like a spoiled child only around Nicola. She could not help but be touched by the innocent way he trusted her, even as he longed for her.

Alois was not at fault either. If anyone was to blame here, it was Nicola for allowing Olivia to run wild for this long.

There was a limit to the lives she could protect. She had never been so overconfident as to believe she could save every life by herself. In this life and her previous one, Nicola had always been careful not to overextend herself. But she had also decided long ago whose life to prioritize under these circumstances and could not let Sieghart die.

The shikigami, who had the same face as Nicola, grinned to bolster her courage and said, “I can only say this one thing—do not waver.”

“Sorry. I’m counting on you.”

“Yep, I know. Leave it to me.”

All I can do is seek the best outcome possible. Although Nicola knew it was arrogant of her, she reached out to tip the scales of life and death.

On the other side of the barrier, Nicola’s shikigami opened the glass jar and tipped it upside down to shake out all of Alois’s hair. After purifying it with an incantation, she whipped the jar through the air and trapped the bee inside.

Fundamentally speaking, the medium of a curse would pay no attention to anyone besides the target of the curse. Even with her meager physical prowess, it was not too difficult for the shikigami to catch the honey bee from behind, which was intent on continuing to hover over Alois.

The shikigami held the lid over the jar while leaving a tiny gap, into which she dropped a lock of blonde hair.

She must have snatched that from Olivia when she grabbed her, thought Nicola.

Once the hair was inside the jar, the shikigami closed it completely.

What Nicola had just done was “overwrite the curse.”Olivia was now the target of the curse, and Nicola was its perpetrator.

After the shikigami slowly opened the jar's lid again, the bee no longer paid any heed to Alois and Sieghart. Instead, it flew straight out the door, which Nicola's shikigami had left open.

Suddenly, the air in the room felt much lighter.

The kodoku was bound to be headed for Olivia now, with its guiding principle being to fight for its own survival. Simply to go on living, it would kill whatever opponent was placed alongside it in a confined space.

Fundamentally, occult theory stated that destroying or burning the medium for a curse would end it. However, the curse had not ended despite Ernst's successful attempt to cut the bee to shreds.

The fact that he could not kill the bee was probably because Ernst, existing as he did outside of the jar, had no right to end its life. Only Alois, part of whom was placed inside the jar, and Sieghart, who was bound to Alois via his dream, could kill it.

And now Olivia, whose hair was inside the jar, had the right to kill the bee. As for Nicola, she hoped in vain that Olivia would indeed kill it, but it had become such a potent menace that prompted its target to cough up blood just by coming near them. Killing it would likely be impossible for Olivia.

Nicola silently cast her eyes down. If the curse had succeeded in killing Alois, the original target, the kodoku would have rebounded fatally on Olivia anyway.

Knowing that she could not protect Alois and Sieghart forever, Nicola had reasoned that there was no way to spare Olivia's life. Of course, it went without saying that if the curse now killed Olivia, the bee would then return to finish off Nicola.

If you curse someone, dig two graves. There was no escaping this law of nature.

"Hey, Miss Weber. It's time you explained what's going on!" demanded Ernst, who could no longer conceal his irritation after having been kept out of the loop this whole time. Nicola deliberately did not answer him.

Instead, she directly instructed him on which action to take next, “That honey bee will surely be back very soon. As soon as that happens, please kill it to end the curse. You should be able to do it this time.” When the curse was successful, the penalty would be inflicted upon the one who made it. The kodoku would then temporarily lose its immunity to attack. Once “rights” no longer mattered, Ernst should be able to kill it.

After a moment, Ernst said, “All right.”

Nicola turned back to Alois and Sieghart. “If you’re going to tend to these two, give them medicine and a cold compress for their fever. If they develop a chill, warm them up instead. It should be fine for you to treat their symptoms that way as their condition is sure to mend quickly.”

Nicola borrowed a fountain pen and a scrap of parchment from Alois’s desk before swiftly writing something down. She used her other hand to stop her writing hand from shaking, managing to write several letters worth of Sanskrit.

“My shikigami must have brought a piece of paper with these letters written on it from my room. Please place that under the pillow. You may see a lot of similar characters, but please don’t get them confused.”

A deathly chill ran through Nicola, as if she were running a high fever herself. Her fingertips were so cold they felt like they had frozen solid. She was scared.

Unable to breathe steadily, the inside of her mouth started to dry up. Still, Nicola pretended nothing was wrong and continued to issue instructions.

“Ah. Besides that, I think she probably brought back a sachet filled with wisteria. Place that under their pillow as well. They will be better off with it than without.” Nicola jabbered at the end, but she had given Ernst the minimum degree of instruction he would need.

Ernst frowned heavily and groaned, “Don’t just say everything all at once! How am I supposed to remember all of that?! Besides, that thing is coming back, right? Why not tell me all of that once this is over?!”

Nicola hesitated for a moment. “If I wait until then, it will be too late.”

The air in the room changed again. The smell, the humidity, turned damp and murky. It had returned.

The shikigami suddenly lost her form, turning back into a piece of paper. Finally, the person-shaped piece of paper, which now had a hole, gently fluttered toward the ground. It was singed around the edges, as if it had caught fire. Nicola would feel almost equally the effects of any damage it sustained.

A sudden wave of nausea, a deathly chill, and the smell of rusty iron overcame Nicola Warm, vivid red blood trickled between her fingers as she clasped a hand over her face.

Unexpectedly, she wanted a hand to hold and reached out toward her childhood friend. But she hesitated slightly at the thought of staining someone so beautiful with her blood, making her hand waver in midair.

Her vision started to shake violently. She could not tell whether the hand she had extended lost its strength first or the rest of her body.

Realizing how much sorrow she was about to cause Sieghart, she tried to say, “I’m sorry.” Instead, blood gushed from her open mouth.

5

As Sieghart faced his desk and wrote a solution to a homework problem, a polite knock came at his door. Recently, his friends visited him every evening around this time, just before lights out.

Sieghart cast a glance at the small lump on the bed next to his desk, before standing up and inviting the two visitors into his room. He had no real reason to interrogate them about who they were. As he did so, he gently withdrew his left hand from the bed, which had rested there while he worked on his assignment. He met no resistance from the slender hand he had been holding—it just fell away as it had not gripped him in response. When he let go of the tiny hand, an unspoken feeling of anxiety tugged at Sieghart’s heart.

The warmth of that hand, which he had felt on that moonlit night, was now truly faint. He worried that if he let go, even that slight hint of warmth would disappear. This scared Sieghart out of his wits as he sensed his hands begin to shake and balled them tightly into fists.

With a brief sigh, he put aside that frightening premonition and slowly

reached for the doorknob. Alois and Ernst slipped inside as soon as he opened the door. His two friends immediately walked over to the bed and looked down at the girl sleeping there.

