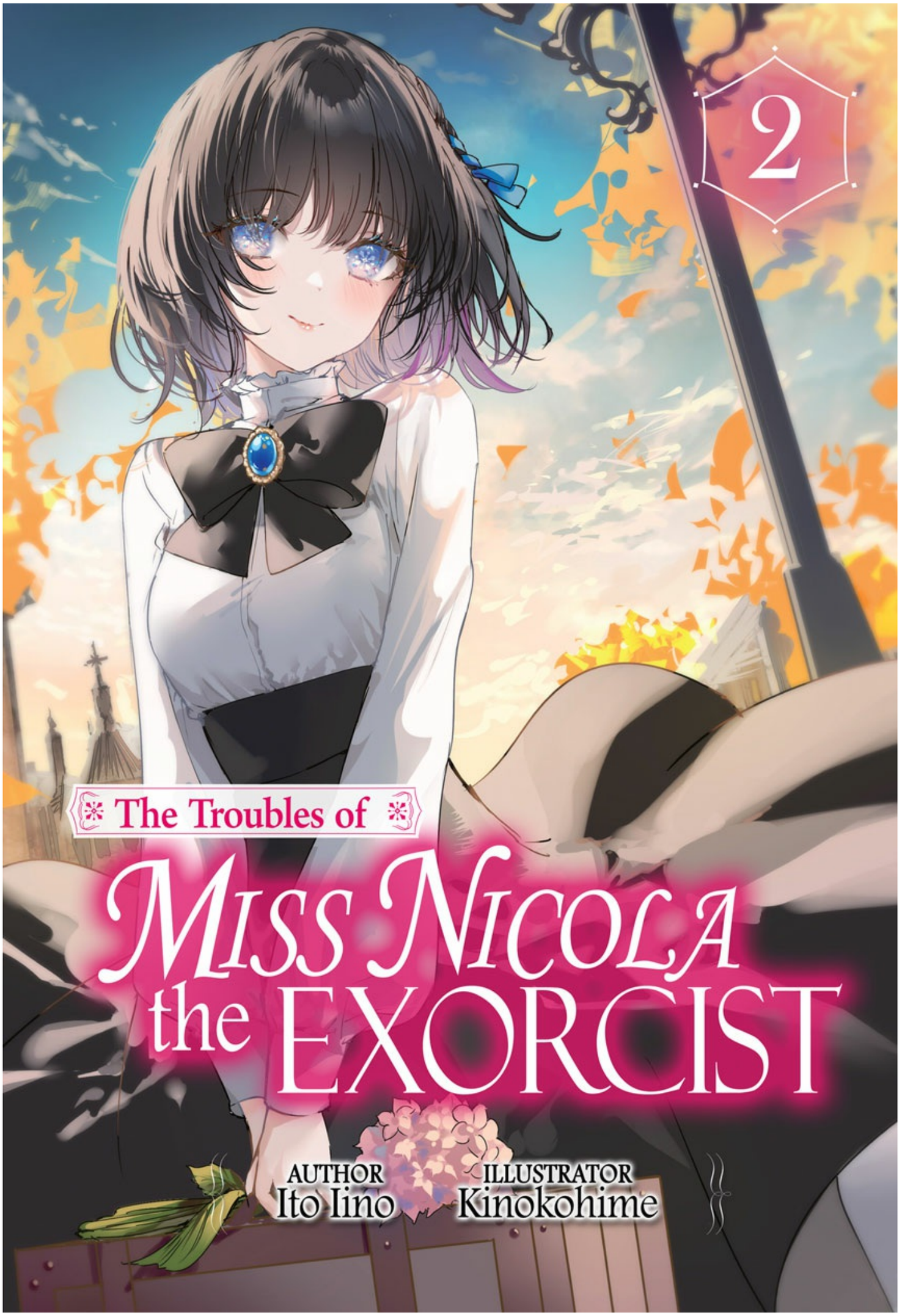
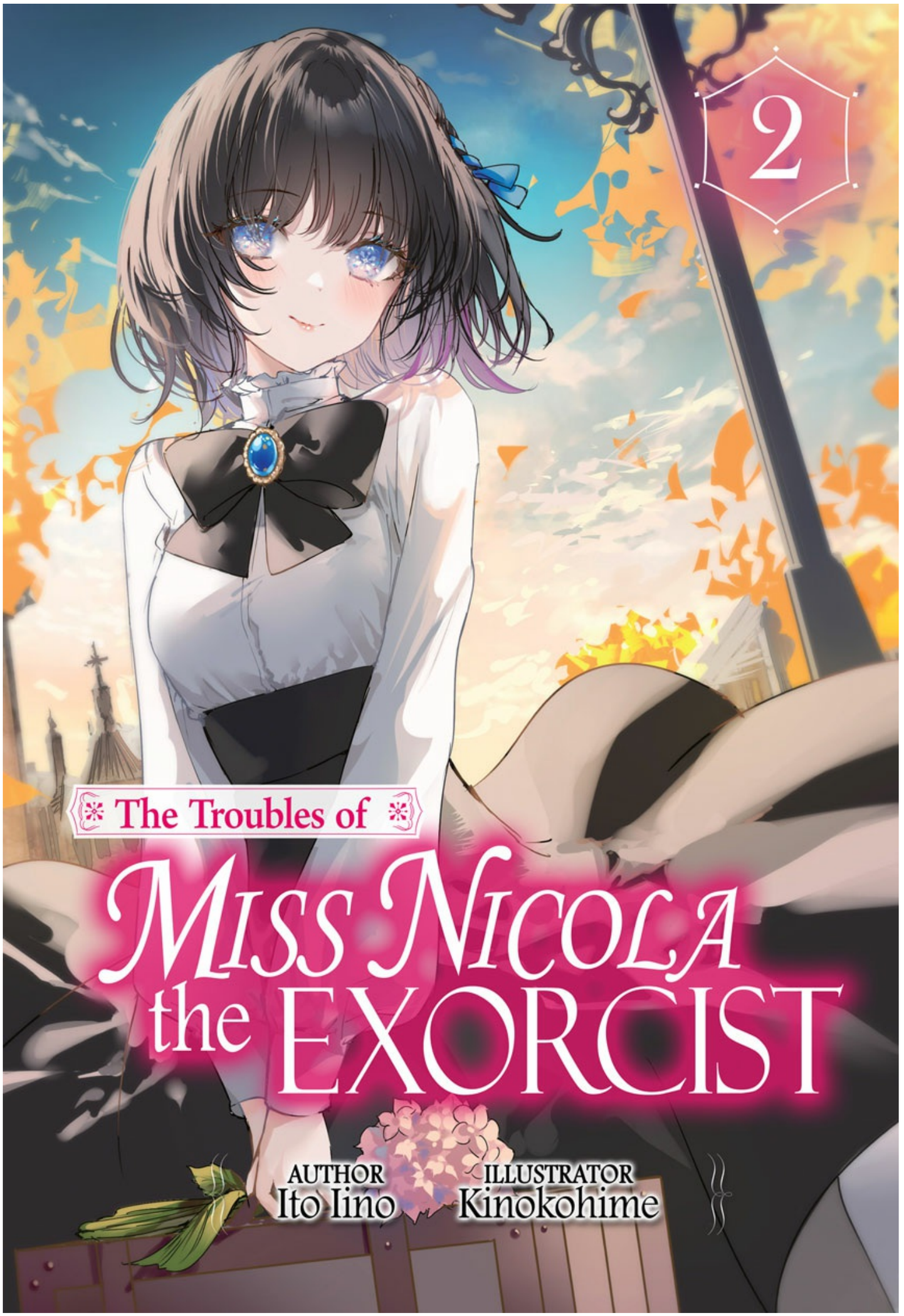

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The Troubles of Miss Nicola the Exorcist: Volume 2 [Complete]

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Prologue

It's hot, so very hot. No, that's not it. It hurts so much that I feel like I'm burning. My head is throbbing, and pounding, oozing something, like it had been cracked open. Ah, I see. It hurts because it really was cracked open.

There was a heavy thud, followed by a door creaking open and slamming shut.

Ah, he's finally headed somewhere else. If only I could go somewhere without that hated man who hurts and frightens me.

[redacted] dragged her heavy body across the floor and held out a trembling hand.

Chapter 1: The Heart of the Heliotrope

1

Sieghart had received a particular gemstone from his mother while visiting his parents' house the previous weekend. With a rigid rattling sound, she had set the gift on a desk before his eyes.

He gently picked up the item, wrapped in cloth that felt luxurious to the touch, and unwrapped it. Upon doing so, he found a stone somewhat larger than his thumbnail. Sieghart grasped it through the cloth and held it up to a window to catch the natural light, finding that it appeared to be a piece of quartz colored a deep purple. Even with its rough cut, it was perfectly translucent with not even the slightest impurity. The stone was most likely of good quality.

After carefully rewrapping the stone, Sieghart gave his mother a quizzical look and asked, "This is an amethyst, is it not?"

His mother nodded liberally, responding, "Yes. A gemstone seller who is a family friend told me, 'Don't you think this would suit your esteemed son?' As we are well acquainted, I bought it, but you may do with it as you wish."

Though Sieghart was reluctant to reject his mother's gift, he believed he had enough finery to adorn himself with. He had never acquired the habit of donning various glamorous items on a daily basis.

After leaving his mother's study, Sieghart returned to his room and wondered what to do. On his way, he crossed paths with his younger sister, who was coming the other way. He called out to her so that the two of them might talk.

Women overwhelmingly had more opportunities to dress up than men did. Sieghart reasoned that the more accessories his sister had, the better.

Having stopped in the middle of the corridor, Sieghart's sister whirled around to face him, the hem of her dress swishing behind her.

"What is it, older brother?"

“Well, our mother just gave me a rough gemstone, an amethyst. Do you want it?” Sieghart opened the parcel to reveal the stone.

His sister stood bewildered at the stone, blinking her blue-gray eyes she had inherited from her mother, before looking up at Sieghart.

“An amethyst? Are you sure? Wouldn’t it match your eyes better?”

“I wasn’t planning on having any new accessories made. It would be a waste for me to hold on to this with no way to use it,” answered Sieghart.

She knitted her brow disbelief, appearing even more puzzled.

“Why not give it to your friend Nicola?” she murmured innocently, prompting Sieghart to stare at her in shock.

As Sieghart conjured up the image of his childhood friend in his mind, he chuckled slightly to himself.

“Given the color, Nicola would probably feel too embarrassed to wear it. At this stage, anyway...” Despite seeing his face in the mirror every day, Sieghart knew his silver hair and purple eyes made him a bit distinctive. If one were to pick two words to describe him, it would be those two colors.

Nicola would surely receive any gift incorporating one of those two colors with her trademark jagged grimace, then shove it straight to the back of her desk drawer. Sieghart placed one hand on his chin and snickered, imagining this scene playing out in vivid detail. Although Nicola was stubborn about her feelings, she was his true love.

Sieghart’s sister sighed in exasperation as her brother mused to himself, then shrugged her shoulders.

“Looks like you two never change. You really have a long and bumpy road ahead of you. But I will happily accept this amethyst if you wish.”

“That’d be a great help. It would be best for this stone to end up in the hands of someone who’ll actually wear it.”

Sieghart was confident he had handed the stone over to his sister. However, the stone lay on the desk in his room the next day. He thought his sister must have reconsidered and returned it, but she could not recall doing so.

The first time might have been a fluke. Sieghart thought of such a possibility and reassured himself that this time would be the charm. So, he entrusted his sister with the stone before climbing into the carriage that would take him back to school.

When Sieghart returned to his school dormitory, he found the stone already sitting atop his writing desk as if it were waiting for him. The second occurrence was definitely a bit creepy and cold sweat began to run down his back.

While he could not wait to dispose of the stone, he recognized that anyone he tried to thrust it upon might hesitate to accept it due to its shady history. In the end, Sieghart wrapped the stone tightly in several layers of cloth and shoved it deep into a locked drawer. He finally had the stone under wraps, or so he thought.

On the very next day, as Sieghart walked through the halls of the school, a sudden feeling of discomfort originating in the pocket of his uniform jacket prompted him to stop in his tracks. He carefully reached into his pocket and felt inside until his fingers struck a hard object.

Sieghart's sudden gasp reverberated awkwardly through the hall. His heart pounded so loudly he could feel his pulse ringing in his ears.

He gingerly pulled the object out of his pocket, and what settled in the palm of his hand was the amethyst he had safely stowed away the previous day. This was the third time. A certain sense of resignation in his chest accompanied this realization.

"Ah... Here we go again." Sieghart closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. He sighed, ashamed of being so useless and needing to depend on his childhood friend. He glanced down at the purple gem in his hand once more.

2

"Ugh..." *This is the worst*, thought Nicola von Weber while gazing at the sky. The window in her room, which was on the second floor, had a broken lock. Since she had nothing of monetary value, she was not concerned about getting robbed. What worried her was not being able to lock her window because the

draft coming through the remaining gap would be unbearable.

The weather outside her window was fine, but Nicola could see many leaves had begun changing color on the branches swaying in the breeze. Under the sunlight, the reds and yellows of the leaves were vibrant. On the other hand, this meant that each morning and night would soon be that much chillier. Her poor circulation gave her a natural disposition to feel the cold, which left Nicola with a terrible melancholy.

"Something tells me those guys will soon bring some sort of trouble to my door." It was almost always the case that whenever something unlucky happened to Nicola, this foreshadowed a visit from one of *those guys*, bringing another onerous problem for her to solve. Nicola's premonition, unfortunately, turned out to be more or less correct.

Will it be him this time or both of them? Nicola slumped her shoulders at the thought of the troublesome matter they would thrust upon her in the not-too-distant future. She then fidgeted as she donned her navy blue uniform.

Nicola knew that the longer she left a truly malevolent case alone, the worse it would get. Pretending the problem was nonexistent would be the same as digging her own grave. She told herself it was best to deal with it sooner rather than later.

Having made her mind up, she slapped both hands against her cheeks with substantial force. She reluctantly decided to go straight to the student council room after class before exiting her dormitory.

◇

At the end of the school day, Nicola walked through the stone-paved hallways, her pace matching her melancholy. Despite her intense reluctance, she reached the student council room. She had no recollection of ever joining the student council, so she should never have had any reason to visit the place. Yet the people she sought had chosen it as their meeting place, forcing her to head there.

The Royal Academy of Daustria, which Nicola had enrolled in, was a co-educational boarding school attended by royals, nobles, and the sons and daughters of powerful merchants. It was the fusion of a finishing school where

unmarried young women had a cultural education and a boarding school that required all of its students to live on its premises. Nicola had commenced her studies at the school only a few months ago.

One could only enroll at the Royal Academy when they turned sixteen. Nicola was fifteen, soon to turn sixteen. But it would be a mistake to reckon the age of this viscount's daughter in this way. From birth, she had greater awareness than her current age suggested, equipped with the knowledge and experience she had accumulated as a different person.

As uncanny and outright bizarre as it might sound, Nicola had found herself reincarnated in this world with the memories of her previous life intact. She could not help but feel that it was slightly misleading to introduce herself as an innocent fifteen-year-old girl.

The person Nicola was in her previous life was born in a small island country called Japan, when she had a different name, Rikka Kurokawa. Although she was in a particular line of work, she went about it with some pride, regarding herself as a respectable, fully grown woman.

In her past life, Nicola's job title was that of an "exorcist" who dealt with apparitions, ghosts, urban legends, and other things. This included all phenomena deemed abnormal, unbelievable, obeying unknown principles, or unexplainable with mere logic. It was a specialized trade involving the resolution of any trouble caused by beings from beyond the human realm.

Unbeknownst to her, Rikka Kurosawa had one day accepted a job that would be her last. Still a young woman, she lost her life on the job. The next thing she knew, she was reborn in another world with a European look. She had a new name and title—Nicola, daughter of a viscount.

At first, she was baffled and could not believe what had happened to her. Under the circumstances, she wanted to believe her memories were false. It was only thanks to her retention of many of her exorcism skills that she finally accepted that her memories of her past life were true. She had often heard that to teach someone to fish was to feed them for a lifetime, but she never would have imagined that her skills would still apply in a different world.

Through this series of events, the consciousness that once belonged to Rikka

transferred uninterruptedly to Nicola. Having found confidence in the memories she kept from her past life, those experiences now made up the better part of what defined Nicola in this life.

Weaving between the other students, each passing the time after school in their own way, Nicola began climbing a staircase toward the third floor. With each story she climbed, the hallways expectedly became more sparsely populated. She was heading to the student council room, which nobody could easily access unless they had important business, making it suitable for meetings.

Those who tended to draw attention and shied away from it liked to hide there. Of course, it would be situated out of the way of crowds.

Finally arriving at the entrance to the student council room, Nicola took a deep breath. She knocked once upon the stately mahogany door and, not waiting for an answer, turned the doorknob.

Either way, she had been told that the student council would not conduct any business for the time being. The only students she would find beyond the door were those who used the council room as a shelter from unwanted attention, so there was no need to have any reservations.

Nicola pushed open the heavy door to find Sieghart reclining gracefully on the sofa. He slowly turned back to look at her. Even though the spun silver locks of his hair glowed profusely in the sunlight that streamed through the window, she spied the faintest hint of a shadow on the beautiful visage underneath.

Ah, so it's him this time, pondered Nicola. Or so she supposed at first. But Sieghart was not the only figure in the room. Barely leaning against the back of the sofa he sat upon was the first-born prince of this kingdom, Alois. The prince's bodyguard, Ernst, stood in front of the opposite wall.

Considering Sieghart was a marquess and Nicola was a mere viscount's daughter, she might have felt terribly out of place. But one could become accustomed to almost anything. At this point, she was so used to this group that there was no point in considering the discrepancy in status.

"So..." Nicola began. The melancholy welling up inside her escaped as a quiet sigh. "What have you brought me this time?"

3

“This is that amethyst,” said Sieghart, delicately setting the uncut gemstone on the table beside him. He had already explained that no matter how much he tried to throw the jewel away, it always came back.

Nicola massaged her throbbing temples as she glared down at the purple stone, which seemed to shine with an eerily bright—yet unnaturally beautiful—glow, even in the natural light that illuminated the room.

“Again...?” muttered Nicola.

“Looks like it. Sorry for always being such a bother,” replied Sieghart.

Just as Nicola had expected, this was shaping up to be another troublesome case. Within her mind, she cursed herself. *Hey, you saw this coming, right?* But this soon left her feeling empty, so she ceased. She knew praising herself for accurately predicting this would not be productive either.

Seeing Nicola’s shoulders slump dejectedly, Sieghart, sitting opposite her, furrowed his eyebrows to show how sorry he felt. He looked almost like a scolded large dog as he hung his head

For this, Nicola could only let out a deep sigh of resignation. This was not her first such interaction with Sieghart. It actually happened all the time. Though she had always done so begrudgingly, she had passed many days like this with Sieghart over the past ten years. As long as she had known him, he had been the root cause of a great deal of trouble.