“Sieg, how is Miss Nicola?” Alois asked hesitantly. The question was already part of their routine.

Just like every other day, Sieghart could only shake his head and gaze downward.

“I see...” murmured Alois. He and Ernst also looked down with gloomy expressions. The night sky, which was visible through a gap in the curtains, was just as bleak as their hearts and without a single star.

A week had passed since the case of the curse was closed. Nonetheless, Nicola von Weber still lay fast asleep in this dim room with the lamp turned down low.

◇

When the time for lights out came, Alois and Ernst returned to their rooms. After seeing them off, Sieghart extinguished his lamp and quietly climbed into bed. He then gently embraced Nicola, who was so cold that he was worried about whether she was still alive. He hoped that he could at least transfer a bit of his warmth to her.

Nicola had always been extremely slender, but she still felt pleasant to hold, unlike a muscular man’s body. Although she had always denied this.

“There’s no way that’s true,” she always said.

However, she had become emaciated during her coma. Sieghart was worried he might easily break her in two if he was not careful. With each passing day, her life felt ever fainter, ever more temporary.

After brushing the hair away from her pale forehead that had no hint of blood coursing underneath, Sieghart placed his own forehead against hers as if praying. As he did so, he noticed Nicola’s eyelids flutter slightly. During the brief glimpse of her deep, ocean blue eyes, Sieghart saw they did not focus on anything.

In a parched voice, Nicola whispered, “Am I... dreaming?” Her voice was so faint as she drifted between her dreams and reality that she sounded like she might perish at any moment.

Occasionally, Nicola’s consciousness did surface as she dozed, but each time she fell back into a deep, deep sleep. Sieghart gave Nicola a slight nod, at which her deep blue eyes crumpled up slightly as if she were about to cry. Still, she also smiled very slightly.

“I... see...” was all she said before closing her eyes again. When Sieghart gently stroked her cheek, he found a faint warmth against his palm. As soon as Nicola brushed her cheek against his hand in reciprocation, almost like a cat, his expression softened substantially.

Feeling as if his heart had just been grasped by an unseen hand, Sieghart pulled Nicola closer still.

“Even if you think it’s a dream, I would have thought you’d put up more of a fight. Hey, Nicola...” As if to hide his own face and keep from having to look at Nicola’s, he buried his face in her shoulder. “Don’t leave me... You can’t leave me. I’m begging you.”

Sieghart knew all too well that Nicola had lost the will to live. That was the very reason he hugged her, however weakly and desperately, on this night, as he did every other night.

Nicola had a dream that took her back many years, one of a little girl being bullied.

She saw flashes of disembodied hands resting on the shoulders of people who passed her in the street.

Severed heads floating in midair.

Arms sprouting out of the ground.

A murky black haze writhing in a corner of the schoolhouse.

The little girl was frightened by things no one else but her could see. Those around her thought she was creepy, so she became an easy target for bullying.

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not lying.”

Though she now knew, both of them had been telling the truth.

Each person had their own “reality.”

Whatever two people could see would be part of their shared reality. If their visions ever differed, it was only natural to view this as a contradiction between their realities. Objectivity and subjectivity would never really be compatible.

By the time she entered elementary school, the little girl realized that what she saw differed from what other people perceived. Still, it was difficult for her to fit in with others.

She could not knowingly step on the bloody woman she once saw collapsed on the crosswalk. When the same woman lunged at her, she could not help but flinch. If strange things chased after her, she had no choice but to run away.

From the perspective of those who could not see what she could, her behavior seemed very odd indeed. That was inevitable.

Eventually, the little girl could no longer withstand the bullying. She became depressed and ended up confining herself to her home. It was then that Nicola finally realized that something was not right.

At first, she was convinced that her lives were flashing before her eyes. She had watched this go by absentmindedly, but with this, the story she was watching had deviated sharply from her memory. This caused her to panic.

“You mustn’t just stay at home. If you never leave the house... You’ll never be found.”

In her past life, Nicola had always killed time after school at a local shrine. As long as she was within its grounds, she would be less likely to be harassed by strange beings.

But it was there that, perhaps by sheer coincidence, Nicola met her mentor.

“Hey, you little rugrat. You can see real well, can’t you? Life has to be hell when your eyes are that good. You’ve got a tough road ahead of you.”

On the day Nicola first encountered him, she became certain that she was not just a weirdo. Meeting him had really changed her world to the point she could well have called it a paradigm shift on par with the Copernican Revolution. Learning that other people could see the same things she did and even occupied a specialized profession moved her beyond words.

The days she spent surrounded by her mentor and other apprentices who saw the same world that she did had, at one point, seemed utterly unattainable. Had it not been for this chance meeting, Nicola would have surely cursed the world around her.

Supposing for a moment that she had not met someone who saw what she did, her life would have proceeded in a completely different manner—the wrong direction.

Precisely because Nicola had once had similar experiences, she felt that she needed to call out to the child whose life so resembled her own.

“You mustn’t stay cooped up at home. If you go outside, someday, someone will surely find you.”

There were limits to how long one could go on pretending not to see. When children who could “see” were born into a normal household, besides being discovered by other people with the same ability gave them hope. As if by some sudden mutation, there was no way for them to lead a decent life.

Though this was certainly the case, if one stayed cooped up in their house, there was no chance of meeting people who shared the same view of reality.

“I know it’s hard. But you can’t just stay at home by yourself. Someone who sees the same world you do may be closer than you think. So, please... Go outside. I’m begging you!” With all the words at her disposal, Nicola tried to convince the child.

Yet, Nicola’s words never reached the child who could not see her. At a loss for what to do next, she stood there motionless.

“You can’t stay there, you can’t... If you stay inside, no one will find you...” Overcome by a feeling of powerlessness, Nicola shook her head helplessly. She appeared to be entirely invisible here, unable to intervene in any way to save the child’s future.

Eventually, after barely attending middle school or high school, the young girl became an adult.

Still by herself in a room meant for a small child, she lamented her life, “I’m not crazy! It’s the people around me, the ones who can’t see, who are strange! The world is wrong! I am...completely sane!”

She felt so isolated—there was no one who understood her, no one with whom she could share her experiences. She inevitably became more and more self-conscious.

Ah, thought Nicola. *If I hadn’t met someone that day who could see the same things I did, I wonder if I might have ended up the same way*. With that, she found herself unable to say anything further.

“Each person has their own reality—that much is inevitable.” Nicola could only develop this outlook because she had met someone who shared her view of the world. Going through life without ever finding proof that she was not simply insane would be a kind of hell she could not even imagine.

The young woman spent her days vilified by her parents, who called her a “loser.” Every day, she despaired at the thought of her apparent mental

abnormality. As she grew increasingly introverted, her world eventually became entirely confined to that tiny room.