To put it bluntly, Sieghart was incredibly beautiful and had fine silver hair that seemed to glow differently depending on the light. In addition to this, his eyes were like amethysts set into his sockets. Below his perfectly straight nose was a pair of thin, shapely lips. The smooth curves that outlined his face were so noble in proportion that it was as if the gods favored the boy. Anyone would imagine that the goddess of forms had intently carved his face. Sieghart was the owner of a quite literally “perfect” visage.

Whenever Sieghart spoke on the matter, a slightly far-off look would come over his eyes, and he would self-deprecatingly say, “I’m only another person,

with eyes, a nose, and a mouth."

But the ideal placement of those facial features, as if demonstrating the golden ratio, left anyone discussing the matter with no alternative but to throw up their hands in exasperation.

In direct opposition to Sieghart's wishes, his "perfect" visage was attractive to all types of beings. Humans were not the only creatures drawn to the pure or beautiful. He could not prevent his good looks from attracting humans or the nonhuman, which left Nicola perpetually vexed.

Spirits of the living and the dead, the ghosts of animals, fairies, and gods alike visited Sieghart. No apparition would not seek him out. It was no exaggeration to say that defending Sieghart from a veritable audience of the nonhuman was a part of everyday life for Nicola. She had gone through these motions time and time again, ever since they were both little.

Sieghart calmly tucked a lock of his spun silver hair that had fallen out of place behind one of his ears, before giving Nicola a wry, conflicted smile. His hair, which until just one month prior had flowed down to his back, was now substantially shorter. While growing it out once more, he wore his hair in a short ponytail, fastened with an indigo hair tie.

"So far, all it's done is follow me wherever I go. It hasn't done me any real harm, but it is a little unsettling," murmured Sieghart with a look of irritation. As the amethyst began rolling toward him, he prodded it with a finger, sending it back.

In contrast to Sieghart's reaction, Alois recoiled from the sofa in alarm and exclaimed, "Hold on, did you just say that *all it's done* is follow you*?* And you find that only a *little* unsettling? That's terrifying! The stone itself is creepy, but the scariest thing is that you're a bit too used to this, Sieg!"

As Alois shuddered in an over-the-top display of fear, Nicola turned to him with a look of scorn. "Shut up, Your Highness... Were the words on the tip of my tongue, but I just barely managed to swallow them."

"No, I heard that. You definitely didn't swallow them. Mind if I cry?" Alois claimed that this rough treatment from Nicola was hurtful, but his expression was one of delight.

What a masochistic prince, Nicola thought. She screwed up her face, making no effort to hide her distaste.

Standing by the wall, Ernst opened his eyes wide and barked, “Why you! Show His Highness some respect!”

Anyhow, Alois had previously granted Nicola permission to treat him so brusquely. She averted Ernst’s gaze by turning away, defiantly huffing and fixating on the horizon.

Sieghart, compelled to resolve this conflict, directed Ernst to calm down, “Now, now.”

Up to this point, this encounter had played out in exactly the same fashion that Nicola was used to. But once the farce had come to a close, Sieghart shrugged his shoulders and chuckled wryly before steering the conversation back to its original course.

“Well, yeah. There’s no doubt that I’m used to this. Regrettably, it’s not uncommon to come across items that come back all by themselves. Though, it’s true to say that they are creepy.”

“This is pretty much a daily occurrence. Really, how unoriginal,” confirmed Nicola, folding her arms and openly expressing her frustration.

A gift such as this was possessed by a living spirit that could return to the receiver like a faithful hound. The amethyst must have fallen in love with the gorgeous gemstones set in Sieghart’s eye sockets—they did share the same purple hue.

Nicola sighed and casually reached for the gemstone in question. Once her fingertips touched the stone’s surface, whatever dwelt within it deflected her hand with a dry crackling sound. She took a moment to register the tingling in her fingers and the shock of this sudden repulsion.

Looks like I’ve been rejected, she thought while glaring at the item.

“Are you okay?! You’re not hurt, are you?!” Sieghart quickly rose from his seat to reach for her affected hand. But Nicola reflexively avoided Sieghart’s touch, quickly pulling her hand away.

Whoops, thought Nicola, but it was already too late.

How rare, how unexpected, is what the eyes of Alois and Ernst seemed to say. Their gazes cut Nicola deeply, and her eyes wavered for a moment. She then coughed loudly to try and smooth things over and spoke to make an excuse.

“I’m fine. It happens often. People like me don’t tend to get along with things like this.”

Nicola tried once more to touch the amethyst. The gemstone did not deflect her hand, even if it faintly emitted heat as if on guard around her.

“I think a spirit of a fairly high order dwells inside the stone... The spirit must have been wary when I suddenly touched it. After all, someone like me might seek to exorcise it or bend it to my will.” She added, “Look, I’m not hurt at all.”

She transferred the stone to her opposite hand and waved the one that had just held it. When Sieghart saw this, he breathed a sigh of relief before sitting back down on the sofa.

For a short while after this, Alois continued to gaze at Nicola and Sieghart with curiosity. But the thrill of the unknown seemed to win out as his gaze moved back to the amethyst.

“Hmmm, so such spirits do exist... I always thought that they were only in fairy tales.” As Alois stared intently at the amethyst in Nicola’s hand, she raised the index finger of her other hand to her lips.

“Shh,” she warned. “Please choose your words more carefully. It is said that each time someone says that spirits or fairies don’t exist, somewhere in the world, one dies.”

“Eh?!” cried Alois, so startled by Nicola’s words that he clapped his hands over his mouth.

Written on Ernst’s face, clear as day, were the words, “No way that’s true.”

Nicola chuckled slightly upon seeing how each boy’s personality was on display in their reactions. Quietly, she returned the amethyst to the table, slid it toward Sieghart, and looked up at his lovely face.

“I recommend you turn it into an accessory you might otherwise be likely to

misplace—a ring, cufflinks, or earrings, for example. Even if you lose it, it will return by itself.” When Nicola said this, Sieghart simply blinked out of surprise. A short while later, he finally nodded, apparently accepting her advice. Without a hint of hesitation, he took the amethyst in his hand again.

“If you say so, Nicola. I’m sure that’s the best course of action.” It appeared Sieghart no longer harbored any doubts and was happy. The full force of the faith he had invested in Nicola caused her to feel just a bit tingly. Without thinking, she scrunched up her nose in an expression of discomfort.



“Ah, I adore that expression of yours,” declared Sieghart.

“Then I won’t make it again,” snapped Nicola, and she bared her teeth angrily at Sieghart.

“I adore that one as well.”

Nicola took to sulking. With a huff, she propped her chin by resting her elbows on the armrest of her sofa.

“Eh, wait, hold on, hold on. Sieg, Miss Nicola, are you both serious?! Aren’t you at all frightened?!” exclaimed Alois. “This stone follows you around all by itself! How can you treat a supernatural phenomenon like a convenient feature?”

“I must agree that this seems entirely improper, Miss Weber. Of course, I still don’t fully believe that the stone can come back by itself,” muttered Ernst.

Still propping her chin up on the armrest of her sofa, Nicola steadily returned the stares of Alois and Ernst, who continued to stand their ground, with a logical remark.

“I mean, if it will continue shocking Sieghart by following him so tenaciously, would it not be better to turn that effect to some useful purpose? I think you two could use a change of perspective.”

The stone itself could only house a spirit due to its high quality. If the spirit meant no harm, Nicola saw no reason to struggle to drive it away or evade it. That being the case, what could be better than spending a tidy sum of money to have it crafted into a new favorite accessory? Sieghart could then go through the rest of his life without worrying about losing his most prized piece of jewelry. Nicola did not think she had missed the mark with her suggestion.

“Well, that’s settled then,” said Nicola, who picked herself up from her sofa’s armrest before rising from her seat in order to leave.

“Ah, Miss Nicola, wait just one moment. Could I borrow you for just a little longer? I’d like to discuss the matter of our visit to Miss Olivia’s grave,” said Alois in a slightly firm voice. This rendered Nicola motionless.

Alois’s serious tone was a startling shift in attitude from the face he had

enacted earlier. Nicola sat back down on the sofa and leaned in with anticipation.

◇

The conversation turned to Her Ladyship, the late Olivia von Lüneburg, daughter of a marquess. Though she was now deceased, Nicola had quite a long history with her, which went back to Nicola's past life.

Olivia had killed Rikka Kurosawa in a past life, presenting her as an offering to a demon and wishing to be reincarnated in this very world.

Nicola gazed back at Alois, who was once Olivia's fiancé. She noted his slightly wavy, honey-colored hair and his emerald eyes. Though he had something of a baby face, his features were finely proportioned enough and not overshadowed by Sieghart when they stood together. His was such a shapely visage that he might almost be mistaken for a Prince Charming who had just leaped out of a storybook.

Ernst, who stood next to Alois, possessed sharp, masculine features. This included his muscular physique, clearly evident even through his school uniform. He had dark brown hair, cropped short, and almond-shaped, blue-gray eyes.

A glance around the student council room provided Nicola with a look at a transcendent example of male beauty, an adorable baby-faced prince, and a stubborn but handsome tough guy. What a variety of dreamboats she had to admire!

But this was not at all surprising. The world Olivia had wished to be reincarnated within was the setting of an *otome game*, a dating simulation game for women. Knowing that the young men gathered here were the romanceable cast of such a game, Nicola could accept their implausibly good looks.

While the civilization she found herself in seemed only about as developed as that of Europe in the 18th or 19th century in her past world's history, some policies at the school put her in the mindset of the modern Japan she once knew. For example, both boys and girls attended the academy, and there was a

student council.

Ever since Nicola was reborn in this world, she had had a vague feeling of unease that nagged her. The source of this discord had been revealed to her only one month ago in a manner that no one would have wished for.

Olivia had planned to kill Alois, her fiancé, with a curse. In order to prevent this, Nicola had cursed Olivia right back, prepared to sacrifice herself in the process. Nevertheless, Olivia died, but Nicola fortunately survived. This conclusion left Nicola with a bitter taste that she wanted to forget.

"It looks like we've settled on a date to depart for our visit to Miss Olivia's grave. We'll be heading off next weekend, as it's to be a long one," said Alois. Nicola made a quiet, noncommittal response.

Olivia's death had been treated as an accident within the academy, so the school had held its own memorial ceremony. Nicola, who was in a coma at the time, could not attend. She had been looking for a suitable juncture to visit Olivia's grave ever since.

After briefly falling silent, Nicola said, "Thank you very much for organizing this."

Seeing that Olivia had been born into the house of a marquess and Nicola was still, at present, a mere viscount's daughter, it was difficult for her to seek permission to visit without an intermediary. For that reason, she asked Alois to inquire on her behalf.

Nicola bowed her head deeply in gratitude, but Alois shook his head and said, "Don't worry about it. Besides, I was hoping everyone here would have a chance to make a proper visit together."

Sieghart and Ernst nodded, silently assenting to Alois's statement. Nicola quietly looked down at the ground.

If you curse someone, dig two graves. It was only thanks to the others gathered here that Nicola's life was spared after she put a curse on Olivia. They were all accomplices in what she considered the crime of her continued existence.

Olivia's grave was within the territory of her father's house: the March of Lüneburg. Nicola's group had been scheduled to make a short trip there from the Royal Academy, in the royal capital, by a steam locomotive.

"I do have one thing to add regarding the members of our party," said Alois. "Owing to my own circumstances—my personal affairs, you might say—I would like to have two more people join us, in addition to this group of four."

Nicola stared back at Alois, feeling perplexed. Seeing her look of confusion, Alois smiled as he continued his explanation.

"Now that Miss Olivia has passed away, you are one of the candidates to become my next fiancée. Though Sieg and Ern will be joining us, if I traveled exclusively with you, it might lead people to conclude that you are the front-runner in the contest for my hand in marriage, Miss Nicola. I'm sure neither of us wants that."

Nicola felt her face stiffen involuntarily. After massaging the deep frown lines drawn on her forehead, she exhaled in a dramatic fashion. Alois had just reminded her of a fact she had been trying desperately to forget, to ignore.

A month ago, Nicola was a mere viscount's daughter. Thanks to her father's imminent elevation—resulting from a recent inheritance—she was now the daughter of a prospective marquess.

Currently, many daughters of marquesses were already engaged to someone. As long as the kingdom was in the process of selecting a new fiancée for Alois, Nicola was to be counted among the very few eligible candidates that remained. This had been a matter of considerable consternation for Nicola of late. She had been told that, including her, there were only three eligible candidates in the kingdom.

One of these was the daughter of Marquess Ludendorff, Elfriede. She was a sickly girl and no longer showed herself in public on any occasion.

The other candidate was Charlotte, daughter of Marquess Rosenheim. She was the marquess' child by a maid he took as a mistress. Charlotte spent many years on the city's streets after the marquess's legal wife drove both mother

and daughter out of his home. Her father had only recently recognized her birthright and brought her back into his household.

As always, Sieghart explained all of this to Nicola, who was not well-versed in the affairs of the nobility.

“The first addition I would like to make to our party is Miss Charlotte, daughter of Marquess Rosenheim. To cut a long story short, if we bring another candidate along, people may not start to talk about you as the front-runner. Also, as extra camouflage, I would like to add another stop to our itinerary. The day after we visit Olivia’s grave, I thought we could visit the third candidate, Miss Elfriede.” Alois added, with an apologetic smile, “Though I do feel bad about dragging you all along for that.”

Nicola did not know much about geography either. Knowing this, Sieghart followed up with a significant piece of information.

“The March of Ludendorff, where Miss Elfriede lives, is right next to the March of Lüneburg, where Miss Olivia rests.”

I see, thought Nicola, realizing how it made sense. She could not deny that she would otherwise find the circumstances of this trip unfavorable. These alterations to their schedule were concessions by Alois for Nicola’s benefit—as he knew she had no intention of marrying him. Alois had started out by saying that his “personal affairs” caused these changes, yet Nicola was unsure of what he meant by that.

Noticing the doubtful expression on Nicola’s face, Alois chuckled slightly, then shrugged and said, “As far as I’m concerned, I’ll be making that visit to save face. The other person I’d like to bring along is my personal handmaiden, Emma. As a matter of fact, Emma is Miss Charlotte’s older half sister by a different father.”

Apparently, the maid Marquess Rosenheim put his hands on already had a daughter with another man. Alois explained that, following the death of their mother, Emma looked after her sister Charlotte while living and working in the palace.

Charlotte’s father unintentionally came across her while she was earning a little money by shining the shoes of noblemen in the streets. The marquess

forcibly summoned Charlotte back to his household. Because of their differences in status, Emma and Charlotte could no longer see each other easily.

“Emma is constantly bothering me, insisting that we should create opportunities for her to see her little sister. And I thought that this would be the perfect opportunity. You see, I do have my affairs, right?” said Alois with a wink at Nicola. Even if he claimed Emma was always “bothering” him, his expression softened unexpectedly when he mentioned her. Nicola blinked in surprise as she got the impression that, despite being master and handmaiden, the two enjoyed a fairly casual relationship.

“Blast, Emma is too free-spirited! Once again, she presumes upon Your Highness’s generosity!” cried Ernst, turning away with a look of outrage.

Sieghart chuckled in amusement, then looked at Nicola and shrugged slightly. “Those three have been together for a long time.”

“Looks like it,” replied Nicola. Even without Emma in the room, she could dimly guess about the relationship between the three.

Putting aside Alois’s personal affairs, the public-facing reason for the changes to their plans were for Nicola’s benefit. So, she had no real reason to object.

“Understood on all counts,” said Nicola. “Now then, I must excuse myself for today.” She then rose from the sofa. This time, no one stopped her from leaving the student council room.

4

The three who remained in the student council once Nicola had left began working on the assignment they had been given in class that day.

For a while, only the sound of fountain pens scratching on paper echoed in the room. Then, Alois blurted out a question that had been bothering him for some time.

“Hey, Sieg. Do you and Miss Nicola ever...fight?”

This question prompted Sieghart to stop writing for a moment, but then, with a wry chuckle, he shook his head.

“I wouldn’t say that we fight,” replied Sieghart.

Alois noted that he might have asked the wrong question.

The air between them certainly was not that of two who tended to fight, and it was not nearly so bitter. Yet Alois did not believe that Nicola would have shied away from Sieghart’s touch as she had when he extended his hand only out of fear for Nicola’s safety.

Alois did not think the apparent distance between the two was just his imagination. The words that tumbled helplessly from his lips next were directed straight at the parchment on the desk in front of him.

“Could this be my fault at all?” Sieghart and Nicola should have gotten engaged by now. However, Nicola was now a potential candidate for engagement with Alois, not Sieghart. The pair returned to square one regarding their plans until Alois found someone else to become his fiancée.

Although Alois was uncertain about his concerns, he wondered if this might affect their relationship. When Alois considered that possibility, he could not help but feel responsible.

Contrary to Alois’s concerns, Sieghart simply smiled and shook his head again.

“No, Alois, you couldn’t be more wrong. It’s not your fault at all,” said Sieghart. He no longer paused in writing his assignment, instead continuing with

tranquility. “This is an issue between Nicola and me. It’s nothing to do with you. She wasn’t expecting to be nominated as a candidate for your next fiancée, but that might not have been such a bad thing.”

“Eh?” Alois blinked with amazement. Knowing how Sieghart had pined ceaselessly after his childhood friend for so many years, Alois never would have expected him to make such a statement.

Whether or not Sieghart noticed Alois’s reaction, he seemed undeterred by it and continued to speak. As his pen glided incessantly across his parchment, well-formed letters fell one by one on the page.

“Under the circumstances we found ourselves in, I rushed Nicola into giving me an answer... I never want to do that to her with matters of the heart. From now on, I will wait patiently.” Perhaps because one hand was still busy with writing, there was something ambiguous about Sieghart’s choice of words. Still, Alois could tell that he spoke sincerely.

While Alois did not fully understand this response, it was enough for him that Sieghart was not worried about the present state of affairs. He resolved not to pursue the matter further and returned his gaze to his own assignment.

“Ernst, this here is spelled wrong.”

“Eh, where exactly?!”

Before Alois knew it, Sieghart had finished his own homework early and took to helping Ernst, who struggled in classroom studies. Even if they had most definitely all started work on the same assignment at the same time, Alois had only progressed about seven-tenths of the way through his own homework. The close friend Alois had made at this academy seemed to have a thoroughly outstanding brain.

Not only was Sieghart exceedingly handsome, but he was clever and skilled with a sword. He was even said to be well-versed in the artistic disciplines. So he really was the perfect man, entirely beyond reproach.

“You really do excel at everything, without exception, don’t you?” muttered Alois, expressing his astonishment with a sigh before pursing his lips in annoyance. Had Sieghart’s behavior been disagreeable, such a reaction might

have been charming. But Alois felt like a fool for envying Sieghart as his friend had a character so gentle.

Sieghart, who perhaps overheard Alois muttering to himself, chuckled slightly and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, I can’t do any of the things that Nicola alone can do. One day, I told myself that I should at least try to learn how to do the things she wasn’t good at. Before I knew it, I turned out like this.” At the root of this perfect man, who could confidently perform any task, was a simple motivation—he did it for the girl he loved. This explanation was so pedestrian that Alois could not help but snort with laughter. It was funny how Sieghart seemed quite human when matters of Nicola arose, even though he usually seemed utterly flawless.

By the time even the scholastically ungifted Ernst had finished his assignment, the sun was beginning to set. The three boys swiftly tidied up their assignment and stationery supplies before leaving the student council room and returning to their dormitory.

The stone paved steps glowed orange under the light of the evening sun, causing the shadows cast there to appear even darker. The breeze that occasionally blew was cold enough that they could tell autumn was setting in.

As the three boys descended the steps, discussing trivial matters as they went, something suddenly struck Alois, making him stop as they stepped onto a landing.

Huh? Alois knew something was bothering him, but he could not put his finger on what seemed so strange. He racked his brains. His intuition told him something was off, but he could not say what exactly. He cast his eyes around the landing of the staircase. Nothing appeared wrong with either Sieghart, who had been walking next to him, or Ernst, who followed a short distance behind. A large, full-length mirror stood beside the landing, as he had seen it every other day.

“Alois, is something the matter?” Sieghart looked back in surprise from a few paces ahead, noticing Alois had stopped moving. His reflection in the mirror behind him looked over its shoulder in exactly the same way.

Looks like nothing is off after all. As Alois thought this, he realized something.

No, there is.

The abnormal scene caused Alois's heart to leap forward in his chest. When Sieghart looked back over his shoulder, the back of his head should have been the reflection in the mirror. Once Alois realized this, a feeling of terror sank into his stomach.

At that very moment, an arm reached out from the other side of the mirror and grabbed Sieghart. The arm proceeded to drag Sieghart inside the mirror.

"Sieg?!" Alois frantically reached out, but his hand grasped only air. He could not reach Sieghart, who continued to sink into the mirror.

Just before Sieghart completely vanished beneath the surface of the mirror, he knitted his brows, then threw a small object toward Alois. The object traced a parabola through the air before Alois caught it reflexively.

"Get that to Nicola."

Yes, Sieghart's lips seemed to move. As Alois accepted Sieghart's message, the mirror's surface wavered one last time as if a ripple had gone through it, before all was still. It was almost like it had never happened. In the aftermath, Alois saw nothing on the landing besides an ordinary mirror.

"Your Grace?!" shouted Ernst, running up to the mirror and pounding on the glass. Nothing reflected in the mirror except Alois, standing still in shock, and Ernst, who continued to panic.

"Ern, you stay here and keep an eye on the mirror!" In Alois's hand was a purple stone that seemed to carry a constant chill. Alois gripped the stone tightly before wheeling around, turning his back to the mirror. Without looking back once, he ran at full speed down the stairs.

I need to find her. There isn't a moment to lose. With that singular thought in mind, Alois let his feet carry him, ceaselessly pelting against the stone floor of the hallway.

5

"Say... Can you think of anything less rewarding than music for the sake of

cultural studies?” Nicola muttered bitterly. Her words tumbled out onto the open sheet music on the desk in front of her.

“I think embroidery is even less rewarding,” groaned Karin, a merchant family’s daughter.

“Without a doubt, poetry composition is the least rewarding lesson,” declared Elsa, an earl’s daughter, while holding her head in her hands. All three girls then sighed gloomily in unison.

After leaving the student council room, Nicola met with her friends from the same school year to work on their shared assignments. But her sense of focus soon vanished entirely. For the past while, she had not touched her homework at all. She realized that, even if she continued, she could not expect to make any more progress today.

“I think I’ll call it a day,” said Nicola.

“Ah, no fair! Me too!” said Karin.

“Look, you two. You know you’ll only make life harder for yourself in the end,” scolded Elsa. Since she was gathering her study supplies to leave, this was not very persuasive. Having concluded this attempt at completing their homework, the three prepared to return to their dormitory rooms.

Stationery belonging to all three girls had ended up scattered across the desk, all mixed together. As Nicola casually reached out to pick up an item, her fingers brushed slightly against those of Karin, who was engaged in the same action. The brief sense of apprehension Nicola experienced when she felt Karin’s warmth left her feeling ashamed.

She reflected on the truth behind this world, which she had uncovered a month ago. Karin, Elsa, and Nicola herself were mere background characters who populated this world. Apparently, their only purpose was to speak the lingo that made this setting, the academy, feel real. Despite this, the girls, as well as their parents and grandparents, did exist, with real blood flowing in their veins. All this was a strange situation, even by Nicola’s standards.

After the incident with Olivia, Nicola could not help but remember this revelation here and there. Each time she did, an unpleasant feeling gnawed at

her mind.

They are alive, I am alive, we are all equally alive, Nicola had once assumed. This much had seemed obvious. What she had learned caused her to question this, which made her feel terrible. She bit her lip surreptitiously in distress as she remembered what Olivia had told her.

"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 I became the fiancée of a character I never even liked. Isn't that messed up?" Earlier in that conversation, she had said, "'Olivia' is not even the protagonist! She's a supporting character!"

Thanks to a certain demon's sick sense of humor, Nicola had been treated to scenes of Olivia's life flashing before her eyes.

The story Olivia wished to reincarnate within occurred in a school and had the following premise: "A girl raised as a commoner ends up attending a school typically reserved for the upper classes and revels in the joys of student life as she meets a diverse cast of male love interests." Olivia was merely a supporting character, making the realization of her wish ironic. That demon really was thoroughly nasty and wily to boot.

"Ah, look. There's the Silent Lady everyone's been talking about," said Elsa.

Enticed by her words, Nicola peered out the window and saw a girl walking across the courtyard. This girl had soft locks of light blonde hair, like the color of tea with plenty of milk, cascading over her shoulders. Even from a distance, her large, wide-open eyes and rosy cheeks were plain to see.

"She really is cute..." murmured Karin from next to Nicola, clearly spellbound. Nicola, who had trouble keeping up with schoolyard rumors, recognized who the girl was. She was the beauty from the neighboring class, Charlotte von Rosenheim. More importantly, she was also one of the daughters of marquesses named as a potential fiancée for Alois.

“I wonder why she doesn’t want to speak to anyone. Could she be worried about the way she talks?” wondered Karin.

“Well, you do have to feel sorry for how she suddenly joined the ranks of upper nobility. If I were told that, starting tomorrow, I had to speak like a lady of the uppermost classes, there’s no way I’d have been able to do it,” agreed Elsa.

Karin and Elsa looked at one another before shrugging their shoulders. Nicola could only smile ambiguously. One could deem the young beauty unfortunate for growing up on the streets, then being invited into the household of the marquess.

Not many girls shared this specific background, which was the very one that made her this game’s protagonist. The trip Nicola had scheduled for the long weekend, which Charlotte was now a part of, might be a significant episode or event flag in the routes for any of the main romanceable characters: Sieghart, Alois, or Ernst.

According to the intended plot of the game, Nicola’s participation in the trip was irregular. If a girl as beautiful as Charlotte started to sweet-talk Sieghart, might even her eccentric childhood friend have an immediate change of heart? Nicola could not help but think about this possibility with no end to it—her mind going in circles.

“Nicola, what’s wrong? You’ve been in a daze for a while now,” said Karin.

“No... It’s nothing.” To evade this line of questioning, Nicola walked over to the open window that provided ventilation and shut it. She told herself that she only had to return to her dorm once this room was closed. In the midst of stretching her arm to close the window, her hand froze in midair.

“HEY, DID YOU HEAR?”

“I DID, I HEARD!”

“I DID, WE DID. DID YOU HEAR ABOUT IT TOO?”

“I SAW IT! AND I HEARD ABOUT IT.”

“UNFAIR, SO UNFAIR! IT WASN’T FAIR TO STEAL HIM AWAY LIKE THAT! THE LITTLE PURPLE ONE, AND THE ONE IN THE MIRROR, I CAN’T FORGIVE THEM! WASN’T THAT UNFAIR? IT WAS, WASN’T IT!”

“THE SILVER ONE—AH, *ER IST HÜBSCH*—WE ALL AGREED TO LOVE HIM TOGETHER, RIGHT? YES, WE DID.”

“YEAH, WE DID! SO UNFAIR!”

“I HATE THE ONE WHO STOLE HIM AWAY.”

Nicola overheard the chattering of the beings who flitted about outside. These creatures, which belonged to the family of faeries, were noisy today. The beating of their wings conveyed their anger and the air seemed scented with tension. Furthermore, Nicola could not dismiss the details of the conversation she overheard. Without thinking, she covered her face with one hand and spoke aloud.

“C’mon, give me a break... He really doesn’t miss a beat.”

“Did you say something?” Nicola’s friends looked puzzled and asked what was wrong. But Nicola shook her hand and quickly closed the window.

“Go on ahead without me. I just remembered that there’s something I need to do.” Leaving Karin and Elsa with only those words, Nicola exited the otherwise vacant classroom ahead of them. “Ah, right. Just to be on the safe side...” Nicola turned around at the entrance. “Could each of you lend me a mirror? I promise I’ll give them back tomorrow.”

◇

Nicola resolved to make her way back to the student council room, walking briskly through the stone hallway leading to the nearest staircase. As she arrived at the stairs, she froze as someone came racing down toward her with a panicked expression on his face.

“Miss Nicola! Sieg... Was just dragged into... A mirror...!” cried Alois, throwing his arms around Nicola. He was clearly at his wits’ end. Nicola nearly clicked her tongue in irritation but restrained herself, instead letting out an extra heavy sigh.

“Please, take me there,” said Nicola abruptly before following Alois to the scene of the incident.

Under Alois’s guidance, they arrived at the landing between the third and second floors of the school building, where nobody passed through. Waiting for them was Ernst, who stood in front of the mirror with his arms folded, staring into the glass with a stern expression.

“There has been no change!” Ernst reported.

Nicola approached the mirror and observed it carefully. The antique-style frame was both beautiful and old-fashioned. It certainly showed signs of its age and felt cold to the touch. But nothing unnatural reflected within it, nor did Nicola’s arm sink into the glass. Knocking on the mirror produced nothing but a solid tapping sound. It was just a mirror.

“Miss Nicola. Sieg said... To give you this...” said Alois, handing Nicola a familiar, purple-hued stone.

She blinked rapidly, then looked at the mirror before scowling and laughing bitterly.

“I guess I should praise him for his quick-wittedness,” remarked Nicola, genuinely astonished by Sieghart’s ability to improvise. Though he likely had not been confident in the stone’s usefulness, he reasoned that he needed to leave some token behind in parting. Thanks to this fine play on Sieghart’s part, they were still connected, even as he lay beyond the mirror.

Sieghart, who awaited her in the mirror’s spirit realm, likely did not doubt whether Nicola would rescue him.

Good grief, thought Nicola with an exasperated sigh. *He really is a handful*. At the same time, part of her felt slightly proud of Sieghart, leaving her conflicted.

“Well then, let’s go and meet him, shall we?” said Nicola before taking her textbooks out of her school bag and stacking them up until they reached the bottom of the mirror’s frame. She took out the two small standing mirrors she borrowed from Karin and Elsa, then positioned them so they formed a triangle with the full-length mirror.

Mirrors were reflected within the mirror, and within the mirrors in the mirror, *ad infinitum*. The phenomenon of reflection was fascinating to behold. Pleased by the sequence of infinite reflections, Nicola gave off a smile of satisfaction.

If the entrance is closed, we'll just have to pry it open. Ships, airplanes, and people often vanished inside the Bermuda Triangle because the shape was a symbol with a deep connection to spirit realms. A triangle formed of mirrors facing each other was what they needed to force open the entrance to this realm.

When Nicola touched the mirror again, it rippled like the surface of a pond. The objects reflected in the mirror also warped and rippled. Behind her, Nicola could hear Alois and Ernst gasp in amazement.

Nicola turned around and handed the amethyst to Ernst, along with the small hand mirror she always carried to check her appearance. Together, these would point the way back home.

"Ernst, please use this hand mirror to shine light from the setting sun passing through that window into the full-length mirror on this landing. Please check that the triangle formed by these mirrors is not broken."

"A-Ah... Understood."

"And as for you, Your Highness..." continued Nicola.

"Please. Take me with you."

Nicola had half-expected this interruption from Alois. Even so, she could hardly just nod and accept his request. Instead, she frowned.

"I'm sick of putting you in danger for seeking your help. If I ever do so again, I could never look Sieg in the eye. Take me with you."

Nicola fell silent. It appeared that the incident last month, in which she nearly died after Alois sought her help, had traumatized him somewhat. As she still had guilt from that incident, she could not brush off Alois's request.

Since she had to keep the opening to this spirit realm open, even if she refused, she was sure Alois would follow. So, she sighed and reluctantly agreed with him.

“Keep in mind that beyond this mirror is a spirit realm. Take proper care—”

“Not to use anyone’s real name, correct? Giving a spirit one’s name is tantamount to surrendering one’s freedom. Right? I understand, you know.”

At that point, Nicola could only sigh before casually plunging one hand into the mirror. The mirror, whose surface rippled again, swallowed everything below her wrist. She planted her feet on the base of the mirror’s frame, then leaped into the realm without hesitation.

6

In an instant, Nicola observed a dimly lit passage with a floor, ceiling, and walls made of stone. This appearance was not much different from the hallways of the schoolhouse.

On the other hand, no doors or windows were visible. As if in place of windows, mirrors lined up against either wall. The sight of all these mirrors, no two alike in either size or adornment, could only be deemed abnormal. The air was chilly yet humid.

For lighting, only candlesticks set into the walls at regular intervals trembled in the cool air. Perhaps the distance between the candles made the corridor, which stretched straight ahead in front of Nicola, dissolve into darkness.

Alois stood next to Nicola in a daze. She grabbed his wrist and started walking into the darkness.

“Hey, where on earth...?”

“Your Highness... Have you ever heard any scary stories about mirrors?”

At first Alois was startled by this sudden interrogation, blinking before answering, “Of course I have. I think I heard stories when I was little. They said it was bad luck to place two mirrors facing one another. If you peered deeply into a mirror in the middle of the night, you will see... Ah, I get it. That’s what’s happening.”

He seemed satisfied and glanced at Nicola, who walked beside him.

“Say, didn’t you once say... Thinking about something enough will give it

form?”

“Yes. That’s what imagination means.” Humans were organisms capable of creating monsters in invisible realms. This was a fact Nicola found had not changed. Regardless of how tastes varied between Western or Japanese cultures, neither the root cause nor the methods of dealing with these phenomena were very different.

Somehow mirrors were always the subject of superstition in ancient or modern cultures. The mirror in the school was old and provided a perfect focus, probably contributing to this unfortunate event. Often, people’s capacity for imagination brought new apparitions to life.

The amethyst stone had catalyzed the birth of an apparition when “stealing” Sieghart from other beings. Nicola and Alois continued walking through the corridor that looked to stretch forever.

“When, and how...?” began Alois. “How did you obtain all this mysterious knowledge, and learn these skills?”

Nicola understood that harboring such doubts was the most natural thing in the world. With no hint of surprise or attempt to deflect the question, Nicola muttered, “I assumed that Sieg would have told you everything by now.”

Considering Alois’s inquisitive nature, Nicola was only surprised that he had never asked her that question. She cast her mind back over the last few months and realized she had never been alone with Alois. As such, she let out a slight, wry chuckle.

Alois had ample opportunity to observe Nicola using the abilities she had acquired as an exorcist. There was no sense in trying to hide her history now.

“You might say that I have memories from a past life. I could see beings from beyond the human realm all too well in that life, so I was in a specialized line of work dealing with such beings.”

“Rikka,” as she was known, had a happy-go-lucky mentor whose trademarks were his heavy smoking, stubbly beard, and sickly eyes. Shortly after, a junior apprentice who got easily carried away, had messy handwriting, and whose work was rough-and-ready joined them. Nicola would have been embarrassed

to refer to this group as a family, but they shared a kind of kinship. Reminiscing on these memories made her give off a faraway look.

“Do you think I’m making this up?” asked Nicola, glancing at Alois.

“No, I don’t,” he answered.

But Nicola had anticipated this reaction and was not so foolish as to reveal her innermost thoughts to someone who might not even believe her. Through the depth of their interactions over the few months she had known Alois, she knew what to expect from him and was willing to talk about this.

Come to think of it, I probably won’t have too many opportunities to speak with Alois alone. Nicola expressed a question that had been on her mind for some time. “Your Highness... How do you feel about getting engaged to someone you don’t even love?”

Alois looked startled at first, but then he snorted with laughter, clearly amused.

“Well, isn’t that what most royals and nobles end up doing? Anyone who does end up loving their spouse deserves hearty congratulations. I think it’s rare for two people who love each other, like you and Sieg, to get married.”

The last part of his response differed from what Nicola had anticipated. She kept her lips tightly drawn to prevent Alois from noticing her agitation, then shook her head in protest.

“No, you’ve got the wrong idea... It’s not as if I love him. I’m pretty sure I don’t...”

As eccentric as her childhood friend was, he had displayed his affection for Nicola for many years now wholeheartedly and single-mindedly. He never ceased showering her with a gaze so warm that she was afraid it might burn her, lavishing her with sweet words and a gentle disposition. She recognized that Sieghart’s feelings ought to be called “love.”

Yet, Nicola was sure she could not return his feelings in kind. She could not manage the same searing level of affection that she had received from Sieghart over the years. Ultimately, she felt convinced that she was not in love with Sieghart.

It was for that reason that, in recent weeks, Nicola had felt conflicted each time she faced those powerful emotions. She felt bewildered. How should she react? She no longer knew.

“Eh? Hold on, didn’t you accept Sieg’s marriage proposal at one point?” Alois’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates as he peered closely at Nicola’s face, clearly bemused.

Nicola averted his eyes, hers wavering as she gazed toward the ground.

“Well, I thought... I wouldn’t mind if we were to become family.”

Despite Sieghart’s gorgeous looks, he had a sincere and straightforward personality. Nonetheless, the boy was quite a handful and could immediately cross over to the other side if Nicola ever took her eyes off of him.

Before Nicola knew it, she found Sieghart’s presence reassuring, placing her trust in him, and could not deny that they shared a bond. She would be very annoyed if he ran off and got himself killed. Conversely, she thought always having him by her side might be the best for his safety.

At some point, Sieghart had become a part of Nicola, and she did not think that this would change in ten or twenty years. So she had accepted Sieghart’s proposal to get engaged. That was all.

I certainly didn’t accept it because... “It wasn’t because I was in love... With him...” Nicola muttered as if the words had been pried out of her.

“Yikes, can you really be so oblivious?” she heard Alois murmur above her head.

She had only expressed her opinion based on knowing who she was far better than anyone else.

“How rude,” she said before glaring up at Alois.

“I’ve heard it said,” began Alois, “that there is only one thing more unfortunate than a loveless marriage. A marriage where there is only love from one side.”