Not having adequately experienced romance might have contributed to the young woman's descent into an obsession with dating simulation games. This natural consequence allowed her to go through pseudo-romance without ever leaving the house.

Her favorite had a story set in an academy with a fictional, Europe-esque setting. This was the same world that Nicola had lived in these past fifteen years, thinking she had been granted a second life by chance.

In the game's story, a girl who was once a commoner was somehow granted the opportunity to attend a school meant for the upper classes. Through her relationships with a wide cast of male characters, she would rejoice in her life as a student. That was the gist of the plot.

One of the cast was a classic prince, who acted aloof and whose true feelings were difficult to ascertain. Also included was the son of a marquess whose excessively refined features had made him distrustful of women. Other characters were a stubborn but faithful knight, a mischievous prince from a neighboring kingdom, and a teacher with a reputation as a playboy, notable for his more mature charm.

That teacher is probably the same man who drove Anne to commit suicide, thought Nicola. Without meaning to, it seemed that Nicola and Gemini had forced a romanceable character out of the academy.

Certainly, the titles of the many characters scrolling across the screen were familiar to Nicola. But that was only true of their titles. In fact, Sieghart was not nearly as distrustful of women as his biography in the game suggested. Another character described as a mere "playboy" had actually driven someone to suicide.

There was no doubt that some deviations had occurred because of the involvement of Nicola, who, in essence, was a new character. And outside of what had been depicted on-screen, there must be countless people who had lived and died.

Even if the basis for this world was the game's setting, the people who lived

there were not characters but human beings. The people she had met here were real humans, true to life.

Some characters from the game's cast, whom Nicola did not recognize, were later introduced, but she decided not to delve any deeper into the game's story. She was not interested in who the protagonist really was or how things might have unfolded if she had made different decisions.

At the end of the day, that story was nothing more than a series of events focused on only one person. Whatever the results of the unknown protagonist's decisions might have been, they had nothing to do with the life of Nicola, who existed outside of that story.

Though her observation may have been a pedestrian one, she realized everyone was a supporting character in someone else's story and the protagonist of their own lives. Nicola had lived her own life, nothing more and nothing less.

While taking a break from the games she enjoyed so much, the young woman had stumbled upon a certain rumor while surfing the Internet. The claim was about "a ritual that will grant your wish" if one offered appropriate payment, which she found most enticing.

Beings that people called demons were more tangled up in society than one might think. It was not at all rare for gods worshiped by cults to turn out to be demons once one took a closer look. As the trend of globalization proceeded, the boundaries that once existed between supernatural beings from different countries became as fuzzy as the international borders themselves.

Dealing with demons from abroad was indeed part of any exorcist's job these days, but Nicola could not quite claim to have had a great deal of experience with them. She thought the young woman had made her way to the site of a cultist group controlled by a demon that went unchecked by exorcists.

Though anyone could have seen at a glance that she was conducting a ritual to summon a demon, in her ignorance, the young woman went through with it. Under normal circumstances, most amateurs would have failed to execute the summoning ritual. Perhaps because of her natural affinity for the supernatural,

she was unfortunately successful.

In the end, the young woman bestowed her offering to the demon, just as she was asked, before making her wish.

◇

"Aha!" came a mocking laugh, prompting Nicola to look behind her.

"Hey, how did that feel just now? How did it feel to see the life of the girl you killed and who killed you flash before your eyes? Hey, hey, tell me!"

However, when Nicola turned around, she could see no one behind her. With the drawling voice—which rubbed her the wrong way—still echoing around her, Nicola scowled.

"Are you the one Olivia called 'God'?" she asked. After a beat, the formless voice started to cackle shrilly. Only a simple, unadulterated malice in the laughter resounded in Nicola's eardrums most unpleasantly.

"Aha—Aha ha ha ha ha! Ah, that's funny! Me, a god! Really, she was stupid, wasn't she?"

The voice sounded so delighted, so pleased that it could not help but laugh. It bounced around the room, sounding genuinely cheerful. Nicola found the shrill voice, which contained more than a hint of villainy, seriously uncomfortable to listen to.

She scowled and furrowed her brow before asking, "What is your name?"

"Oh, me?" replied the voice, before falling silent momentarily. After a short spell, the voice without a shape answered. "Yeah, right. I guess you can call me Rumpknecht if you like."

"Nah, you're totally a demon," said Nicola scathingly, unable to help herself. At this, the being cackled shrilly once more.

Rumpknecht, also known as the dark Santa Claus, was a being who gave naughty children gifts they would never have wished for. In Germany, his name was synonymous with demons, to which Nicola could only let out a little sigh.

"When you failed to make Olivia the protagonist of the story, was that on purpose?"

“Well, I mean, her wish was to let her be reincarnated inside the game... It wasn’t to let her be reincarnated as the protagonist!”

“I guess not...”

This was a being for whom the misfortune of human beings was the supreme pleasure. However carefully one chose their words when forming the contract, the creature known as a demon would find some way to split hairs and trip people up before ridiculing them for their foolishness.

Those who knew this would never think of making a contract with a demon, but the young woman had not known. Her ill-fated wish, born of her ignorance, led her down a path to a truly pitiable end.

The formless voice continued cackling to his heart’s content until, with an air of satisfaction, he finally said, “Aha ha... I definitely made the right call when I threw you together in the same world! Thanks to that decision, I got to see something truly amusing! I never would have expected you to curse her back, ready to die alongside her!” His voice sounded as if it had steeped in a concentrated brew of malice, delight, and arrogance. He audibly sneered as he attempted to rile Nicola up. “That was noble of you. Is this the power of love?”

“As if it were anything as high-minded as love,” spat Nicola without thinking about it.

The voice was overcome by bursts of laughter as if it found this particularly amusing.

“You think love is high-minded?! Aha ha... This is what makes humans so funny!” Every syllable the voice spoke dripped with irony and was unnecessarily elongated.

“Hey, could you stop talking like that? It’s really getting on my nerves.”

“I don’t think so!”

Nicola clicked her tongue unreservedly. But she knew that this was her fault for thinking she could have a meaningful conversation with a member of the demonic hordes.

Still, by way of revenge, she seized the contents of her pockets and hurled

them in the direction of the voice that dripped with malice. She did this despite knowing a flashback was a kind of dream and being sure that this would have no effect.

The handful of dream catchers remaining in Nicola's pockets flew quite a long way, tracing an arc in the air before clattering to the ground.

"Wow, so scary! Fall back, fall back! Right then, let's meet again someday if we have the chance! *Bis bald!*" As the voice delivered that parting shot, it slowly grew fainter.

But something about how the demon phrased that did not sit right. With a frown, Nicola said, "No, of course we won't have another chance. I'm about to die, right?"

"Heeheehee, aha... Too bad! You probably won't die, I think? After all, I think I heard a real god say she owed you a debt. Something about an offering."

"Huh?" Nicola could not believe her ears and did not understand what the voice was referring to.

She opened her mouth but could not immediately find any words to say. When she finally managed to squeeze out her voice, it trembled pathetically.

"No way... Why?! When I made a curse, don't you know that I was prepared to..." She could not keep going. *Are you telling me that I alone may go on living after killing another person? There is no way that would be allowed. Besides anything else, I can't forgive myself.* Nicola clenched her teeth together.

As if unable to contain his delight, the demon cried, "Poor little human! How wretched you are!" He then let out a laugh that seemed to originate deep in his throat. "I shouldn't be surprised! The gods really are irrational! And cruel! It looks like the desires of the humans who worship them couldn't mean less to them! Bye, for now, child of humanity! I'll see you again someday!"

After those final words, Nicola no longer heard the voice of the being who sounded like the manifestation of villainy. Nicola felt weak and slowly fell to her knees on the spot. Though her hands were shaking, she buried them in her hair.

Nicola could not have defended Alois and Sieghart indefinitely. If she had taken no action and they had died, the kodoku's curse would have rebounded

on Olivia anyway.

The choice was between three deaths or two. Nicola chose the latter and had issued the curse, intending to compensate for Olivia's life with her own and journey to death with the pitiful soul. Despite that...

"I didn't wish to go on living. I never wished for this."

7

Her body felt stiff, like a plank of wood, but it was wrapped in something warm. She slowly breathed in, sending air into her lungs. A familiar fragrance, something sweet but not the work of perfume, pierced her nostrils. Suddenly, her body relaxed, releasing all its pent-up tension.

When did I start to find this sweet fragrance reassuring? Nicola wondered as she worked her way back through her memories, but she closed her eyes again after failing to find a clear beginning.

The same hand she had extended that day and hesitated to use to take Sieghart's hand now firmly enclosed her childhood friend's palm. His other arm hugged Nicola tightly, but with just the right amount of strength in order to not cause her any pain.

As soon as Nicola sensed the warmth, she was forced to realize that she had survived. She felt the back of her throat tighten suddenly. To fight back the tears, Nicola bit her lip tightly.

After spending some time in the same mood, she took a deep breath before slowly exhaling again. Stirring from her position on the bed still seemed like too much trouble. With only a slight turn of her head, she surveyed her surroundings and saw sunlight streaming through a gap in the curtains. From the birds chirping, she judged it was most likely morning.

Nicola tried to say, "Um, just for starters, why are we sleeping together?" But she was uncertain she made a sound. The inside of her mouth was as parched as a desert. If she did manage to speak, her voice would likely be raspy.

“Ungh...” Nicola groaned indistinctly. With that, the long eyelashes on the ravishing face right in front of her stirred. He breathed gently and just barely opened his eyes. His translucent skin was so smooth Nicola could not even make out its pores. As his eyelids opened, two of the world’s finest purple gems peered out from within.

They faced each other at such an extremely close range that Nicola felt like their eyelashes might touch as they stared at one another for over ten seconds. Sieghart then opened his purple eyes so widely that they looked like they might fall out.

“Nicola?!”

Sieghart seized Nicola’s hands and pulled the top half of her body upright with a minimum of care and politeness. The moment he had done so, he embraced her, wrapping his arms around her. Nicola, who was even thinner and weaker than usual, certainly lacked the strength to tear his arms away and went along with it.

Like a broken record, Sieghart called Nicola’s name again and again. He hugged her so tightly and insistently that she thought he might crush her to death.

Sieghart, that hurts, Nicola thought of saying, but then decided not to do. There was not even a hair’s breadth between them, so she failed to pretend not to notice that Sieghart’s body was trembling.

With extreme sluggishness, her arm feeling like it had been immersed in a swamp, Nicola raised her hand and silently stroked the silver head resting on her shoulder. When she ran her fingers through his hair, which was wonderfully smooth, she noticed that the sensation did not last as long as she expected. Before long, her right hand touched only air. She remembered Sieghart’s long, silky, luxuriant silver hair reaching as far as his back. It seemed that, at some point, it had become much shorter.

Nicola slowly closed her eyes and after a moment, she said, “You gave it as an offering to Meatol, goddess of fertility, right?” *A real god... A debt... An offering...* Nicola recalled what the demon had said.

Besides the one whose statue she had cleared of the vines surrounding it,

back in those ruins, she could not think of any god for whom she had done any favors. And it was none other than Nicola who had told Sieghart that it might accept his hair as an offering.

With his head still buried in Nicola's shoulder, in a muffled voice, Sieghart said, "You told me that when dealing with beings from beyond the human realm, I must decide how to pay them. So, I made my own wish and my payment."

After gently pulling his body away from Nicola's, he traced the curves of her body as if confirming that she was really there.

"Looks like... You really are alive..." A definite sense of relief and the tiniest hint of sentimentality accompanied his trembling voice.





“I am afraid that I did indeed survive...” murmured Nicola, finally forcing the

words out before averting her eyes.

“Nicola, won’t you look at me?” Though Sieghart’s words were gentle, there was something very forceful about his tone. Nicola raised her head, but his amethyst eyes arrested her gaze

Sieghart knitted his elegant eyebrows together. His expression was contorted, almost as if he were enduring some pain, as he opened his mouth to speak again.

“I’m sorry. I knew what you had resolved to do and what you wanted to happen, Nicola. But I wanted— We wanted you to go on living rather than have the chance to atone for your sin. With our own inflated egos, we made that wish,” said Sieghart before scooping up Nicola’s hand and wrapping his hands around it.

Despite his words sounding like a confession, there was a strong sense of his will somewhere in his tone. Nicola could not brush his hands away.

Sieghart’s amethyst eyes were fixed squarely on Nicola as he continued, “Don’t worry. Since we wished for you to live, Nicola, we’ll share the burden of that sin.”

With these words, Nicola felt a pang in her chest as if a claw had suddenly seized her heart. She bit her lip as the back of her throat tightened again.

He already knows what my sin was. When Nicola understood this, she felt like the blood inside her had gone cold.

Sieghart was very sharp.

On that moonlit night, when they burned the doll, Nicola had already told Sieghart that cursing someone meant the very same misfortune would later visit the instigator. By piecing together the events that Ernst had witnessed, Sieghart must have immediately figured out Olivia’s misdeeds and what Nicola had done in response.

Nicola bit her lip tightly. As she shifted on top of the bed, she heard something rigid snapping underneath her. The mattress was somehow uneven

—there seemed to be some hard bumps on it. It almost felt like she was sitting on top of countless wooden planks.