“Well, with the scales so out of balance, such a union would surely crumble before long,” Nicola murmured to herself.

Alois grinned merrily and chuckled, “Aha ha, now I see. I’m beginning to understand why Sieg has been waiting so patiently and why he doesn’t want to rush you.” He then made a face as if lost in thought and continued, “This is my opinion, but I believe love means opening up one’s heart and body for another, even just a bit. Maybe loving someone just means having a place for that person in your heart and remembering them each day.”

Nicola had always been concerned about her childhood friend because of his susceptibility to being haunted. She could not help but frown until narrowing her eyes, seeking to understand Alois’s intentions.

“What are you trying to say?” she asked.

Alois shrugged, before laughing in his usual frivolous manner. “Everyone feels their particular form of love. You might try asking different people what their definitions of love are.”

Nicola narrowed her eyes again and started to say, “Knowing that wouldn’t change anything...” But she stopped herself. Alois did not venture to continue speaking either. The pair had finally reached the end of the seemingly eternal passage.

Needing to return to her senses and push away idle thoughts, Nicola slapped her cheeks with all her might before willing her face to stiffen. She stopped at a heavily worn, wooden door.

“For now, I will proceed on my own. Your Highness, please do not enter until I give the signal.”

◇

As Nicola pushed the hefty door, it made a harsh creaking sound. Squinting at the sudden shaft of light that broke through the gap she had created, she slowly pushed it open.

In one fell swoop, the smell of succulent meat and fragrant spices engulfed Nicola’s nostrils, stimulating her appetite and forcing her to acknowledge her empty stomach. Beyond the door was a fairly large room with a high ceiling, but again, not a single window in sight. Instead, an assortment of mirrors, big and small, were arranged along the walls.

Of particular note was the long table in the center of the room that had a veritable abundance of arranged dishes. That said, they barely fit atop the table despite its length. In this uninhabited place, this was certainly an unusual sight.

“Wow, how very blatant,” Nicola said without thinking and could not help but laugh. Many stories like the Japanese *Yomotsu Hegui* and the Greek legend of Persephone’s descent into Hades showed how eating the food of another realm ensured one never returned home. The master of this spirit realm seemed intent on keeping Sieghart here for good.

Nicola heard someone behind her chuckle slightly.

“Of course I haven’t eaten any. You always used to warn me about the perils of food in these places till you were blue in the face,” a voice said.

She looked back to find Sieghart smiling awkwardly, leaning against the wall beside the door.

“You came to rescue me, didn’t you? Thank you,” said Sieghart. His expression softened, and he had a broader, more innocent smile. For a moment, Nicola was at a loss for words but turned away from him, pouting in a way that was not at all charming.

“Lately, you always seem to react that way whenever I smile at you,” noted Sieghart.

“I was only thinking... That your face is needlessly pretty today, as always.”

“Is that the sort of reaction you have when you see something pretty?”

Nicola heard Sieghart snicker and furrowed her brow. But she briefly returned her gaze to him, confirming that he did not seem to be noticeably injured or fatigued. Nicola started exhaling slowly—it was difficult to tell whether this was a sigh of relief or frustration. But before she was finished, she suddenly tutted in irritation. She had noticed innumerable white hands reaching toward Sieghart from the mirror behind him.

“No... I won’t let you have him,” declared Nicola as she dragged Sieghart to her side and exited the dining room, slamming the door behind her. She then shouted, “Turn around and run as fast as you can!”

“How?!” shouted Alois, who had been waiting by the door, at Nicola.

Looking over her shoulder, Nicola saw even more countless arms extending from the mirrors in the hallway, writhing like a colony of sea anemones. The group had no space to pass through, and she allowed herself to tut as loudly as she pleased.

After plunging her hands into her pockets and grabbing all the paper dolls she had brought, Nicola tossed them into the air and clapped her hands together in prayer. A dry rustling echoed through the hallway as the paper dolls flew straight ahead. These were not mere confetti, but a flock of Nicola’s paper dolls. In the blink of an eye, they darted through a cluster of white arms, severing them.

“Now! Quickly!” Nicola grabbed Sieghart and Alois by the hand and ran back through the corridor the way she had come, as fast as she could. There was no time to look back, but she could sense the remaining arms reaching out in pursuit. She put this out of her mind and continued running, even as she was ashamed to admit her lack of athletic ability.

At some point, the two hands Nicola had dragged behind pulled her forward instead until she was halfway floating in midair. Still, she kicked her legs in desperation.

They eventually spotted a mirror that glowed with a golden light among the procession on the walls. Hurrying to escape the presence that pursued them from behind, the three sped up before leaping together into the mirror.

A flash of pure white light blinded Nicola, making her squint. She realized this was due to the evening sunlight that Ernst reflected using her hand mirror. The familiar space was the schoolhouse, which allowed her legs to rest even as she breathed raggedly.

There was one last thing Nicola still had to do. Envying the two sitting on the landing while thanking her lucky stars that they’d been saved, Nicola willed her legs to move again, even as they threatened to tear apart, and retrieved the amethyst from Ernst.

Nicola looked down at the amethyst and whispered, “See if you can prove

that you can in fact be useful to that man.” She then tossed the hunk of purple stone into the mirror. After watching it plummet beneath the mirror’s surface, she broke the triangle of mirrors that let them access the spirit realm, shutting it off completely.

“Huh... You threw the amethyst away...” murmured Alois, his mouth hanging open. Nicola looked at him out of the corner of her eye, then collapsed from exhaustion.

“I take back what I said earlier,” said Nicola. “This man does not need to carry something that will bring him further unwanted trouble.”

THE LITTLE PURPLE ONE, AND THE ONE IN THE MIRROR, I CAN’T FORGIVE THEM!

It seemed that the amethyst’s act of “stealing Sieghart away” had started all of this. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Nicola could think of nothing better than pitting a nonhuman entity against another. Since they had been so intent on their plan, they could fight over Sieghart to their heart’s content.

At any rate, the amethyst could deflect Nicola’s hand and move around on its own. She believed she had worn out the apparition in the mirror a fair amount, so it would probably be a fair fight.

Besides, if the amethyst won and shocked Sieghart by doggedly returning to his side one day—*Well, at that point I’ll allow it to stay by his side*, Nicola thought with a little shrug.

As it happened, the battle had been decided the very next day when the full-length mirror on the staircase’s landing stood shattered. Resting on Sieghart’s pillow, somewhat worse for wear, lay the amethyst.

When Sieghart related this to Nicola, she could only respond with a slight, awkward smile.

Chapter 2: Hell is Other People, Even on Vacation

1

From time to time, a steam locomotive's whistle sounded off. Along with the regular vibrations of the carriage, the scenery outside rapidly flowed past the window. There was also faint smells of steam mixed with coal and smoke mixed with oil.

The usual suspects faced each other in a compartment of the first-class passenger carriage, with Lady Charlotte and Emma accompanying them. Altogether, the boys and girls were a group of six.

In a cool voice, almost like making a routine self-introduction, Charlotte von Rosenheim nonchalantly blurted out, "Ah, what else... The thing is, on the inside, I'm actually a man!"

Their trip away for the long weekend began with this bombshell statement from an outwardly feminine young beauty.

Thus, it is necessary to rewind time to ten minutes prior.

At the beginning of the journey, the party of six had agreed to meet in a specified compartment in the first-class carriage. On one side of the window, in the direction of the corridor, sat Alois, Emma, and Ernst. Opposite of them were Sieghart, Nicola, and Charlotte.

Alois glanced around the compartment before smiling cheerfully and breaking the ice.

"I'm not here on official business, and this is a vacation. Let's dispense with any stuffy formalities! A few of us are meeting again for the first time in a while, so there's no need to worry about your manners. Shall we start by having each of us introduce ourselves?"

It turned out that Alois really meant it when he said there would be no “stuffy formalities.” The introductions did not proceed according to social status but in the order people were sitting.

Alois began by introducing himself as he was sitting by the window. But Nicola had no interest in the self-introduction of someone she already knew all too well—this passed in one ear and out the other.

When Alois finished, it was Emma’s turn to introduce herself.

“Out of everyone here, I suppose Emma is the oldest,” said Emma. Her hair—the color of milky tea, like Charlotte’s—bounced as she nodded. Although it was difficult to see her eyes clearly due to her extremely thick glasses, her eyebrows and lips were lively, making her expression surprisingly obvious. “Emma is His Highness’s personal handmaiden—having entered his service when I was only about ten years old. I’ve known His Highness and Ern here ever since they were about yay high.”

Emma raised a hand to her mouth as she chuckled but held her fingers just far enough apart that her smile was visible.

Ernst snapped, “You’re only a year older than we are!”

In other words, Emma is nineteen years old, thought Nicola as she performed mental arithmetic. Emma appeared to be quite an eccentric handmaiden.

“Emma has absolutely awful eyesight, so I may well end up being a nuisance to all of you. But I certainly hope we can get along,” said Emma.

Ernst and Sieghart introduced themselves, respectively. When it was Nicola’s turn, she gave the blandest self-introduction possible.

Only Charlotte was left, stating her name and then saying, “Ah, what else... The thing is, on the inside, I’m actually a man!”

With that out of the way, we now return to where we started.

“Eh? Wait a... Eh...?!” Nicola’s voice cracked as she struggled to respond to this shocking yet casual coming out.

While Nicola was at a loss for words, those around her had their own

reaction. Sieghart was the only one who appeared as shocked as Nicola; Alois chuckled wryly, and Ernst simply furrowed his brow. From their reaction, Nicola understood that those two already knew about Charlotte.

Alois shrugged and closed one eye. “Though we’ve never met, Emma has always spoken of Charlotte as her ‘little brother.’”

This is quite a delicate matter, so why didn’t you mention it beforehand? Nicola thought, glaring resentfully at Alois.

“Please feel free to call him ‘Char,’ okay?” said Emma.

“Yeah, so that’s the way things are. I really can’t stand being treated like a girl, but I hope we’ll all still get along,” said Charlotte—Char—waving with a silly smile on his face. Once Nicola realized she was stuck with this whimsical brother and sister pair, she wanted to bury her face in her hands.

The terribly frank crown prince had brought his stubborn knight. The handmaiden, whose personality was still a mystery, was joined by a marquess’ daughter who was a boy on the inside. Then there was Sieghart—who attracted nonhuman entities like moths to a flame—and Nicola, who had memories from a past life. One quirky traveler would have been one thing, but with six, this promised to be an eventful journey.

Don’t you think this party has a bit too much character? mused Nicola as she exchanged a glance with Sieghart.

2

Wisps of smoke, sometimes thick and sometimes thin, interrupted the countryside scenery as it streaked past the train's window.

The train occasionally leaned dramatically to one side, and each time the wheels squealed as if under stress. Inside the rattling carriage, Nicola stole a glance at Char's face in profile, as they were sitting next to one another.

Together with wide, open olive-colored eyes, Char had a nose with a high bridge, soft-looking lips, and porcelain white skin. Despite looking like an exceptionally beautiful young girl, that frank and rough personality did not match his appearance. Yet he managed to fit in with the others in the blink of an eye.

Perhaps Alois, Emma, and Char could thank their good communication skills for drawing everyone into their small talk, leading to quite a lively conversation.

Nicola found that even Sieghart, clearly bemused at first, had opened up enough that he had no problem calling Charlotte "Char" and was laughing alongside everyone.

Ernst transformed into a bot who could say nothing besides, "Except for His Grace, you are all much too rude!" But this could be said to be an everyday scene at this point.

Although the traveling party included people meeting for the first time and a shocking revelation, the atmosphere was surprisingly not too bad.

"It must be nearly time for lunch," murmured Sieghart, prompting Alois to check his pocket watch. It was just past noon.

"Ah, Emma prepared a light meal," piped up Emma. "Everyone, feel free to dig in!"

This offer caused the three who had known Emma since childhood to become instantly pale.

"Sis, you can't be thinking of poisoning the prince..." cautioned Char as he looked up at the ceiling.

“Emma... How many times have I told you to stay out of the kitchen?” lamented Alois, placing a hand over his face.

With a stern look in his eyes, Ernst quickly rose to his feet and cried, “I will make my way to the dining car at once!” He then left the compartment.

From their reactions, it was easy for Nicola to guess what Emma’s cooking was like. She wordlessly exchanged a glance with Sieghart.

“Could... Could it really be as bad as that?” Sieghart nervously ventured to ask Alois.

Alois weakly nodded before saying, “I believe we should show respect toward anyone kind enough to cook for us. Therefore, even when someone gives me something that doesn’t taste good, I hesitate to call their cooking “the worst.” But in Emma’s case, even calling it that is putting it lightly. Otherwise, how might I put it...? Sorry, I can’t find another way to describe it.” He said this all with the eyes of a dead fish.

With a meek expression, Char said, “I know what you mean!” before nodding furiously. The two then clasped their hands together, sharing a wistful look, each forcing a laugh.

“I-It’s really that awful...?” muttered Nicola as she cringed. Char overheard this and wheeled around to face her.

“Yeah, it’s awful. Really awful. Even Shakespeare could not pen a tragedy more heart-wrenching than the food my big sister cooks. You could display a message saying, “Later, the staff happily ate it.” But I can’t imagine a staff who wouldn’t all throw up their hands and run away from this food.”

“Oh?” said Nicola. “So it lays waste to both literature and industry compliance?”

As for Emma, who found herself lambasted even by her little brother, she did not take this criticism very well. Rather than cheerily claiming that today’s efforts had resulted in some genuinely tasty food, she looked offended, pouting with her cheeks puffed up as she opened the lid of her rattan basket.

A tinge of curiosity provoked Nicola to nervously peer inside the basket. Upon doing so, she stared a dead fish in the eye. The shock momentarily arrested her

ability to think.

“This is called Stargazy Pie,” explained Emma. “It’s a traditional dish in a neighboring kingdom, you know. And doesn’t it just look adorable?”

Several fish heads protruded from a beautifully browned pie crust. The eyes in the disembodied heads all stared into space, seeming to follow Nicola no matter what angle she viewed them from. Nicola was at a loss for words when faced with this supremely surreal tableau.

“Yikes...” Nicola could not tell whether she blurted this or if it was someone else who witnessed this scene.

But Emma did not seem at all perturbed, delightedly continuing her explanation.

“It is a savory fish pie, not a sweet one. I put a mix of herring, mashed potatoes, and boiled eggs inside a pie crust and baked them together!”

While listening to Emma, who held her head high during this explanation, Nicola nervously looked at the fish heads protruding from the pie crust again. Once she ignored the impact of the bizarre scene, she noticed that the crust was a beautiful golden brown and the fish heads were perfectly baked.

Though the pie’s appearance was off-putting, Nicola admitted it looked tasty. It did not look so inept as to warrant the criticism heaped on Emma, which puzzled her.

“Nicola, go ahead and try some if you’d like,” urged Emma.

Nicola plunged her fork into the pie as directed. The crust felt light and crispy. Just as she had predicted, the fish inside was well-cooked and fragrant. Everything until that point was fine.

The problem emerged when Nicola put the forkful in her mouth and chewed. An unexpected bitter and grassy flavor spread throughout the inside of her mouth. Simultaneously, a contradictory cooling sensation and a mellow sweetness stopped short of sweeping away the other flavors. Finally, there was the saltiness of the fish and potatoes, perfectly seasoned for a lunchtime dish.

Several flavors that shouldn’t be in the same dish all pressed upon Nicola at

once, causing her to gag involuntarily.

“By the way, my secret ingredients are cilantro, mint, and peaches!” announced Emma.

“Why?! Those definitely weren’t part of the original recipe, were they?!” Nicola snapped reflexively. But Emma just maintained her cheerful smile.

Char, who sat opposite Emma, grabbed her by the shoulder as if explaining something to a child and said, “You know, sis, people calling something their “secret ingredient” doesn’t mean they want others saying,‘Wow, you really put that in your dish? How unexpected!’ Got it? If you understand, please put that needlessly poetically named pie back in the basket, okay? No way you can feed that to the prince.”

Having said his piece, Char snatched the dish away from Emma with what appeared to be a practiced hand.

However, Emma had trouble accepting this. She pursed her lips defiantly and protested, “I just wanted to make something His Highness would enjoy to thank him for this opportunity to see you, Char. What a pity... I’d even heard that peaches are good luck and can ward off evil, so I hoped this pie would bring us all good fortune on this trip.”

Upon hearing Emma mention this supernatural property of peaches, Nicola turned to look her squarely in the face, as if to say, “You certainly know a great deal.”

Unfortunately, Emma appeared utterly deflated by this rejection. Alois, who had been carefully watching this interaction, let out a sigh of exasperation. With a look of resignation on his face, he finally spoke up.

“I’m willing to have one bite. Just one...”

Ah, you’re actually going to eat it. Nicola was confident that she was not the only one thinking this and exchanged glances with each of her neighbors. Sieghart blinked in surprise but seemed fascinated.

“Huh...” murmured Char as he raised an eyebrow, not expecting this outcome.

Emma paid no further attention to the reactions of those around her. She smiled in delight before busily serving Alois his slice of pie on a small plate, passing it to him along with a fork.

Alois nervously conveyed a forkful to his mouth. Before he could swallow, Ernst burst into the compartment with his arms full of drinks and snacks.

“Your Highness, are you still alive?”

He found Alois already afflicted, with his face turning blue and nearly fainting from the agony of eating the pie.

Well, we told you so, thought Nicola.

“Here, have some water,” said Ernst, handing Alois a drink. Seeing how smoothly he performed this motion, Nicola wondered if Alois tried a bite of Emma’s cooking every time she brought him something.

I wouldn’t have taken this prince for such a risk-taker, thought Nicola as she gazed listlessly out the window.

3

All the refreshments Ernst had purchased for the group were delicious. The bread must have been freshly baked for the train journey, as it was still warm and gave off a pleasant aroma of butter and wheat.

When bitten into, the sausages sandwiched between the bread had a satisfying snap and overflowed with juices. They had the right amount of salt and a perfect balance of fresh lettuce and tomato.

One bite of a quiche filled to the brim with eggs, bacon, and vegetables sent a wave of savory flavor across one’s tongue. Any of these items would have wiped away the awful memory of Emma’s cooking.

The cookies Ernst had bought as their dessert were light, crispy, sweet, and fragrant. Enjoyed with a cup of black tea, they made the inside of one’s mouth feel refreshed. Nicola believed she could eat any number of cookies.

While stuffing her face with cookies, Nicola furtively glanced at Alois and Emma, who sat side by side opposite her. She noticed that each time Alois

reached for some food, Emma quickly extended her own hand to preempt him. Emma seemed to have been assigned as the royal food taster. Alternatively, this tiny act of provocation might have been Emma's way of flirting with Alois.

Nicola was unsure if Char also noticed. In any case, he casually said, "Hey, prince. Even if you are incognito, can you take a trip with so few people? I kinda thought this would end up being a bit more elaborate."

He's right, Nicola suddenly realized. But Sieghart, sitting next to her, did not seem to find the manner of their journey at all surprising.