She nervously drew back the duvet to reveal several wooden standins spread out beneath it and opened her eyes wide in shock. At a glance, there seemed to be no fewer than three hundred of them. All of them had Nicola's name written on them.

"What are these...?" she murmured in a dry rasp.

Sieghart's expression relaxed slightly as he said, "Alois went looking for the same fragrant wood that you used. Ernst cut them into the shape of people, and Alois wrote your name on every single one. I think he might have bought out the entire stock of that wood—not only in the royal capital but all the surrounding towns as well." Sieghart stated all this with a wry smile, but Nicola was at a loss for words.

The standins were very helpful, but the fragrant wood used as their raw material was quite expensive. Even Nicola would not use them unless the circumstances really called for them. And Alois had made so many too. Even as a conservative estimate, she reckoned he had spent a sufficiently large enough sum that if he had used it to buy a new carriage, he could have expected to get some change back.

Of course, it was not only the money involved that floored Nicola. Thinking of the time he must have put in to prepare them, Nicola hung her head and drew her lips into a thin line.

This undertaking was a totally different proposition from making just a few at a time. Nicola could not believe that they had fulfilled such a massive task for her sake.

"I wasn't the only one who wished for you to be spared. Alois and Ernst made the same wish. It's our fault that you survived. Feel free to resent us for wasting your resolve. Feel free to blame us." This time, Sieghart gently embraced Nicola and pulled her closer. "It's our fault, so you do not need to feel guilty for being alive right now. We did the wrong thing, not you, Nicola."

Past her childhood friend's shoulder, of which his new haircut provided a clear view, she could see the countless wooden standins strewn across the bed.

This act proved how they had wished for Nicola's life to be prolonged, not caring about the consequences.

All Nicola could do was clench her jaw hard, knowing she had no right to cry. Still, the feelings that welled up inside her became warm tears in the corners of her eyes, which ran down her cold cheeks. After gathering at the point of her chin, they turned into drops and fell.

The more she told herself that she did not have the right, the larger the teardrops seemed to grow. The dam had already given way—the tears fell incessantly, staining her childhood friend's shoulder.

On that day, for the first time, since she had been born again in that world, Nicola cried openly.

8

Nicola cried and cried some more. When she had finally calmed down a bit, a strong sense of shame suddenly overcame her.

When she abruptly grabbed Sieghart by the shoulder and pushed him away, he did not resist.

"I would just like to confirm one thing. Is His Highness also all right? Does he seem to have any lingering symptoms?"

"Nope, he's fine. And I think we'll be getting a visit from Alois himself soon enough. On weekdays, he comes to check on you just before lights out. But he said that since it's a weekend, he'll visit this morning."

"Sieg, I'm coming in," a voice rang outside the room. With uncanny timing, a knock came at the door, then it opened.

After stepping into Sieghart's room, Alois stopped the instant he saw that Nicola was awake. Because he had stopped so suddenly, Ernst, who was walking behind Alois, bumped into him and sent him tumbling forward.

"Your Highness! Please excuse my—"

But Alois did not seem to listen to Ernst's apology. He did not try to stop the momentum that Ernst had imparted when he barreled into him but borrowed it

as he made a beeline for the bed. He then tightly hugged Sieghart and Nicola together.

“Ugh...” groaned Nicola. All around her, she started to hear many disquieting snapping sounds. She then squeaked, “Eek! W-Wait a moment! You’re breaking them—you’re breaking such expensive items for no reason! Please, let go! Sieghart, fight back!”

“Eh?” mumbled Sieghart.

“Miss Nicola! Thank goodness! Really, thank goodness you’re all right! I’m sorry, so sorry... And really, thank you...” said Alois.

Sieghart did nothing to help, but instead chuckled as Alois would not cease clinging to them.

As for Nicola herself, she did not have the strength to tear Alois’s arms away and could only wail ineffectually. Meanwhile, Ernst just wandered sheepishly around the room. Once Nicola was thoroughly exhausted by this mortifying predicament and her body went limp, Sieghart and Alois, who had their arms around her, slowly realized how weak she still was.

Eventually, after releasing his grip on Nicola and Sieghart, Alois silently borrowed the chair at Sieghart’s writing desk and sat down. Nicola and Sieghart remained sitting on the bed, and Ernst leaned against a wall.

Alois’s expression darkened. For a brief spell he was silent, apparently feeling hesitant about what he was going to say.

He then, dispassionately and lacking intonation, said “Miss Olivia is dead. For now, her death is being treated as unnatural, but they do not have a suspect.”

“I see...” Nicola silently averted her eyes once again.

Ignorance was a sin, and knowledge was a punishment. Olivia’s half-baked knowledge of the occult had been both. Even if she had been dancing on the demon’s palm the entire time, death was an appropriate penalty for her crime.

As Nicola could not have gone on protecting Alois and Sieghart forever, she had no choice but to overwrite the curse to save their lives. If she had not done so, the curse of the kodoku would have rebounded on Olivia and killed her

anyway.

Was she to let three people die or only two? Nicola had chosen the latter. It was not as if she regretted that choice in and of itself.

“From what Sieg knows and what Ern witnessed... Putting those together, I think I at least understand the bare minimum of what happened. Once again, I am so sorry. And once again, thank you.”

Alois reached out to take Nicola’s hands before squeezing them tightly. With his pair of emerald eyes staring at her, glowing with sincerity, Nicola could not bring herself to look directly at Alois. Her eyes wandered instead.

“Sieg may already have told you this, but we all wished for you to live, Miss Nicola. So you needn’t feel beholden to anyone because you’re alive right now. We want you to share the burden with us.” Alois smiled, though his expression seemed troubled.

Unfortunately, this was not a proposal so simple that Nicola could just blindly state her approval. She might have really died if it had not been her shikigami that executed the curse rather than Nicola herself, the goddess’s protection, and many standins provided by Alois. If any of these things had been lacking, the consequences would have been her end.

Though she knew in her head that a series of miracles had saved her, she could not bring herself to affirm her life in earnest. Her gaze danced around the room, making her look like a lost child.

Unexpectedly, Ernst spoke up as Nicola was in her state of confusion. After marching up to Nicola, he knelt to bring his eye level down to hers. He spoke haltingly as if he were still searching for the right words.

“Ah, my family has guarded the royal family for generations. In turn, I was assigned to protect His Highness and once came very close to death in the line of my duty.”

Nicola could only blink at this seemingly unconnected tale.Without any concern for whether Nicola understood his point, Ernst continued.

“I still remember clearly what my father said when he scolded me for that... He told me that when protecting someone, only a third-rate bodyguard would

fail to ensure his own survival. He told me that unless you both can celebrate your safety together after facing death, the one who survived will not feel as if they have been saved. And so...”

Despite the artlessness of his speech, Nicola could not help but gasp as his blue-gray eyes stared directly into her own.

“And so, won’t you allow yourself to be saved for the sake of His Highness and His Grace? Won’t you affirm your own life?”

Nicola looked past Ernst’s shoulder to see Alois silently nod. When she looked up at Sieghart sitting beside her, he gently patted her on the back.

Nicola tried and failed to breathe, her throat making an undignified gurgling sound as she did so. It seemed that her tear ducts, having already given way once, had not tightened back up. Once again, her view went blurry against her will.

In a flash, Alois stood up and ran his hand over Nicola’s head to stroke her gently. He said, “Ern, let’s stay outside until Miss Nicola has calmed down. I don’t think she would like us to see her like this.”

Alois then left, dragging Ernst behind him. Sieghart embraced Nicola as always, holding her close and remaining quiet as she sobbed.

◇

Nicola wondered just how long she had been crying.

Even after her tears had dried up, she had not exchanged words with Sieghart for a while and quietly accepted his warmth. Once the redness had disappeared from her cheeks and she had recovered her breathing, she thought about something.

“Why am I in your room, Sieghart?” she asked.

Sieghart looked surprised at first, but then his expression softened again as he said, “If we had left you in the girls’ dormitory, then we wouldn’t have been able to nurse you back to health. Had anyone found you in that condition—in an unexplained coma, of all things—you surely would have been taken to the infirmary. Besides, we were also worried that the school might suspect you of

having something to do with Miss Olivia's death."

I see, thought Nicola. *I guess that's true*.

"Ah, by the way. While you were sleeping, Gemini went to school in your place, disguised as you."

"Gemini did that?" It appeared Nicola's familiar was still hard at work the whole time she was sleeping.

While Nicola thought she would have to reward Gemini somehow, Sieghart made one last announcement in a stiffer voice.

"There is one more thing I must tell you." Nicola looked suspiciously up at Sieghart's face. He seemed hesitant briefly, but then his expression turned resolute as if he had finally made up his mind. "Marquess Elsheimer's heir, your uncle, has passed away... Consequently, Viscount Weber will now inherit Marquess Elsheimer's title."

Nicola gasped. *Did the family of his elder brother who haunted him finally realize their wish for revenge, or was it a coincidence?* She would probably never know the truth now. However, it looked like the side effect of the kodoku curse—that the family of anyone who used it would prosper—had indeed taken its merciless effect on her household.

She realized that, whether she wanted it or not, her status had gone from the daughter of a viscount to one who was already informally recognized as a marquess.

"Nicola, do you dislike me?"

Sieghart could be very unfair, was what Nicola would have told herself if he had immediately followed up the news of her elevation—which placed them on equal standing—with a request for marriage. She could have easily forsaken him without mercy but just furrowed her brow.

I do dislike you. Nicola tried saying the words to herself, rolling them around in her mouth without speaking. They tasted bitter, with an even nastier aftertaste. It was unpleasant in a way that was difficult to define—something like food that had gone bad.

Of course I don't dislike you, she thought as she frowned.

"I think you know that I'm not the kind of person who would risk my life for someone I dislike."

"Yeah, I guess you aren't," Sieghart said casually, as if he had never doubted her feelings for him for a second. Nicola could not help but feel a little annoyed, and glared up at him resentfully.

"So, do you like me, then?" asked Sieghart.

Nicola paused and responded, "I'm not sure." She felt exasperated, still struggling against this after all that had happened. But as a knee-jerk reaction, this was the answer she gave.

"I see... That's quite a pickle. I intended to match your awkward pace as best as possible. If we really can't even say that much to each other, I guess I have no other choice."

"Eh?"

Controlling his strength just enough so as not to hurt Nicola, Sieghart took her by the hand and pulled her close. The distance between them had already been small, but now it was zero.

At first, Nicola felt flustered by being so close to Sieghart that she could feel his breath, but her sluggish body would not do as she asked. She could do nothing as he stole her lips away.

"Mmf?!"

In shock, Nicola tried to pull away, yet the arm wrapped around her waist would not let her do so. She felt as if the ever-deepening kiss was stealing her very breath and mind as her eyes started to glaze over.

"Mm... Mmf... Haah...!" gasped Nicola as Sieghart finally released her.

"Did you hate that?"

What's the big idea, asking me if I hated a kiss after already planting it on me without asking permission first? So Nicola thought, but whether she wanted to or not, she had to acknowledge something. Feeling frustrated, as if her feelings had betrayed her, she bit her now moistened lip.

She was not such a beginner as to claim she had no clue where her thoughts and feelings were leaning. Plus, she could not stand for her face to feel so hot.

With a look of satisfaction, Sieghart stroked Nicola's flushed cheeks.

"So, did you hate that?"

Nicola hesitated for a moment. "I did not...hate it."

"Good. It pays to be honest. Well then, as clever as you are, you must know how you feel," said Sieghart. Suddenly his stern expression relaxed like his face had thawed, replaced by a startlingly sexy smile.

Nicola's face was still hot and flushed. Finally, with her breath heaving along with her chest, she said, "Aren't you a little too skilled at this?" A sore loser, Nicola could not help but say something so lacking in charm.

Sieghart pouted as he grabbed her hand again. "You shouldn't underestimate a man afflicted by his first love."

Guided by Sieghart's hand, Nicola placed her hand on her childhood friend's chest. Through her palm, she could feel his pulse working on overdrive, as if sounding an alarm to the rest of his body. She blinked in surprise.

"I am not so void of feeling as to remain calm after kissing a girl I've loved ever since I was a child." An innocent, slightly embarrassed smile broke Sieghart's perfect, doll-like appearance. Nicola's flushed cheeks showed no signs of calming down either.

She hated the idea of anyone seeing her with her face so red, so she quickly turned her face away. But her timing was poor—she found herself looking toward the door just as it opened again.

"I've brought something to cool your face down!" announced Alois. "Aha ha, Miss Nicola, you're bright red! It looks like things went well, Sieghart... Ah, by the way, did you end up needing your last resort?"

"Looks like I somehow managed without it," answered Sieghart, making no effort to conceal his delight as Alois called to him with a knowing look.

Rendered speechless, Nicola covered her lips with the back of her hand. If that kiss was not Sieghart's last resort, what on earth could it have been?

“Tell me... What was your last resort?”

“Eh, ah...” As Sieghart hemmed and hawed, Nicola swiftly abandoned him and glared at Alois instead.

While handing Nicola a damp handkerchief for her flaming cheeks, Alois looked back at her with a mischievous smile.

“Here’s a hint. Now that Miss Olivia has passed away, I, the crown prince, am without a fiancée. Therefore, I need to select a new fiancée as quickly as possible,” said Alois, punctuating this revelation by holding up a finger.