After looking at Nicola and Char, Sieghart chuckled and said, "There are no powers either inside or outside this kingdom who would profit from Alois's death."

Alois accepted this explanation from Sieghart with a simple nod and said, "That's right. No one besides me has the right to inherit the throne. Should members of the nobility come to blows over who is to become my fiancée, they could hardly afford to be hostile to me." After taking a sip of tea to moisten his throat, he continued. "Besides, Ernst is by my side. We have no knights mightier than Ernst, not even in the royal guard. The members of the guard trust Ernst so deeply that sending him with me was sufficient—at least, so I would like to say."

Alois paused and shrugged slightly, then added, "As a matter of fact, some bodyguards will watch over us among the train passengers and other travelers we meet."

Not even Sieghart expected this and looked slightly shocked. From the subsequent change in his expression, he worked something out very quickly.

"I wonder if this might be why..." said Sieghart, taking out the local newspaper he had bought that morning. With a tap of one of his shapely fingers, he indicated an article that was small, even on the page it occupied.

Nicola noted that the short article in this section of the paper—where anyone, even commoners, could pay to have an article published—included the heading "Still Searching." Apparently, the person who submitted that article was seeking information about a missing child. The sketch underneath showed a boy of about ten years of age wearing a flat cap.

“Got it in one,” said Alois, with an almost imperceptible frown. “It seems a series of kidnappings have been happening in an area close to our destination. Only small children have gone missing, so I don’t think we’ll be targets, but we’re playing it safe.”

Kidnappings. These occurrences were not unlikely in a world at the level of civilization of Earth in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The best case scenario was that the children were sold as workers. They might also face a far more wretched fate, sold to aristocrats afflicted with certain tendencies.

It was an unpleasant topic, but nothing would come of getting worked up out of a sense of justice. In fact, Nicola thought to herself, *I feel like we’re about to trigger a flag, so cut it out already*.

“Let’s drop the subject, shall we?” said Sieghart with a bitter smile.

All Nicola could do was nod furiously in agreement.

Before Nicola knew it, Emma had become silent. Looking over at her, Nicola saw that she was nodding off. Her head lolled from left to right, eventually falling on Alois’s shoulder.

“Why, you fool! Are you really about to fall asleep in front of His Highness?!” growled Ernst.

“I’m not asleep...” murmured Emma, shifting in her seat. But only seconds later she was nodding off again.

With a hand against his temple, Ernst groaned, “All right. So as not to bother His Highness, lean on me instead.” That said, Ernst presented his shoulder. The look on his face showed what an agonizing decision this was, but surprisingly, Alois stopped him.

“If this is all, I don’t really mind. Besides, with the difference in height between you and Emma, I don’t think she could sleep comfortably.”



Alois saw that Emma was beginning to lean toward Ernst and pulled on her arm, guiding her head to rest on his own shoulder. He performed this action so naturally that Nicola raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” she said to herself.

Ernst continued to make a fuss. “But...! You must see...!” Nicola observed Sieghart’s face out of the corner of her eye, blinking rapidly at him.

Sieghart sighed and chuckled slightly before saying, “I wonder how you can have such keen insight for the inner workings of other people’s hearts, yet none when it comes to your own.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Nicola.

Using one of his long, slender fingers, Sieghart brushed away a cookie crumb stuck to Nicola’s cheek. For a moment, she scowled but quickly collected herself and ate another cookie.

“Nicola, you’re welcome to sleep as well if you feel tired,” said Sieghart, then patted his knee.

“Not tired, won’t be sleeping,” said Nicola, turning away and pouting.

Char laughed and said, “What the heck, is everyone here a normie?”

Nicola overheard this but made every effort to pretend that she had not. She returned to munching on cookies with great enthusiasm.

◇

The curtains fluttered and parted to reveal groves of trees with red and yellow leaves standing underneath an endless autumn sky. It was pleasantly bright inside the train compartment, where sun rays poured through the window on this fine day.

As the train continued to rattle on its tracks with a regular rhythm, the group continued their trivial small talk that faltered from time to time.

“Ah... Looks like we’re about to enter a tunnel,” noted Alois. His voice prompted Nicola to look out the window as well. Along the winding track ahead, in the middle of a mountain range, a dark, wide open hole grew steadily as they traveled toward it. Eventually, they could no longer see the landscape. There was only the shuddering of the carriage and its squeaking wheels.

Just moments before they fully entered the tunnel, engulfing their field of vision in darkness, something happened. Nicola felt a familiar sensation—a tingling in her skin—as the surrounding atmosphere changed. She immediately narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

Emma should still be asleep. Char was awake, so Nicola waited until they were under the tunnel's darkness to disguise any of her more suspicious actions. Having reasoned thus, she slapped a paper talisman on the four corners of the compartment before surreptitiously clapping her hands together in prayer.

However Nicola heard two claps overlapping—*Cla-clap!*

Hmm? Nicola tilted her head to one side. Soon after, she heard paper hit another piece of paper. She knew several pieces of paper falling to the floor by her feet.

Nicola waited for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, then used what little light remained to search for the fallen talismans, which she gently picked up. She was aware of her neighbor to her right picking something up too.

She peered at the two paper talismans stuck together and badly crumpled and could tell they were from different practitioners. The spells had interfered with one another and failed.

The letters on one of the talismans were an appalling scrawl, which looked like an earthworm had dragged the ink across the paper. Nicola sighed.

The abuse she hurled at the person who had written those letters emerged from her mouth with no conscious thought.

"Well, looks like your writing is messy as ev—"

"Huh?! It's definitely not as bad as Russian cursive. Anyway, what do you think you're doing? Our barriers knocked each other out. I always finish mine first, and I keep telling you to leave it to me... In situations... Like this..."

"No way! I mean, your talismans are so messy that... They whiff completely... Now and then..."

Both were beginning to understand what the words they were shouting

reflexively implied. Char wheeled around to gaze at Nicola, who was wide-eyed and stared right back.

“What’s all the noise about...?” wondered Emma, rubbing her sleepy eyes. Emma, Sieghart, Alois, and Ernst stared suspiciously at Nicola and Char, but there was no time to indulge their curiosity.

“Okay...” said Char. “Let’s have a quick chat outside.”

Nicola immediately nodded in agreement. The two exited the compartment, and Nicola slammed the door shut behind her. With a sigh, Char crouched in the corridor while scratching his head.

“I kinda had the feeling that we weren’t speaking for the first time... But I can’t believe it’s you...” he groaned.

“That’s my line,” Nicola responded, rubbing her temples and waiting for her headache to subside. She had been surprised that Emma recognized peaches could ward off evil. It was only natural for Emma to obtain such knowledge by having Nicola’s former junior apprentice for a younger brother.

“Say, let me just ask you something so I can be certain... Did you ever study under a man in his thirties who looked like a delinquent, was insanely rude, and always condescending?”

Char raised his hand and affirmed, “Oh yeah, I did. Though, I bet our mentor would have said, ‘Have you ever seen a delinquent my age? Dumbass.’”

I bet he would have, thought Nicola, screwing her face up as she recalled their mentor’s cynical laugh.

“Right, now it’s my turn to ask you. Were you ever the apprentice of a devil-may-care dude who smoked all day, year-round, and was just unhealthy?”

This time it was Nicola’s turn to reply, “I did... Much to my chagrin. He would probably say something like, ‘You total moron, what’s bad for your body is good for your spirit. Besides, the rotten air in the outside world is way worse for your health than nicotine.’”

“Yeah, I bet he would. That sounded like him,” said Char, cackling.

With a sigh, he stood back up and quickly patted his rumpled clothes into

shape. The corridor felt almost disturbingly tranquil, with no sign of anyone else.

“Well, we have a lot to talk about... But let’s put that aside and talk later, senior apprentice,” continued Char.

“For now, let’s agree to talk once we’re out of this spirit realm, junior apprentice.”

4

After returning to the compartment, Nicola found it was loud compared to the silence of the corridor.

“Eek! Look at the window! Handprints just suddenly appeared there... Lots of them!”

“Impossible... The train has been running the whole time. How would anyone have done that?!”

Taking notice of the pale faces of those who occupied the compartment, Nicola let her gaze fall upon said window. Indeed, many handprints appeared on the glass. Among these were prints made with a dark red substance that looked like it could be blood. The scene would not be out of place in a horror movie. Seeing that even Ernst was recoiling in fear for once, Nicola shrugged her shoulders and knew she had to do something.

The already countless handprints seemed to grow in number each time they passed one of the gas lamps that dimly lit the inside of the tunnel.

Char, who stood beside Nicola, clasped his hands together behind his head, before chuckling and indifferently saying, “You know, somehow, it kinda looks like there are more handprints on the inside of the window...”

In contrast to Alois and Sieghart, who immediately stiffened in terror, Emma calmly took out her handkerchief and wiped the window with it.

“Ah, you’re right. This one is on the inside.”

“Waah! Come on, why would you go and confirm something that scary?!”

screamed Alois.

“That can’t be. That’s impossible, right?!” shouted Ernst.

In a panic, Alois and Ernst grabbed Emma by her shoulders and pulled her away from the window. Nicola glared at Char for that unnecessary comment, then elbowed him in the ribs.

“Don’t say things to stoke their fear just for fun.”

“C’mon...”

As Nicola and Char had this exchange, they suddenly felt Sieghart’s gaze upon them—he obviously wanted to say something. Nicola scratched her face nervously. But after thinking for a few seconds about how to explain herself, she could come up with nothing on the spot. In the end, she told the truth.

“Ah, well, you might say that Char was an acquaintance of mine in my past life, and we seem inseparable... You are welcome to think of Char as more or less able to do whatever I can.” Nicola was sure to lower her voice for the first part of this announcement so that only Sieghart and Alois, whom she had confided about her past life, could hear it. For the second part, she spoke clearly enough that Ernst could listen too.

Sieghart and Alois both had eyes wide as saucers, staring at Char so intently that it felt like their gaze might go through him. But Char did not exhibit any sign of irritation from this attention.

“Hey sis, Nicola here was a senior apprentice of mine in my past life!” said Char, reporting this incredible news to Emma casually. When finished, he turned around to look at the others. “So, can we change the subject? This is super bad, but our compartment has been dragged into a spirit realm. Let’s work on escaping with haste.”

“Really?” is what all of the eyes now focused on Nicola seemed to say. But when she nodded to confirm what Char had said, Sieghart, Alois, and Ernst grimaced immediately. As expected, the situation was easy to explain to someone who had been pulled into a mirror only a few days ago and those who had witnessed that event.

Though the subject change felt forced, Nicola was privately relieved that

Char's blatant announcement had allowed her to remain vague.

◇

With Nicola taking the lead and Char at the rear, the group walked single file into the corridor.

Still, there was no sign of anyone else. Even when they peered into the other compartments, they were far from finding other passengers or luggage.

"So there are really no other passengers..."

The group left the first-class carriage, moving through the other passenger carriages and finally the dining car, but nobody was there. Not even the train conductor was present. All was quiet as if the train had been empty originally.

"Looks like the locomotive itself has lost quite a bit of speed... For its speed to drop to this degree, even the engine's stoker must have disappeared," whispered Sieghart, who walked directly behind Nicola.

Indeed, as he had said, the regular rhythm of the train's wheels had grown steadily wider ever since they entered the tunnel.

Unless a steam locomotive continuously burns coal, it will not continue to move. Even if the stoker, whose job was to feed coal into the engine's furnace, was gone, the train's speed should have continued to decrease.

"At this rate, the train will soon stop," added Ernst, walking behind Sieghart. Based on the current speed, the train would most likely stop before exiting the tunnel.

Without looking over her shoulder, Nicola said, "Not a problem. In fact, if it doesn't stop, then we'll have a problem and need to get off the train to walk back the way we came."

"Ehh?!" someone cried wildly from behind Nicola.

"Back the way we came?" piped up Emma. "Surely you don't mean back through the tunnel? It's bound to be full of whoever made those handprints on the window, isn't it...?"

"Well, I suppose it will," replied Nicola, peering through the nearest window.

Unlike how the window's glass panes reflected the train interior when they had entered the tunnel, they were now thoroughly covered in handprints. Nicola understood why passing through the tunnel on foot would not be a sane act, but doubling back was the best solution to their predicament. No matter how creepy it might be, she had no choice.

Without stopping in the corridor, Nicola said, "A spirit realm that stretches out infinitely does not exist, so we're guaranteed to end up somewhere."

If there was no end, they had entered an entirely new world. The two might sound superficially similar but were totally different.

"Proceeding in whichever direction, if there is an end to this realm, should lead us to its periphery, its edge. But if we blindly pick a path, there is no method to determine how far we must travel. Under these circumstances, returning the way we entered would be standard practice." Doing this, they would only need to walk the distance they had already advanced into the realm. Nicola said all of this matter-of-fact while making her way toward the very rear of the train.

"On top of that..." said Char, continuing Nicola's explanation. "I mean, look, a 'tunnel' is a pretty obvious symbol for the entrance to a spirit realm, right? In ancient and modern civilizations, tunnels, bridges, and rivers have always been symbols of a division between worlds, a border between this world and the next. 'Crossing' or 'passing through' is almost a ritual for stepping over that border. That's exactly why going through this tunnel is the surest way of getting back."

"I see now," said Emma, apparently convinced by Char's explanation.

"Is that...really the case?" Ernst did not seem entirely convinced and protested but finally fell silent.

When Nicola first met Ernst, he was a stubborn classmate who rejected any references to the occult, only recently mellowing considerably. Nicola and Sieghart shared a glance, then a chuckle.

"Hey, speaking of supernatural phenomena..." Alois spoke up, sounding perplexed. "Isn't this the first time Ern has actually found himself caught up in one? That never happens."

“Ah, certainly,” agreed Char, nodding a few times. “Normally, our knight here would never get caught up in one of these incidents. He’s got a guardian spirit so strong that it hurts to look at it. It’s *super* bright, like looking at the sun.”

A guardian spirit referred to a spiritual entity that got attached to a specific person to protect them from danger. Sometimes these were the spirits of ancestors, deceased pets, or—in very rare cases—those classified as gods or phantoms, varying from person to person. In Ernst’s case, his guardian spirit was so powerful that it was off the charts.

This unbelievable power instantly blew away any nonhuman of middling strength that touched it. It was indeed of a nature that approached the domain of the gods. Certainly, Ernst would not have been drawn into this supernatural phenomenon. Nicola sighed heavily, as all of her strength seemed to desert her.

“Perhaps you could say that we arrived here by a majority vote, or we just dragged him along.”

Beings from beyond the human realm preferred to meddle in the lives of people willing to acknowledge their existence. The more one learned of that realm, the closer its inhabitants would encroach.

In their group was Sieghart, who was naturally attractive to the nonhuman; Alois who, following a certain incident, saw them more clearly; and there were two people with deep knowledge of the nonhuman—the former exorcists. Up to that point, the party ensured that their time went without incident. Feeling weary, Nicola slumped her shoulders.

As if in response to Nicola’s melancholy, the locomotive continued decelerating. Eventually, an ear-shattering screen of metal on metal occurred, and the train came to a complete stop.

5

The train had only stopped just after the rearmost carriage had emerged from the tunnel. As the group looked back down the tunnel, the tracks appeared to have been laid following the excavation of a small mountain. After stepping off

the train, they seemed to be at the foot of that mountain, as there were dense groves of trees all around.

The sky, crystal clear a short while ago, was now heavy with dark clouds. It was so heavy that the stagnant air around them felt like being at the bottom of a body of water.

Looking over her shoulder, Nicola could see only a single track running back through the gaping hole that was the mouth of the tunnel, extending far away into the pitch darkness.

“Whoa, it looks like a black haze is filling the tunnel...” noted Alois. Like he said, there was no hope of seeing further into the tunnel. Although gas lamps were set into its walls at regular intervals, the black haze engulfed their light so much that their light did not make it outside. The haze, which wavered occasionally, almost looked composed of the shadows of a great number of people, all crowded together.

Did Nicola’s ears deceive her, or could she hear voices uttering curses? The wind that blew toward them from deep inside the tunnel felt strangely warm and humid.

“Can you see that?” quizzed Nicola, pointing at the haze in the tunnel and looking up at her childhood friend.

Sieghart replied, “If you mean that black haze, I’d say I can see it very clearly indeed.”

“Of course you can...” Ever since he was a small boy, Sieghart had drawn the attention of a staggering number of apparitions. As a result, out of sheer necessity, he developed the ability to see the nonhuman. Since it was not a natural ability, fleshed out in response to threats, he did not need to learn to see harmless apparitions and only had the vaguest sense of their presence. Sieghart being able to see the haze so sharply meant that the beings within it had every intention of harming them.

Going is fine, fine, but going back is frightening, thought Nicola, recalling an old nursery rhyme from her past life. Even though the apparition had pulled them in without further incident while they were still on board the train, it seemed that it would attempt to stop them if they tried to go back. In any

event, Nicola could see that she would have to prepare.

Nicola plunged her hand into the bag she had brought, stuffed to the brim with the tools of her exorcist trade, before fishing for some particular items. It took a while to find them, but she finally took out some of her handmade, aromatic sachets. She tore one of these open and shook its contents all over Sieghart. The air was momentarily thick with the fragrance of wisteria and sandalwood. All of the contents of her sachets were flowers and fragrant woods that had the effect of warding off evil.

“Oh, is that a wisteria sachet? If you’ve got a spare, gimme one too,” said Char, who had made his way over to Nicola while her attention was elsewhere as he sniffed the surrounding air.

But Nicola turned to him with a doubtful expression on her face. “You don’t really need one, do you?”

“Hmm? Ah, not for me. My sis is a bit on the sensitive side, so she might get tripped up more easily if we go in there.”

Nicola gave Char a withering stare, but he simply shrugged. After following his gaze, Nicola saw Emma catch one foot on a sleeper resting on the track ahead, tumbling to the ground in magnificent style.

“Oh, come on... Look, you need to watch your step,” said Alois, offering Emma his hand even as he sighed in exasperation. However, his reprimand seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

Emma adjusted her glasses and pointed at the tunnel, saying, “But... I can feel the presence of so many spirits in there. Shouldn’t I be worried?”

These words caused Nicola to blink in surprise. Next to her, she could hear Sieghart gasp.

“Don’t tell me, can she see as well?” whispered Sieghart.

Char smiled ambiguously but confirmed their suspicions. “Well, my sister ran into trouble some time ago, and her eyesight turned terrible. She can hardly see a thing, even with those thick Coke bottle glasses. So, to compensate, her other senses got sharper.”

Indeed, some argued that the sixth sense developed to compensate for a distinct lack of other abilities.

Well, that's all right then, thought Nicola as she handed Char a spare sachet.

"Hey, what about me? Don't I get a sachet?!" Alois cried, bounding over to Nicola like a puppy just as Emma had the contents of the sachet poured over her. But Nicola rejected this out of hand.

"Your Highness, did you not just have peaches to eat? The ones in the Stargazy Pie? Those will be enough."