Nicola recalled that Olivia had belonged to the house of a marquess, just like Sieghart. The only reason the crown prince had been engaged to a marquess’ daughter rather than the daughter of a duke was that there was no duke with a daughter of a suitable age.

Nicola, now a presumptive marquess’ daughter, was so taken aback that she momentarily turned pale as the burning in her cheeks suddenly subsided.

“Don’t tell me...”

“That’s right. If things remain as they stand, they will count you as a candidate for my new fiancée. Though, well, you will only be one of many.”

At light speed, Nicola turned back to Sieghart and firmly grabbed his elegant hand despite being callused by swordplay.

“Sieghart, let us get engaged at once. If you will still have me, please, let’s do it without delay.”

“You see. I knew it would go like this, so I considered telling you to be my last resort,” muttered Sieghart with a weary expression.

While Alois cackled to himself, Ernst returned to the room and growled, “Why, you! Don’t you think you’re being disrespectful to His Highness?!”

As this scene unfolded, Nicola finally felt like her normal life had returned, and she had started to realize it was decent. Her expression softened as she shrugged slightly to herself.

This isn’t so bad, she thought as she inadvertently let out an amused chuckle.

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 5

Curse

Even if the one you curse suffers misfortune, your excitement will only be temporary. After all, when the curse successfully imparts that misfortune, the same woe will return to you.

The expression “If you curse someone, dig two graves” is quite famous in Japan. So why do people still curse each other so carelessly? This has always puzzled those in my profession.

A curse is something like a tangled thread. It is surprisingly easy to get a piece of string tangled, but much more difficult to untangle it again. Sometimes, no matter how much time and effort you spend, you find that you are caught up too deeply in a curse. No matter how hard you struggle, you will never escape it. There’s really nothing more bothersome than a curse.

Epilogue

Half a month had already passed since Nicola had awoken from her slumber.

Even so, Nicola had always been puny. In order to recover the stamina and weight she had lost, she spent her days struggling to move her sluggish body and eating heartily in between meals.

Having come so close to death, she could not hope to instantly return to everyday life immediately after regaining consciousness. As for her presence at the academy, Gemini still attended classes in her place.

After spending an entire week doing nothing but sleeping, her physical strength seemed to have diminished by about fifteen percent. Sieghart had apparently moved Nicola's limbs for her while she was napping, but her muscles had decidedly atrophied anyway.

Nicola had time to kill anyway, so she walked around the dormitory and the school grounds while the other students were in class. She spent every day working diligently toward her rehabilitation.

That said, she recovered surprisingly quickly after just two weeks of this lifestyle. After half a month, she was already in a condition not too far removed from what it had been before her coma. She knew that, now that she had recovered, her rehab lifestyle could not continue indefinitely.

"I guess it's about time to get down to business," she muttered. This happened around the same time that the final class of the day ended, and students came pouring out of the schoolhouse. Sieghart would probably return to the dormitory building soon enough.

Nicola turned on her heel, deciding to head back to Sieghart's room. Incidentally, from when she had woken up until this very day, Nicola had remained in Sieghart's room. Though she would have preferred not to, it was in their mutual interest.

While waiting in Sieghart's room for her childhood friend to return, she

recalled the discussion she and Sieghart had had on the day she woke up. At first, Nicola had naturally intended to return to the girls' dormitory.

"Right then, I'll just be heading back to the girls'... Wha..." But when she tried to stand up from the bed, her legs got tangled up, and she nearly toppled over. Thinking she was about to fall, she reflexively closed her eyes and braced for the impact. By quickly holding out his arm, Sieghart averted the fall. But that was not the end...

Though Sieghart had reached out to support Nicola, he did not intend to help her continue standing. Instead, he unquestioningly sat her back down on the bed. After kneeling on the bed and locking eyes with Nicola, he sighed in exasperation.

"In that state, there's no need for you to go back, right?"

Nicola hesitated. "But, well, I mean, this is the boys' dorm..." Her eyes moved back and forth. But Sieghart paid no mind and just smiled cheerfully. His usual tender manner was unbroken, but underneath that, Nicola could definitely sense his true intention. He would not let Nicola get away.

"A spell of invisibility—is that what you called it? I heard about it from Ernst. I think he said that it can hide you completely?"

"Oof..." Nicola suddenly was at a loss for words.

"If Gemini goes back to the girls' dormitory in your place and you can become invisible, surely that won't raise questions. More importantly, you might still need some assistance to get around. Say, is there really any need for you to return to the girls' dormitory yet?"

Nicola was left speechless. Underneath the force of Sieghart's smile, she could only avert her eyes and stay silent. Still grinning, though there was definitely still something insistent about his smile, Sieghart pressed further.

"While you were sleeping, we entered the middle of autumn. As sensitive as you are, when it gets to this time of year, you always complain about getting into a cold bed at night. Unfortunately, winter bedding will not arrive at the dormitories for another month. So, until then, this is just a suggestion..." Having spoken thus far, Sieghart stopped and smiled mischievously. "If you choose to

stay here, I'll get into bed first and warm up the sheets at night. Besides, the rooms here are not huge. With two people living here, the room temperature will surely rise a fair bit. Considering all that, do you still want to go back to the girls' dormitory, Nicola?"

Nicola was still speechless. Only the ticking of the clock on the wall disturbed the silence. Nearly a minute passed without Nicola saying anything. Undoubtedly, it was difficult to resist the appeal of having someone warm your mattress. Besides, they had known each other ever since they were small. It was far too late to object to sharing a bed, and the warmth of Sieghart's body really was pleasant.

She carefully considered all these excuses as they came to her one by one. In the end, she nodded timidly.

"Until I have recovered, I will accept your hospitality." And so it was that Nicola ended up staying in Sieghart's room for a while longer.

Now that Nicola had recovered, it was time for her to announce her departure from that way of life. With the end of her time in Sieghart's room, there was something she had to broach with him. After all, Sieghart had said, "As soon as you have recovered, Nicola, we will visit our respective parents' homes to get their blessings for our engagement." They had both agreed to this.

Hence, Sieghart had not hurried Nicola toward her recovery. On the other hand, if she so wished, Nicola could delay their engagement. That was the situation.

Even now, Sieghart still seemed to hold Nicola's feelings in the highest regard. For that very reason, she did not wish to selfishly hold off their engagement by hiding the fact of her recovery. She had been given more than enough time to prepare herself emotionally and knew that it would be insincere if she put this off for no good reason.

She had only stayed there for two weeks. As she gathered her belongings, which were not so many, she chuckled awkwardly to herself. By the time she had packed everything, Sieghart had returned.

When Sieghart saw Nicola had already packed, his eyes widened. He then turned to Nicola with a look of surprise.