"Huh, you're kidding..." said Alois with a pitiful moan. Yet peaches were a fruit that could dispel evil and malice. No matter how disgusting the food that contained them might be, he had eaten peaches, so he should be fine.

As for Ernst, he made every effort to see the apparitions that were hidden only from him, staring intently into the tunnel for some time.

"So that's how it is. I can't see a thing!" Ernst shouted in frustration.

But after a look at the brilliant, blazing body of light that glowed behind Ernst, Nicola shrugged, deciding that she would not need any additional measures to protect him.

◇

The black haze continued to overwhelm the tunnel, writhing with many smaller entities. Upon standing at its entrance, Nicola could feel them all suddenly rush toward her in a swarm.

"Ugh," Nicola groaned while grimacing.

"Whoa," said Char. "I bet if you turned a smartphone on that, the facial recognition would go off like crazy."

"Enough," said Nicola, glaring at her once junior apprentice for speaking carelessly. Char responded with a casual shrug.

With the corners of his mouth raised in a grin, Char rolled up his sleeves, then balled one hand into a fist and slammed it into the opposite palm.

"Right then, shall we get to work on this mass exorcism?" said Char excitedly.

But as if raining on his parade, Nicola shook her head forcefully. “No, I won’t do that. I won’t be doing anything.”

“Huh?” Char’s mouth hung open in shock, but Nicola ignored him. She slowly made her way around Ernst to stand behind him.

Then, with a subdued cry of effort, she pushed Ernst forward. Not expecting this stealthy strike, Ernst leaned forward, then tumbled straight into the tunnel the black haze inhabited. Ernst then became submerged in a sea of humanoid shadows in the blink of an eye. Nicola could see him begin to sink within their ranks.

But the haze, or the shadows within it, were blown away when they tried to touch Ernst. It was almost as if the light that enveloped Ernst burned them, then with a *poof*, they started to evaporate.

“Whoa!” exclaimed everyone—besides Nicola and Char—who witnessed this marvel, their mouths hanging open.

Char whistled cheerfully and said, “Whoa, they’re being forced to pass to the other side... Haha, that’s freaking amazing.” He followed this with a sigh of admiration.

“Hey, Miss Weber, what are you doing?!” Ernst was wide-eyed with fury as he turned back to glare at Nicola.

Behind him, as if echoing its master’s displeasure, the guardian spirit suddenly had an ever-growing glow. Hence, spirits began to evaporate around Ernst within an even greater radius, showing the immense power of his power.

As far as Nicola could see, Ernst looked in no way the worse for wear because of this encounter.

“Good, let’s go ahead with this strategy,” said Nicola, nodding before snapping her fingers and pointing deep inside the tunnel. “I would like to ask you to run to the first gas lamp as fast as possible. Run along now, go!”

“Ah... Why... Why you!” growled Ernst.

Nicola enthusiastically pushed Ernst from behind as if setting a dog loose on someone. He frowned, clearly displeased by this treatment, then reluctantly

sprinted into the tunnel. Once he did so, the countless pitch-black shadows that filled the tunnel quickly vanished, and their line of sight immediately became clearer.

Now able to see at least a little further into the tunnel, Nicola stepped inside and looked back at her fellow travelers.

“Now then, shall we head back toward the exit?” Out of sheer habit, Nicola offered a hand to her childhood friend. At first Sieghart was surprised, but a look of delight soon broke across his face. He made sure to grip Nicola’s hand before she could withdraw it.

The primitive method of setting Ernst on the spirits worked even better than Nicola had imagined. Even as the dark shadows gathered to block their path forward, he knocked them out of the way without even being aware of them. Each step he took deflected and mercilessly blew away the shadows as well as the sooty haze.

As one shadow Ernst trampled over screamed in agony before vanishing with a *poof*, Alois, in a strained voice, said, “Hey, is this really all right? A coach driver can be found guilty of a crime if one of his horses tramples over someone. Is there any chance Ern might get arrested?” His face was deathly pale as he watched Ernst sprinting ahead.

“But how would the police ever find proof that we trampled some ghosts and annihilated them? I think we’ll be fine... Probably,” said Sieghart, with a smile that lacked confidence. Still, a trained expression soon came over his incomparably beautiful visage as the swarm of trampled shadows got blasted to smithereens before his eyes.

As for Emma, she had a carefree smile and muttered, “In some sense, Ernst is fortunate to be unable to see or feel those things!”

With this somehow disorderly atmosphere around her, Nicola scowled and noted, *Quite a lot of people have died here*.

The bricks and the gas lamps, installed at regular intervals, helped give the tunnel a modern feel. While it showed signs of a few decades of wear and tear, the tunnel was still mostly intact and looked robust. But to build this sturdy

tunnel, Nicola guessed many people had lost their lives.

She remembered a certain tunnel that ran through a certain mountain in Kansai, Japan, which had become a popular sightseeing spot for contemporary psychics. The tunnel had experienced a cave-in during construction, leaving more than one hundred fifty workers buried alive. That was the beginning of an inauspicious reputation.

Even the early twentieth-century technology of the Taisho Era, when the cave-in occurred, did not stop such an accident of that scale. In this world, which matched the feel of the eighteenth or nineteenth century, such an accident seemed even more likely.

The space between the gas lamps inevitably grew darker. As Nicola walked through one such gloomy length of the tunnel, she noticed what looked like a glowing phosphor floating lazily through the air. She soon realized that the glowing object rested on one of Sieghart's fingers. With the darkness around them deepening, it seemed to glow steadily brighter as if to light their way.

"Is that... The amethyst we dealt with the other day?"

"Ah, that's right. I had it made into a signet ring."

"Huh..." Nicola looked down at the ring fixed upon Sieghart's right hand. The insignia carved into it might have been the crest that belonged to Sieghart's family, which he inherited when he became marquess. It was such a subtle design that even Nicola's untrained eyes could tell that a skilled hand had carved it.

Putting aside the creepy reality that the ring would return to Sieghart if he lost it, whether or not he wanted it to, Nicola had to admit that it was a fine piece of craftsmanship.

"When I considered that a sentient being dwells within the amethyst, I felt it would be cruel to make it into anything that would split it in two. So I gave up on any accessory that comes in pairs, like cufflinks." As if delighted by Sieghart's kind words, the amethyst strengthened its glow.

With her eyes only half open, Nicola murmured, "That's the thing about you..."

Sieghart could only smile nervously in response.

They continued walking through the tunnel for a time, making trivial small talk as they went.

Ernst, far ahead of them, turned back and raised his voice, “The exit is just ahead!”

The five who walked behind him shared a series of glances, blinking in astonishment.

After all, humanoid shadows and the formless black haze still blocked the remaining portion of the tunnel. It did not look like an exit to anyone else, but Ernst’s eyes perhaps judged it that way.

With one final spurt of effort, Ernst ran faster toward the exit. As he did so, the haze became gradually thinner, and little by little, light from the other end of the tunnel began to break through.

Alois let out a sigh of relief. At the same time, Emma nervously raised her hand, looking hesitant to say something to everyone.

“Umm... It might just be my imagination, but does anyone else feel like plenty of eyes are staring at us from behind?”

“I did feel like saying something...” Sieghart timidly agreed. “At first I thought they were just echoes, but it *does* sound like there are too many footsteps in this tunnel.”

Char clasped his hands behind his head and cackled, then said, “Ah, have you all finally realized? There is a *nasty* band of spirits coming up behind us.”

It went without saying that Sieghart and Alois screamed in terror as soon as they turned around.

6

Sieghart held a hand against his chest, where his heart pounded violently like a bell sounding a feverish alarm. Without calming himself, he would not have been able to breathe correctly.

When he looked back into the tunnel, he saw an unmistakable abomination. It was an awkward, burly humanoid figure that was over three meters tall. Although its silhouette was not entirely humanoid, it was close enough to register as such in Sieghart's head.

As it drew near enough for Sieghart to see it clearly, he realized it was a disordered pile of flesh that he could not be sure if it had once been human. It had eyeballs. It had a mouth, ears, nose, arms, fingers, and feet. But Sieghart noticed none of these were the right amount or in the correct places on its body. He believed it was a monster formed by haphazardly cobbling together human body parts.

Several of its eyeballs, which looked every which way, revolved within gaps in the monster's flesh before their gaze turned upon Sieghart. He noticed that no two eyes had irises of exactly the same color.

By the time Sieghart realized that its arms and legs—which seemed to have sprouted without any attention to order—had entirely mismatched skin tones, he more or less understood.

Ah, this thing came about using parts from different people. A feeling of nausea welled up in his stomach. His breathing became irregular and his fingers trembled as if he were having a spasm. *Even so*...

Everytime he encountered an apparition, he needed to look at Nicola and read her expression. If she looked relaxed, there was nothing to worry about. The only action he needed to take was ensuring he did not get in her way.

But if she had a slightly uneasy expression, he would usually stand by her side to protect her if all else failed—and to take her hand and run.

At a reasonable distance lower than Sieghart's natural eye line, he saw

Nicola's black hair, which made him think of the night, softly swaying in the breeze. Her deep ocean blue eyes focused on the abomination. Yet Sieghart sensed no fear or agitation, which made the tension leave his body, beginning at the extremities.

Ah, we should be fine.

Sieghart could not keep count of how many times he had seen those serene eyes and that dignified stance and fallen in love with her all over again. He quietly took the hands of Alois and Emma, then withdrew behind Nicola. Though she was small, the view of Nicola from behind was entirely reassuring.

◇

Nicola placed her hands on her hips and looked up at the abomination. The hulking mass of flesh with mismatched limbs approached, staggering as it came. Each arm and leg had a mind of its own and, just as a kitchen can have too many cooks, they each flailed independently. Nicola stared at the being with more than a bit of pity in her eyes.

The survivors of Ernst's rampage through the tunnel had apparently sought each other out before amassing to form this monstrosity. Nicola knew it would go a bit far to set Ernst on the spirits again with a cry of, "Go, charge!" She sighed briefly since his efforts had made things easier for her.

With an air of resignation, Nicola took a match out of her bag before throwing what remained—bag and contents together—for Char to catch.

"Let's give them a proper cremation. Everything we should need is in that bag, so I'll leave that to you," said Nicola

"Yeah, yeah," replied Char with a knowing look as he caught Nicola's bag.

Communicating their intentions without needing to talk was an upside of their inseparable bond, which saved a lot of time and effort.

After peeking at the bag's contents, Char widened his eyes and exclaimed, "Wow, you've got all the tools of the trade in here."

"I was worried about this trip from the start, so I came prepared," responded Nicola with a smirk. She had never once taken a trip with Sieghart that didn't go

wrong, so this was unavoidable.

“Now for a container... That will do nicely. Hey, sis, can I borrow that basket for a minute?” said Char, taking the rattan basket that had carried the Stargazy Pie before walking briskly toward the tunnel’s exit, where Ernst was standing. After crouching in front of the exit, he began outlining their battle formation with a piece of chalk he had taken from Nicola’s bag.

While watching Char’s progress out of the corner of her eye, Nicola turned to face Sieghart, Emma, and Alois. Sieghart and Emma, who could not see the finer details of the grotesque abomination, seemed calm. Only Alois stood terrified, as if he were witnessing the end of the world.

With a small sigh of dismay, Nicola called out to Alois. “Please, try not to be so scared.”

She glanced back at the abomination. Even though the hulking mass of flesh continued staggering toward them, its motion was still sluggish. As if sympathizing with the apparition, Nicola half-closed her eyes.

“Your Highness, I believe I once told you that for things we do not fully understand, it is better that they stay that way. A name can serve as the shortest of spells. To assign a name to a being with a vague identity, to define its existence, can grant it a definitive form... This here is the exception.” Her eyes then met those of Alois. “What you see are merely the many people who died here. That is not a monster, nothing of the sort.”

Nicola slowly continued her explanation. She explained ghosts were hazy in form because they had forgotten who they once were. They could not see themselves, nor would anyone ever call them by their names again. Gradually, they would forget their faces and even their names.

“Your Highness, do you think you could remember your own face if you went ten years, or even twenty, without looking in the mirror? Would you remember the shape of your eyes? Or your nose, mouth, or the color or length of your hair? I know I certainly could not. I would lose the ability to define myself.” As she spoke, a troubled smile came over Nicola’s face. “These men are just the same. One day, the line that separated them from everything became so fuzzy that they all got mixed. See, we should feel sorry for them. Not fear them.”

Alois widened his eyes before timidly looking at the abomination. Nicola's expression softened after confirming that some color had returned to his cheeks.

"Everything's okay on my end... Ready when you are," Char called out once he had placed the rattan basket in the center of his chalk formation.

Receiving this signal, Nicola nodded slightly in response. She hurried Sieghart and the others over to one side of the tunnel. Despite its sluggish pace, the abomination could not stop and change its direction, stumbling.

Once it had passed Nicola's group, the hulking mass of flesh realized that it was caught between two potential targets. Its many eyes rolled busily around in their sockets, struggling to decide whom to attack first.

But its arbitrary arrangement of limbs could not agree on a clear objective and became awkwardly stranded between Char and Nicola's group. Nicola lowered her gaze before biting down on the tip of her thumb. She rubbed the bead of blood that welled out of the wound against one side of the match she held, lighting it. As she took a deep breath, the smell of phosphorus tickled her nostrils.

"Thou art an affront to reason, so I bid thee smolder and burn to a cinder. Thou art wicked." After she blew gently on the match, in the blink of an eye, its flame wound itself around the abomination.

The hulking mass of flesh screamed and writhed in an attempt to escape Nicola's flame, but the embers followed its every move. It squirmed and thrashed its arms and legs. As its hulking body tumbled to the ground, it landed in the chalk circle Char had drawn right in front of the rattan basket.

"I bid thee receive this, receive it, and shut it away. Close thy canopy upon it and seal it away," recited Char, following Nicola's sacred words in a voice almost like he was humming to himself.

The blazing abomination let out one final cry of anguish before being sucked into the basket all at once. Finally, the lid of the basket slammed shut.



Afterward, nothing remained. Only a deathly silence that penetrated everything around lingered. Nicola quietly looked back into the tunnel. No haze, shadows, or ghosts that could form another abomination were visible.

“Come on, everyone. Don’t just stare. Let’s go home to the world of the living,” said Char, picking up the basket and walking toward the tunnel’s exit. Once Nicola stepped forward to follow him, Sieghart and the others hurried after her.

◇

Nicola suddenly awoke to the rhythmic clatter of the train’s wheels. After slowly raising her head, she noticed she had been resting on Sieghart’s shoulder as she slumbered. Still not fully roused from her sleep, she looked around the compartment to see that everyone else was waking up. They all stirred, their tired eyes slowly blinking.

Looking out the window, she saw the gaping mouth of the tunnel recede into the distance before her very eyes. The sky was so clear she thought the view was endless, and the sun was still not far from its apex. Most likely, while her group had been sleeping, only an extremely brief period had passed during the train’s passage through the tunnel.

“Looks like... That wasn’t all just a dream,” said Sieghart, furrowing his brow and chuckling as he noticed the fragrance of wisteria and sandalwood that enveloped his body. The others looked at each other with perplexed expressions, all apparently having remembered what had happened in the tunnel.

“I thought I was just having a vivid daydream,” muttered Alois. As Nicola overheard this, she yawned slightly. Not only did a sudden sense of mental fatigue strike her, but her body felt weary as one’s did after waking up. Her eyelids felt especially heavy.

Sieghart combed his fingers through Nicola’s hair and gently stroked her head as if thanking her for her hard work. Nicola could not find the strength to brush his hand away. Instead, she quickly let go of her thoughts altogether.

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 6

Spirit realm

It is not found in the world of the living but is a realm of the departed, belonging to another dimension. That is a spirit realm.

A spirit realm is often a separate space, and we can say that none exists that goes on to infinity. In other words, it has a guaranteed end.

Now then, what is the one thing that defines a space? That would be its “boundary.”

There is a close relationship between the concepts of boundaries and spirit realms. In particular, bridges and tunnels are “things that connect places together.”

Besides these, slopes, mountain passes, crossroads, and riverbanks can all serve as boundaries that divide our world and spirit realms.

The act of “crossing” or “passing through” can be a type of ritual that results in one stepping past those boundaries.

I trust you will not, on any account, cross those boundaries carelessly or merely out of curiosity.

Chapter 3: The Bird Has Left Her Cage

1

“Huh?! You cursed her right back with the *kodoku*?! I mean... You’re lucky to be alive...” exclaimed Char.

“I really am...” responded Nicola. The wind picked up the hem of her uniform dress, which she wore instead of mourning clothes. Olivia’s grave stood on a small hill inside the vast estate surrounding Lüneburg Manor.

The headstone of chalk limestone had Olivia’s full name and the year of her death engraved on it. Nicola knelt in front of the grave and gently set down the white lilies she had carried. She then put her hands together and quietly closed her eyes.

Fortunately, only Char was there beside her. The one who rested here, Olivia, was once herself a Japanese woman. Mourning her in the Japanese way seemed most appropriate.

Nicola’s silent prayer did not last for long. She stood up and looked down at the foot of the hill where Sieghart and the others were waiting for her. Believing she must have had plenty to discuss with Olivia, they had descended the hill ahead of her. While quietly thanking them for their consideration, Nicola averted her eyes.

“I was prepared for both of us to die. I didn’t mean to survive. But they all worked hard to see that I did, and that’s why I’m alive now. They even said that we could shoulder the burden of my sin together,” Nicola muttered , almost as if she were talking to herself. A troubled smile spread across her face.

What if they had instead said, “It wasn’t your fault” or “You didn’t do anything wrong”? In that case, Nicola was sure that she would have crumbled beneath her own sense of guilt. What if her friends had said something like, “Don’t worry about it,” meaning to be kind, to comfort her? She was sure that her survivor’s guilt would have left her unable to breathe.

After all, it's not as if I can just wipe away my guilt. Unless the life that was lost somehow returns. "Really, what an eccentric bunch of guys! I give up." Not only did they not seek to negate the feelings that she could not erase, they offered to share the load with her. Their kindness delighted part of her, while another part felt apologetic. Even so, she could not deny that she had depended on that kindness, which did not feel great.

One of her friends was a veritable lightning rod for the non-human, another a fool who willingly stuck his nose into serious trouble, and another was hardheaded, stubborn even. Still, they were such decent, open-hearted people that she could hardly believe they were going through life for the first time. Occasionally, they seemed so wise and grown up that Nicola felt quite disappointed in herself.

Nicola traced the words engraved on Olivia's gravestone with her finger one last time.

"So all four of us will shoulder what happened to her together... Pretty words, I suppose," said Nicola with a self-deprecating smile.

Char lightly shrugged his shoulders. Then, with a mischievous smile, he said, "Isn't that fine? After all, even if they're just words, they are pretty."

"I guess you're right... That's fine," Nicola murmured those last words. Together with the fallen leaves around them, the wind carried away her words.

Still staring at the gravestone, Nicola stood there silently for a while. As if supporting Nicola, Char stood beside her with his mouth shut. Besides the occasional leaves rustling in the trees, all was silent around them.

Eventually, Char let out a small sigh. Then, in a carefree tone, he said, "Ah... All that said, is this world really the setting for an otome game? This whole time, I kinda thought I was in another world extremely close to Europe."

"I know what you mean," Nicola quietly agreed. She could remember having felt the same way. From the moment she was first reborn, she always felt something was wrong in this world. But this feeling was never more pronounced than simple observations like, "I don't know the names of any of these countries" or "The plumbing works surprisingly well for a civilization resembling that of the eighteenth or nineteenth century."

Outside of these examples, the surrounding culture, the climate, and the etiquette people displayed were all exactly that of Europe. There was only the faintest trace of any of the behaviors or sensibilities that were unique to Japan. So at first, Nicola had also thought she was merely in “another world that was extremely close to Europe.”

As she learned about the Royal Academy, the more she discovered, the more that unease reasserted itself. There were uniform designs that did not fit the period, and it was a coeducational institution. Moreover, the system of electing a student council was like what she remembered from school in Japan. When she finally learned that she was in a work of Japanese fiction—the setting of an otome game—all of these elements finally had an explanation.

“This is just speculation, but...” Nicola muttered in a low voice, almost as if talking to herself. She looked down at the grave of the one who had wished for reincarnation in the world of an otome game in the first place. Char said nothing, only glancing at Nicola to encourage her to continue.

It was only a vague bit of speculation that suddenly occurred to Nicola one day. This was her first time trying to put it into words and communicate it to someone. She opened her mouth slowly as if still searching for the right words.

“I think that the game by itself didn’t contain enough information to construct an entire world. In fact, it was overwhelmingly lacking in details. So to make up for that, some information got mixed in from the real world Europe, from a period that matched the game’s setting...”

Probably, with only the information that the player could observe through the protagonist’s eyes, the demon could not construct this world. A world that stopped at arbitrary points, with no continuity found past the game’s script, would have been nothing more than a pocket dimension. It could hardly be called another world.

But the wish Olivia made to the demon was to inhabit the “world” of the game. Having accepted her wish and sacrifice as compensation, he needed to construct that world, even if that meant finding some pieces elsewhere for elements missing in the game.

And so, might it not be the case that, to make the game’s setting fit better

once embedded into a European world of a suitable period, he fiddled with the details to some extent? This was the vague conclusion that Nicola had arrived at.

“Well, it’s not as if there’s any way to find out for sure,” said Nicola with a bitter smile, then let out a small sigh. Although, just shaping her thoughts into words made her feel like she had put them in a better order.

In the end, this world had come to be, and it was now her reality.

Whether her fellow inhabitants were characters from a game, they died when their hearts stopped beating. And once dead, they would not come back to life. Should one have unfinished business, one might become a ghost. Some things were universal—whether in Japan, Europe, or with the setting of a game mixed into one’s world, some things would never change.

“’K then, that all seems to make sense to me, so I guess I’ll go with that explanation too,” said Char. He had casually given up on thinking about the matter. His unflinching optimism and the swiftness with which he switched his attitude amazed Nicola, and she felt the need to raise a doubt that had suddenly occurred to her.

“Come to think of it, Olivia killed me as part of her sacrifice, but just how did you end up like this...?” Nicola had meant to ask this casually, but Char was briefly shocked. Then he twitched his eyebrows at her and smiled.

Char scratched his face as he wore a sheepish expression and said, “Oh, me? Ah, so you’d really like to know...”

“Yeah. I mean, who wouldn’t?”

“Ah... So... Yeah. Well, the truth is, I got killed right after you in much the same way.”

“Excuse me?” Nicola’s eyes widened.

With a bitter smile, her once junior apprentice continued, “Yep. I got a message from your smartphone that said, ‘I’ll split the reward for this assignment with you, so come and help me.’ When I went, I found you already dead. I was understandably reeling from that shock, but someone whacked me from behind.”

“What can I say... Yeah, sorry.” Thinking back, Nicola had no memory of sending such a message. Once Rikka was dead, Olivia had most likely used her fingerprint to unlock the smartphone and set that trap.

“Nah, I can’t get angry at you. You don’t deserve the blame, so don’t feel the need to apologize. When I looked back on what happened, I realized your message was full of emojis. I should have suspected something. I mean, there’s no way you’d ever use emojis—or kaomoji—when messaging me.”

“No, I suppose that’s true. If you received those messages, you should have suspected something.”

“I know, right?”

Provoked by Char’s cackling, Nicola could not help but smile slightly. Eventually, Char managed to suppress his smile. After putting on some semblance of a serious expression, he spoke again.

“What can I say? Though I feel kinda sorry for this girl, she reaped what she sowed,” said Char with an air of indifference, looking down at Olivia’s grave. There was no inflection in his tone or a hint of the passion or fury one might expect. “Y’know, I am annoyed that she selfishly made me part of her contract with a demon, a damn reckless act. Yet she lost her life after dancing to the demon’s tune. I think that’s retribution enough, and I don’t need to say any more about it.” With that said, Char turned to Nicola and shrugged slightly. His eyes seemed to ask Nicola, “How about you?”

Nicola chuckled wryly for a moment. Instead of answering Char, she closed her eyes.

Oliva wished for a new world, and the demon made that a reality. She truly desired to replace the game’s protagonist and assume the enviable position of the childhood friend of the character she wished to romance. Ironically, that privilege was not hers when she was reborn.

From start to finish, Olivia had been dancing on the demon’s palm and lost her life. Nicola had to agree that she had paid a fair price. Thinking of her miserable end, she could no longer bear a grudge against Olivia—she even pitied her.

“That being said... Me, as the protagonist of an otome game? Seriously, for demons, every little thing they do is cruel, huh?” With his hands clasped behind his head, Char continued, grumbling frivolously, “Man, I wouldn’t have had any complaints if he’d made me the protagonist of a men’s dating sim.”

Nicola sighed sadly, turning to her junior apprentice with a look of exasperation. “It’s because of your dirty mind that the demon messed with you.”

To a demon, a human’s displeasure was the ultimate delight. When she considered the demon’s principles, she could almost acknowledge that he had cast this drama well.

Char responded to Nicola’s admonishments with a grin and a shrug, then said, “Nah, well, whatever. I’ve got a decent family and a respectable school life. For a second shot at life, I could do a lot worse, and it’s been pretty fun. You feel the same, don’t you?”

This sudden question caused Nicola to blink at Char in shock. As she looked up and away from him, the rest of their group, waiting for them at the foot of the hill, caught her eye. Seeing those who had wished so strongly for her to live made her pause and smile.

“Yeah... I guess.”

“Right?” said Char with a carefree smile. He suddenly held out his right hand. With a smile of her own, Nicola grabbed it. Though the palm of her fellow apprentice was soft and felt entirely different from the way it once had, it was still somehow nostalgic.

“Right then. Once again, I’m counting on you, Char.”

“Yep. Counting on you, Nicola.”

They both turned around and slowly walked away from the grave. Looking up, Nicola could see stars beginning to twinkle faintly in the darkening sky of dusk. The evening autumn breeze was cold as it brushed her cheek.

A curious mixture of orange and ultramarine colored the sky behind the two exorcists as they briskly descended the hill.

2

The travelers arrived at Lüneburg Manor, where Olivia was born, and were led into the opulent entrance hall. Once there, the lord of the manor, Olivia's father, greeted them.

"My, oh my. To think a young lady at school, a first-year student at that, would make such a long journey to visit my daughter's grave. I can't express how happy this makes me." Even when speaking to Nicola—who was still only the daughter of a viscount—Marquess Lüneburg conducted himself with the utmost courtesy. When he sought to shake Nicola's hand, a gentle smile on his face, she felt obliged to comply.

Though a middle-aged man, Marquess Lüneburg could still boast a refined, youthful appearance. His sharply sculpted features and almond-shaped eyes were certainly dignified but offset by his unwavering, peaceful smile. Nicola's overall impression was that he must be intelligent, and she could imagine that he must have been a very handsome young man. From how he spoke to Alois and Sieghart—whom he had known for many years—with an air of familiarity, he appeared to have a friendly personality.

The marquess escorted Nicola's party, who found themselves in a spacious drawing room. At the suggestion of the marquess, Nicola sat down on one of several sofas in the room. Char sat next to her, and Sieghart sat on the opposite sofa, on the other side of a table. Alois sat in an armchair a short distance away from the others.

"Your Highness, I seem to remember that you have always liked that armchair," said the marquess, half closing his eyes with nostalgia.

"I guess so. It was the pattern I liked," Alois responded with a smile. He had apparently known the marquess ever since he was a small boy. Emma, his handmaiden, and Ernst, his knight and bodyguard, were not seated, as they had withdrawn to a nearby wall.

After looking around the spacious drawing room, Marquess Lüneburg smiled and said, "I must apologize for not showing you greater hospitality. I have prepared rooms for you, as well as a modest supper. Please, make yourselves at

home.”

At this display of courtesy from a high-ranking noble, Nicola and Char stood up quickly and bowed their heads. Alois and Sieghart, clearly used to this treatment, gracefully rose from their chairs and thanked the marquess.

◇

The supper served by the marquess turned out to be much too grand to be called “modest.” After everyone ate, they returned to the drawing room and assumed their prior sitting or standing positions.

When Marquess Lüneburg indicated he would like to know more about his daughter Olivia’s time at the academy, Alois and Sieghart primarily answered him, with Nicola chiming in now and then.

As they told him stories about their time with Olivia, the marquess listened intently, his expressions shifting between pride and reminiscence. It was the face of a father who loved his daughter and was precious to him.

“My daughter... Was never any trouble at all,” recounted Marquess Lüneburg, half closing his eyes.

Olivia, who had hardly been blessed in her previous life, seemed to have experienced being loved by a parent in this one. Nicola felt slightly relieved that misfortune had not entirely characterized her life.

“My daughter was very bright ever since she was little, and always did as told. One day, I found she understood some things that I had never told her. Even though she was my daughter, her intelligence left me speechless more than a few times.”

After quietly rising to his feet, Marquess Lüneburg walked over to the wall without hurry before looking up at a portrait of Olivia that hung upon it.

“The night Your Highness betrothed her, I felt certain she would make a fine queen... I often dreamed of how she would look in her bridal gown.” As his voice grew steadily more emotional, there was a tinge of sadness there that he could not conceal. For that very reason, it was easy for Nicola to anticipate what words would follow, and her face stiffened.

Char, sitting next to Nicola, expected the same thing and muttered, “Urgh, I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

But no mere lesser noblewoman could even think of interrupting this brokenhearted marquess. The words that Nicola most dreaded slowly emerged from Marquess Lüneburg’s lips.

“Would you permit me to commission a new painting of my daughter, Your Highness? One depicting the two of you wed that I might see her in that proudest of moments?”

Ah, so that’s really where things are headed, thought Nicola, unconsciously holding her head in her hands. Taking advantage that the marquess was still looking up at the portrait, Char brazenly placed one of his hands on his forehead and gazed up at the ceiling.

“Whoa, here we go. *Mukasari ema*, the marriage votive... It’s the same pattern. The father’s pure love for his daughter makes it so problematic...” whispered Char. Nicola could only scowl and subtly nod in agreement.

The wish the marquess expressed was most proper for a father who missed his child. But it was the one wish they absolutely could not grant. It touched on a taboo that must not, under any circumstances, be broken.

But they were in no position to respond to Marquess Lüneburg’s request. Instead, they had to prompt Alois to reject it.

With a series of hand gestures, Nicola sent the messages “No!” and “Don’t” in Alois’s direction. Unfortunately, he did not notice this because he had chosen to sit in a chair away from the others. He was in a poor position for nonverbal communication.

Sieghart could not bear to watch this for a moment longer. With a slight, wry smile, he rose from his seat.

Marquess Lüneburg still gazed up at his daughter’s portrait. After glancing in his direction to confirm this, Sieghart coolly strode over to Alois and whispered in his ear.

“Say no.” Sieghart then spoke to the marquess, excusing himself. “I beg your pardon. May I use the lavatory?” He then exited the drawing room.

Char's eyes widened as he was impressed with how cleverly Sieghart had covered for them.

Alois, in a state of confusion, watched Sieghart leave the room before turning to Nicola as if seeking confirmation. As soon as she nodded slightly in response, his puzzled expression faded almost immediately.

When Alois turned back to the marquess, he did so with an apologetic expression on his face, then said, "Erm, let me see... A painting, you say? Yes, well... Though I would very much like to give you my permission, I must consider my position as a public figure. So it might be difficult."

As the marquess turned back from the portrait, he blinked as if suddenly returning to his senses. After coughing awkwardly, he corrected his posture.

"Goodness me, of course, you are right. Considering Your Highness's position, that is only natural. Forgive me for speaking out of turn." As if embarrassed by a slip of the tongue, the marquess smirked before lightly bowing his head and apologizing. Nicola breathed a small sigh of relief as Alois had turned down the request amicably.

The air in the room had settled when Alois returned to the drawing room. After a pleasant chat continued between the group and Marquess Lüneburg, Alois checked the time and rose from his seat. Sieghart followed suit, and the evening's festivities were at an end.

The group left the drawing room after Marquess Lüneburg stood up and wished them well. Alois took the lead, as if to say that, although this was not his house, he knew it very well. Sieghart followed him with Nicola, Char, Emma, and Ernst in that order. But the moment they had all started walking, Alois suddenly stopped.

Alois locked eyes with Nicola, giving her a puzzled look.

"That's right. Just for future reference, may I ask why I couldn't allow him to have that picture painted?" There was a momentary glimpse of Alois's natural curiosity in his words.

Nicola sighed sadly, then considered Alois should make these questions rather

than carry on sticking his neck out in ignorance. With disinterest, Nicola kicked off her explanation.

“In a certain region, there was once a culture that painted portraits of those who died unmarried as part of a married couple for memorial services. It was what some might call a posthumous or ghost marriage.”

Mukasari ema was a custom that survived in the Tōhoku region of Japan. Alois resumed walking once Nicola began and calmly continued her explanation.

“As a method of mourning, it was simple. A painting of the deceased to their imaginary partner at a wedding came to be. The depiction of their wedding, symbolic of “the happiest moment in one’s life,” was what those who survived the deceased wished for them. That was not a bad thing, but there was just a caveat. A rule that one must never break.” For a moment, Nicola paused. “That rule was that one must never depict a living person in such a portrait. The partner of the deceased must always be an imaginary person.”

Behind Nicola, Char laughed grimly. “Yeah, that’s right! If you paint someone real and still alive, they’ll be dragged away into the world of the dead. Just breaking one little taboo, you can easily end up cursing someone. A real bother.”

“Eh?! I’d die ?!” cried Alois, going around in shock. Char just continued cackling. With his face pale, Alois turned to face Sieghart. His movement was so rigid—like a tin soldier whose owner had forgotten to oil its joints—that one could almost hear him creaking.

“Sieg... Don’t tell me you knew this whole time?”

“Well... I guess I did. After all, they’ve nearly painted me many times...” With a faraway look in his eye, Sieghart carefully avoided Alois’s gaze.

For her part, Nicola had a look on her face like they had forced her to take some especially bitter medicine, which had taken a long time to swallow. Frowning deeply, she could not help but groan.

One father had said that his daughter, who departed much too soon, had fallen in love with Sieghart at first sight. Another had said that he wished his daughter could be with such a peerless beauty as Sieghart, even if only inside a

painting. The star of Sieghart's beauty was so high in the sky that "fabulous" did not adequately describe him. From time to time, he did receive such requests.

Seriously, give me a break, thought Nicola. The light had gone out of her eyes, but her pinching the bridge of her nose hid them.

"Though it is dangerous, I never want to be painted in a wedding to anyone besides Nicola, so I've always refused, but, well... The thing is that sometimes people paint me anyway, which is a problem..." said Sieghart, sighing and covering his face with one hand.

Indeed. Thanks to the well-meaning but reckless actions of the bereaved, her childhood friend's life became endangered now and then. Nicola could never let her guard down.

"Whoa..." Alois, Char, and Emma all exclaimed in perfect unison. They were all taken aback.

As for Ernst, his reaction came out of left field. "Painting a man without his permission? How outrageous!" But no one was listening.

Nicola muttered, "So, do you understand how hard I've had to work every day?" Her eyes were those of Sisyphus after pushing his boulder up the hill, only to see it roll back down for the thousandth time.

"Yeah... I think both of you've had it tough," said Char.

"Look, we're outside the rooms prepared for each of us. We have an early start tomorrow, so shall we hurry up and go to bed? Yeah," said Alois. He and Char started pushing Nicola from behind to hurry her into her room.

"Come now, your room is this way, Nicola!"

Pulled this way and that way, before she knew it, Nicola found herself in her room with the door swinging shut behind her. She did not care for this kind of treatment, which put her in mind of people trying to appease a vengeful god. But there was no one around to hear her complaints since each member of their party had their own room.

Nicola plopped down on the edge of her bed, which was a bit larger than the one she had in her dormitory at school.

As she gazed at the intricate patterns painted on the ceiling, she muttered, “Hold on, is this really still the first day of the trip? You’re kidding...”

3

The group's departure the following morning was reasonably early. Their next stop was the March of Ludendorff, where Elfriede—the third candidate for Alois's next fiancée—was said to be recovering from her illness. Though it was a neighboring territory, the group learned it would take roughly two hours to reach it by horse-drawn carriage.

After getting dressed and having breakfast, they all eagerly checked their luggage. When everyone finally assembled in the entrance hall, they found Marquess Lüneburg waiting. It appeared he wished to bid them farewell.

The marquess told the group that the carriage and its driver were ready for them to board just outside the gate. He had really made every effort to assist them. Each member of Nicola's party gave their thanks and farewells before leaving the manor and boarding the carriage.

Before their carriage set off, Marquess Lüneburg exchanged a few words with Alois and handed him something. Alois looked slightly startled, blinking rapidly, but soon accepted it with a smile and stepped into the carriage. Once everyone was inside the carriage, they closed the door and began moving.

All eyes inside the shaky carriage were focused on the item in Alois's hands. At first glance, this was nothing more than a folded piece of paper. The paper itself must have been thin because it was just possible to make out some lettering inside the parcel. But it was only faintly visible, not clear enough to make out what it had written on it.

With everyone's gaze upon him, Alois said, "Oh, this?" He chuckled wryly. "The marquess asked me to take this with me, saying, 'If you're going to the March of Ludendorff, you simply must.' We happen to be going there just in time for the harvest festival, so he hopes we could send this up on his behalf."

One could separate the reaction of the five passengers into two categories. Some understood and said, "Ah, I see," and the rest looked puzzled. Emma, Ernst, and Sieghart belonged to the former group, whereas only Nicola and Char

displayed the latter reaction. Nicola and Char shared a glance before both tilted their heads in confusion.

Seeing this, Sieghart chuckled before saying, “Have you never heard of the harvest festival they have in the Ludendorff region?”