Nicola tried hard to act calm, then gazed into the distance and said, “I am fine now. As I have recovered, I will be returning to the girls’ dormitory. Ah, by the way, you know... You know our agreement to visit our parents. When would you like to do that?” As she finished speaking, she glanced furtively up at Sieghart’s face. When she did so, she looked at two eyes of purple quartz, opened so widely that she thought they might come tumbling out.

However, this only lasted a moment. Sieghart’s expression quickly stiffened again, and he stood silent as he faced Nicola. He took Nicola’s hand with reverence, as if holding something easily broken.

After a moment, he said, “I’m sure that I will go on needing your constant protection. Can you be happy with someone like that? You don’t mind?” Sieghart’s gaze was serious, but there was a hint of uncertainty there as his eyes faltered slightly. Surely his excessively refined appearance would continue attracting beings from beyond the human realm. But even so...

With a little sigh, Nicola stared straight back into those amethyst eyes. She felt uneasy about saying what she was about to say right to his face, but she could not resist him when he looked so downcast.

“I don’t mind. After all, it’s not as if I’m always protecting you. I am sure you will protect me too, so the feeling is mutual. I think we’re just right for each other.”

The expression that overcame Sieghart’s face defied any description with mere words. He might have been smiling through his tears but his expression seemed to shine throughout his entire face. Despite the complex emotions mixed there, he manifested happiness.

This must be what was meant by a ravishing beauty. Faced with Sieghart’s aggressive charm, which could surely bring all the subjects of one or two smaller kingdoms to their knees, Nicola could only keep her eyes half open. However, her cheeks were already burning brightly, so she did not entirely resist it.

However, that saccharine moment ended very abruptly. With a deafening bang, the door to Sieghart's room was thrown open.

"Sieg, are you there?! We might have a bit of a problem!"

Nicola and Sieghart froze reflexively and turned their heads toward the doorway, where they saw Alois stumble into the room in a hurry. They could only silently stare back at each other after this extraordinary sight. What on earth was happening?

"Alois, what has you looking so pale? You don't seem like yourself," asked Sieghart.

"For starters, look at this."

Sieghart knitted his elegant eyebrows as he studied the letter Alois had brought with him. The wax seal on it bore the crest of the royal family.

As he ran his eyes over the letter's contents, Sieghart's expression slowly grew even more severe. After seeing her childhood friend place a hand over his mouth as he became lost in thought, Nicola turned back to Alois.

"Excuse me, but just what is...?" Nicola asked.

Alois looked down at Nicola with an awkward, almost apologetic expression on his face. He then said, "Erm, well. Putting it bluntly, the royal household has issued something of a troublesome decision... As they put it, until I have selected a new fiancée, they will not permit any standing engagements to be dissolved. That's the gist of this vexing letter."

Nicola was confused. "Um, excuse me. But what is so vexing about that?" In all honesty, Nicola was not well informed about noble matters. She struggled to grasp Alois's words, but despite racking her brains, she could not.

Alois quickly glanced at Sieghart, who was still reading the letter with a troubled look.

With a frown, Alois said, "Sieg and I... No, probably the same is true of all nobles... In any case, I, the crown prince, must choose my fiancée once more. So it was predicted that most marquesses with daughters would put up their

hands. Of course, they would only do so after dissolving any preexisting engagements."

Having apparently finished reading the letter, Sieghart now silently raised his head. With a stiff demeanor, he took over Alois's explanation.

"If that happened, then naturally the noblemen whose engagements were dissolved would need to find new fiancées as well. The royal family reasoned that by canceling the engagements of marquesses and dukes, the relationships between families in noble society would change dramatically. Regarding all that, even if you and I wished to get engaged... It looks like we no longer can."

"Yeah... It might be difficult," said Alois before giving a bitter, apologetic smile. After sighing and looking away, Sieghart handed the letter back to Alois.

"Umm... So, what does this mean?" Nicola raised her hand and looked timidly up at Sieghart, who gently stroked her hair.

"Looking at the daughters of marquesses, or presumptive ones, who are not already engaged, there are only three. That includes you, Nicola. Under these circumstances, having few candidates to possibly wed Alois means the palace will probably not permit our engagement."

"In other words," said Alois. "Until I have officially chosen a new fiancée, you probably won't be able to get engaged to anyone, Miss Nicola."

"Eh...?" Nicola finally understood the situation thanks to the thorough explanation the boys had provided her. Still, her face stiffened unexpectedly.

This was her first time considering an engagement in this life or her previous one. After she had finally made up her mind, prepared for the worst, this was the world saw fit to treat her?

In shock, she muttered to herself, "Can this really be happening?"

Afterword

Hello. It’s nice to meet you. I would like to thank you for picking up this book.

The motivation that got me thinking about writing this book was a change in my employment. When I resigned from my previous company, I found I had about two months’ worth of paid leave saved up.

That said, it is not as if I am someone with a particularly great number of hobbies. After finding myself with far too much time on my hands, by sheer coincidence, I happened upon a small novel writing contest. The award was limited to novels with a particular theme, that being “romances set in another world.” This is not a genre of books I usually read, but at the time I thought to myself, “I guess these are popular; let’s try writing one.”

By the time I had nearly used up all of my paid leave, the story had already expanded to 150,000 characters.

“Other world stories,” “Young noblewoman stories,” “Reincarnation stories,” and “Dating simulation game stories”—all of these concepts are very much in vogue. They are popular genres. I’m still not sure how I arrived at the following idea: “Let’s mix all of these and add a dash of occult flavor.” Though I can’t quite remember, I found myself getting quite excited as I wrote it.

Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in that novel contest, but by the time I had finished writing my story, I had developed strong feelings of attachment to it. After all, it was the first novel I had ever completed. It felt like a waste to abandon it, so I wanted to get more people to read it. With that in mind, I tried posting it on several story-publishing websites.

A long time ago, when I was still an elementary school student, I once investigated what was involved in becoming a novelist. But back then, no matter where I looked, I found the same answer: “The usual course of action is to submit a story for a new writers award.” And I believe the method of doing so was still “sending a manuscript by mail.”

Nowadays, anyone can easily publish a novel for free. By attaching appropriate hashtags to one's work, one can easily apply for any new writers' award. Though I am still a youngster, having only lived a few years past twenty, I couldn't help but think, "How times have changed."

I spent roughly half a year adding and deleting those hashtags over and over. When I received word that I had been given an award, my state of mind seesawed from day to day. Eventually, I decided to celebrate in earnest. I'd done it.

Upon the publication of this book, I would like to thank everyone who examined it, including my head editor; Kinoko Hime-sensei, for drawing such adorable illustrations of Nicola; and so many others who assisted me. Thank you so much. Far and away, my greatest thanks go to you, the reader, for picking up this book.

And so, I pray that we might have the chance to meet again.

-Ito Iino