Even Nicola had at least heard of the festival. At these words from Sieghart, Char nodded along with Nicola. Those in the kingdom’s center recognized it as a prominent festival.

Sieghart must have expected this reaction since he showed little surprise before he continued.

“Well then, have you ever heard it referred to by its other name—Lanterne Gala?”

This time, Nicola and Char shook their heads. Lanterne Gala had a literal translation of “Lantern Fair.” But Nicola did not understand how this related to the harvest festival and shared another confused look with Char.

Sieghart smiled, apparently having guessed the question on their minds and launched into an explanation.

“On the night of the harvest festival, the townsfolk traditionally observe lanterns sent into the air with the names of deceased family members written on them.”

According to Sieghart, a great famine had struck the region in the distant past, resulting in many people dying within a year. Since then, prayers for the deceased have been accompanied by prayers for a bountiful harvest. The people also began launching lanterns on the night of the harvest festival.

I see, thought Nicola, interpreting Sieghart’s explanation to fit her experience. *It’s a bit like Obon and a bit like Halloween. That sort of event*. Sieghart’s story sounded quite commonplace as the origin of a tradition, so Nicola felt that this all made sense.

“So you’re saying that thing that looks like a folded-up piece of paper is actually a lantern?” asked Char, peering down at the parcel in Alois’s hands.

“That’s right,” said Alois while nodding. “If you unfold it and stand it up, you

have a lantern.”

“The sky is so pretty on the night of the harvest festival...” murmured Emma. “Isn’t it, Ern?”

“Well... I guess so. Certainly, it’s not a sight you’d forget,” replied Ernst, reluctantly agreeing with Emma. Both had apparently seen the launching of the lanterns in the past. Alois, too, half-closed his eyes as if fondly reminiscing that night.

“Ern and Emma have been by my side for as long as I can remember, so we were together wherever we went. While I got to know Miss Olivia, my betrothed, I went to see the Lanterne Gala. Just once, though.” A gentle smile crept across Alois’s face as he recalled that night. “It’s truly a lovely festival, so look forward to it.” He then cheekily winked at the others.

◇

Approximately two hours had passed since they departed from Lüneburg Manor. The carriage had finally arrived at their destination, the March of Ludendorff.

“Wow!” Sighs of wonder escaped the mouths of Nicola and Char as they pressed their noses against the carriage’s mouth.

The town, built in a semicircle that partially surrounded an enormous lake, appeared to have flourished with rows of brick buildings and wooden-framed houses. Street stalls and tents were grouped closely by the lakeshore, with many people crowded around them.

Pastoral melodies played from all corners, and the colorful drapes hanging throughout the town almost sparkled as they bathed in the autumn sun. As far as Nicola was concerned, this scene was fantastic enough, even without sending the lanterns out.

Sieghart snickered when he saw Nicola glued to the carriage window amid this scenery.

“I know how you feel, but we have to go to Ludendorff Manor first,” he said.

“Now that you mention it, we do,” said Nicola, hurriedly correcting her

posture.

At long last, the carriage arrived at a plaza in the center of the town. After stepping out of the carriage into the plaza, where there was a large fountain, they spotted a magnificent, ornate metal gate and a vast garden. Behind the garden stood a stately home that was Ludendorff Manor. An old woman with a hunched back, dressed in what was presumably the uniform of the servants who worked there, stood in front of the gate. The old woman spied the travelers who stepped out of their carriage.

“We bid you welcome. My lord has entrusted me with the task of showing you his manor,” said the woman, then bowed her head with great reverence.

The party followed her through the gate and into Marquess Ludendorff’s estate.

Ludendorff Manor stood on a vast plot of land. In particular, the garden was extraordinary in scale and practically the size of a botanical garden. It even contained a range of flowers blooming profusely.

Nicola’s eyes widened, looking left and right as she walked. She saw anemones, delphiniums, and lilacs in one of the garden’s sections.. In another corner, she noticed pink and blue hydrangeas planted together.

Char tugged insistently on the hem of Nicola’s traveling clothes, then pointed at the hydrangeas. He brought his face closer to Nicola’s and spoke to her with a curious tone.

“I dunno what the other flowers are, but even I know those are hydrangeas. I often saw them back in Japan, but this might be my first time seeing them in this world.”

After blinking briefly, Nicola muttered, “Yeah,” as if taking Char’s point. She approached the blue hydrangeas and prodded the petals on one flower with her finger.

“You see, hydrangeas turn blue if the soil is acidic and if it’s alkaline, they turn pink. It’s a flower that can bloom in either type of soil. The typical soil in Europe is alkaline, whereas the typical soil in Japan is acidic. I think we don’t tend to see

Japanese flowers here because the makeup of the soil is different."

Rainfall was significantly less in Japan, and the land had a lot of volcanic ash. Because of this, the quality of its soil differed from that of Europe. Once Nicola had explained this to her junior apprentice, he had very little to say in response.

"Uh-huh..." Char replied, dimwitted.

Sieghart, who had come up beside the unknowing Nicola, leaned down to peer closely at her.

"In any case," said Sieghart, "it's a peculiar garden, isn't it?"

"I suppose so," replied Nicola. This garden certainly did merit the description "peculiar." Nicola nodded in agreement and looked away from the hydrangeas to observe the rest of the garden.

Flowers of various colors were in full bloom around the garden: red, white, pale pink, light blue, pale purple, and more. It was indisputably a beautiful garden, but something was off about it as well.

"Peculiar, you say...?" asked Ernst with suspicion.

Sieghart turned around with a smirk and said, "Yeah. Anemones, delphiniums, and lilacs are all spring flowers. Besides that, hydrangeas aren't autumn flowers, so I couldn't help but find it peculiar."

At this, Ernst exclaimed with shining eyes, "Your Grace is even well-versed in botany!"

That was when Sieghart smiled proudly before sneaking a glance at Nicola."That's because you like flowers, Nicola, though you try to hide it. Anything you liked, I hoped to come to like myself."

As Sieghart turned to look at Nicola, his eyes were as sweet as candied violets. Nicola was sure she would get heartburn if she met his gaze directly, so she scowled and averted her eyes. The lukewarm looks from Alois and Emma filled her with distinct discomfort.

Nicola coughed and addressed the old woman, "Excuse me! Can you tell me why only spring flowers bloom in this garden?"

The old woman slowly looked over her shoulder, eventually saying, "Very

observant.” She smiled. “There are a lot of spring blossoms because the gardener attempted to ensure that they bloom more than once in their season. The young lady of the house is fond of spring flowers.” With her eyes half-closed, the old woman looked up, her eyes fixed on a window of the mansion’s second floor. Unfortunately, the curtains were closed, so there was no telling what was happening inside.

So the sickly daughter of the marquess must be in that room, thought Nicola.

“What kind of girl is Miss Elfriede?” asked Alois.

The old woman closed her eyes as if recalling fond memories, then said, “She was once quite the tomboy and often ran around this garden. Whenever the gardener or I took our eyes off her ladyship, she would slip out of these grounds altogether. She often went to play in the town. Yes, she used to be quite the handful.”

With these memories in her mind, the old woman smiled and looked up at the window once more.

It sounded like Elfriede had once been an active young lady who developed a grave illness despite her tomboy vigor. The old woman cast her eyes down and exhaled slowly.

With a solemn air descending upon the garden, Sieghart sought to change the subject.

“It is a splendid garden, but does the gardener really tend to it all by himself?”

For a moment, the old woman hesitated but shook her head.

A live-in gardener had tended to the garden but became distraught and could not continue working when his only son died a week ago.. For that reason, the other servants started taking turns managing the garden.

“That gardener’s son... Was it an accident...?”

“No, no. The child was still of tender age, began coughing up blood one day, suffering... They told me the doctor said it was a rare disease whose cause was unknown. Since then, several of our young maids, one after the other, also claimed to be unwell. Only this frail old housemaid you see before you is left...”

The old woman pointed sharply at a flowerbed where blue hydrangeas bloomed.

She continued, “Ah, come to think of it... These hydrangeas changed their color at about the same time that the young boy died. He was a child who always followed his father around, watching how he worked... Could they have changed their color to cheer the father up?”

The travelers looked at one another and meekly kept their mouths shut. But the old woman smiled and shook her head as if she had read their expressions.

“We old-timers must not dampen the mood of youngsters. Please, I hope you can forget what I said. Now then, allow me to show you to the mansion,” said the old woman, slowly turning around. The party of travelers silently followed her.

4

Under the old woman’s guidance, Nicola’s group arrived at a drawing room. However, a man—the house steward—came to apologize, telling them they would have to wait there for some time.

It so happened that the lord of the manor, Marquess Ludendorff, was presently being petitioned by the people who lived in his territory and would not be at liberty to receive Nicola’s group for a while. Therefore, the marquess wanted them to wait in the room.

Even though the house steward apologized, his expression did not change one iota. The steward had neatly combed-back hair—with a few hints of gray hair visible here and there—and a cold, hard gleam in his eyes. These features and his rigid expression made Nicola think of a length of wire.

“I know this region is in the middle of a big festival. I should say sorry for visiting at such a busy time. We don’t mind,” responded Alois. When he did so, the middle-aged man abruptly changed his attitude. He had bowed his head apologetically and raised it all too easily. Then, still expressionless, he thanked the prince and swiftly exited the room.

Once she had prepared some tea for the guests, the old woman retired from

the room. Only the traveling party of six remained in the drawing room.

“Now then, we’ll have accomplished the official objective of our trip once we’ve met with Miss Elfriede. And we’ll be able to spend the rest of our time enjoying the festival... However, Miss Nicola, the truth is that I have one favor to ask of you...” Alois said this last part in a low voice.

Nicola had long since been conditioned to respond to any request from Alois with a withering look, as if regarding a hairy caterpillar.

Receiving Nicola’s glare, Alois furrowed his brow but still chuckled slightly.

“Elfriede von Ludendorff... The daughter of the marquess is said to be sickly and has not shown herself to society for some time. She is seventeen years old. Does she genuinely exist? With your abilities, I thought you might find out.”

Nicola frowned and heard Sieghart, sitting next to her, quietly gasp.

“Do you mean to say that the palace doubts whether she’s alive?” Sieghart murmured.

With a troubled expression on his face, Alois nodded and replied, “Yep, that’s right. I did meet Miss Elfriede about ten years ago...but ever since, no one has seen her.” He directed his attention toward Nicola with a chuckle. “Of course, I have no intention of forcing you. This is neither a request nor a command. I don’t mind if you refuse.”

Nicola stopped herself from tutting in annoyance but let out a deep, deep sigh.

“So it will satisfy you if I confirm she exists, right?” This trip only came about because Nicola wished to visit Olivia’s grave. That being the case, she felt she ought to cooperate with Alois’s wishes to some extent. Hearing Nicola’s acceptance—reluctant though it might be—Alois blinked in surprise at first, then a smile broke across his face.

Now that Nicola had decided, she would need someone to stand in for her while the others waited. Some servants might return to the drawing room, or Marquess Ludendorff might greet them, only to find one of his guests missing. This would be terrible. Nicola fished around in her bag, stuffed with the tools of

her trade as an exorcist, and took out a person-shaped piece of paper—a *shikigami*. She then roughly shoved this into her junior apprentice's hands.

"Well, I must be off, so I'll leave the rest to you, Charaemon," said Nicola.

"Who are you calling a blue raccoon?" asked Char.

"Sorry, he was actually a cat."

When Char reluctantly accepted the shikigami, he appeared willing to assist Nicola.

After that, Nicola opened her bag again and softly said, "Gemini, come on out. Come with me."

A small black blob immediately leaped out of Nicola's bag. *Boing!* It happily bounced up and touched down on Nicola's shoulder. After bouncing a couple more times, it moved to the top of Nicola's head and rested there.

Emma and Char, seeing this for the first time, opened their eyes wide and focused on the blob on Nicola's head.

"Wow, the squishy way it bounces around is so cute!" shrieked Emma.

"Eh, the heck is that?" asked Char.

Gemini shrank and expanded as it moved atop Nicola's head as if showing off when he saw those two fascinated by its appearance. As it did so, Emma and Char moved up and down and side to side, following Gemini's motion. Nicola found this slightly amusing.

"This is Gemini, a doppelgänger, and I've made it work for me," said Nicola.

"Eh? Then there's no need for me to activate your shikigami?!" cried Char, then pouted to express his discontent.

But Nicola ignored this, placing a spell of concealment on herself and vanishing before the argument went any further. She knew from experience that her junior apprentice would do as told, however reluctantly.

"Ah, fine! Got it, got it. If that's what you want, I'll do it, all right?!" grumbled Char, snapping his fingers with an air of desperation. This prompted Nicola's shikigami to stand up and twirl on the spot. A moment later, another Nicola

appeared to be standing there.

Having confirmed this, the real Nicola quietly laughed before taking Gemini and leaving the drawing room.

◇

“Now then, let’s get going, Gemini.” After sliding down from Nicola’s head, her familiar bounced on her shoulder. Nicola walked through the corridor while being tickled by this motion.

Though the residences of noblemen varied in scale, their construction always followed a similar pattern. The first floor was for socializing and receiving guests, whereas the second floor was private. Miss Elfriede’s bedroom had to be somewhere on the second floor.

A festival was in progress and involved everyone in the region, so the marquess was probably really busy. There was in fact a long line of people from his realm in the entrance hall, and every servant Nicola passed in the corridors was in a terrible hurry.

No matter how many people Nicola passed, not one of them glanced at her suspiciously. Her spell of concealment seemed to work perfectly.

“Still... What the old woman told us earlier was probably true,” Nicola murmured as she glanced at the servants who passed her in the corridor. She thought about what the old woman had said about the young maids in the house complaining of illness and giving up their jobs.

As Nicola looked around at the servants with this in mind, the imbalance was plain to see. Though she could see young men among the servants, there were absolutely no young women. She saw female servants here and there, but they all looked over fifty years of age.

The death of the gardener’s son had been extreme too. Perhaps it was a contagious disease that only women and children contracted. Though she was a skilled exorcist, she lacked knowledge of diseases.

With these thoughts still on her mind, Nicola began to ascend the stairs to the second floor and suddenly stopped. She had spied a portrait of a young girl with blonde hair. It was reasonable to assume that this was a painting of someone

who lived in the manor. As Nicola came closer, she saw Elfriede's name written below the picture frame, undoubtedly showing this was the young lady of the house.

Yet the girl in the portrait looked around ten years of age. Nicola silently shared a look with Gemini.

Quite some time must have passed since Elfriede sat for this portrait. Either her present illness was so severe that she could not sit for a new one, or else... This portrait could only mean one of two things. Which was it?

Eventually, Nicola came to a stop in front of a certain room on the second floor. It was the room she had seen the old woman look up at from the garden.

A small brass knocker was attached to the door, which Nicola gently tapped against the door twice. She was still invisible and would be lucky if Elfriede opened the door to provide proof of life. But the door did not open, and there was no answer. Nicola let out a small, disappointed sigh before gently touching the doorknob and noticing the unlocked door.

Nicola gingerly pushed the door open to find a room decorated in an almost offensively girly style. By the window, curtains with a pale pink lace fluttered. The bed, with linen abundantly decorated with the same lace, did not have a lump underneath the covers. Moreover, the room's occupant was not present.

To make sure, Nicola looked around but found no sign of anyone inside. Teddy bears and other stuffed toys a little girl might like were there, but they hung their heads in silence.

After hesitating for a moment, Nicola opened the closet. The dresses hanging inside were all of a length that would fit a girl of around ten. Nicola silently cast her eyes downward.

Nicola shut the door to the closet and turned around, ready to leave, when she heard a voice.

"Ah! Milady?!" With a slow, tottering gait, the old woman who had guided Nicola's party burst into the room. Nicola had left the door open, and the housemaid must have noticed and come to investigate.

The old woman glanced around the room, expecting to find someone. Guilt

welled inside Nicola, so she softly whispered to Gemini, who sat on her shoulder.

“Can you become the girl in the portrait we just saw?”

Gemini rolled along Nicola’s arm before bouncing down onto the floor. It then smoothly assumed the form of a blonde haired little girl, then ran over to the old woman and hugged her tightly.

At that moment, the old woman suddenly sprang to attention and turned around. After opening her eyes wide in shock, she recognized the young girl and reached out to her with trembling hands. She stroked the girl’s face to know it was real. Heavy tears began to roll down the old woman’s cheeks as she called out the girl’s name many times.

“Ah, I am so happy to see that you are safe. Your Nanny has worried about you this whole time. Where have you been all this... No, it does not matter. Now that you have returned to me... Ahh, that is enough. Your Nanny is so...”

The sight of the tearful old woman sent anguish through Nicola’s chest. She bit her lip slightly and shook her head.

“That’s enough, Gemini... That’s enough,” declared Nicola quietly. Gemini immediately abandoned its imitation of the girl. The old woman cast around as she searched for the girl who had just vanished from her arms and sank helplessly to her knees in the middle of the room.

Nicola averted her eyes and quietly slipped out of the room, with the old woman’s sobbing echoing behind her.

5

Meanwhile, the five who remained in the drawing room had nothing but time on their hands.

With a yawn, Char leaned far back on the sofa he sat upon and said, “Man... Nothin’ to do, huh?”

Emma and Sieghart giggled at these thoughtless words Char had uttered. Although Char had killed some time by making his senior apprentice’s shikigami

pull funny faces, he soon grew tired. Sieghart had also smiled in a way that scared him a little. And so Char stared out the window, with nothing better to do until he noticed something strange.

A child suddenly entered his field of vision. Char nonchalantly scanned the child and immediately noticed they had commoner clothing. The child then sprinted into a bush and disappeared.

“Oh?” said Alois, blinking as he looked outside the window with a puzzled expression. “It looks like a child is playing outside. Well, it is festival time, so perhaps the marquess has opened his garden to civilians... Though, that doesn’t seem like something Marquess Ludendorff would do...”

Hearing Alois’s doubtful murmurs, Char said, “Ahh...” He made an ambiguous face. Sieghart and Emma also had expressions that were difficult to read.

Only Ernst said, “A child? I did not notice him at all...” He looked puzzled. The other three all looked at each other.

Char pointed at Alois and frowned. He muttered, “Could it be that it still hasn’t been very long since the prince learned to “see”?”

Sieghart gave Char a wry smile and nodded. “Alois has only seen spirits since about a month ago. Nicola said he can already see as clearly as she can.”

Despite Alois being born with the potential to see spirits, the absurd power of the guardian spirit attached to Ernst hindered this due to almost always being by the prince’s side. As such, he had gone without beings from the other side coming into focus.

If Alois could see spirits as well as Nicola could, then he could have trouble telling the difference between the deceased and the living. Char looked at Alois sympathetically.

Alois still looked positively baffled, so after sighing, Char spoke up.

“Look, Prince... Just a little warning from someone who’s been there before. You might think you’ve seen something like a child running around where he shouldn’t be. If you feel uncertain about what you see, you should avoid being the first person to bring it up, okay? You gotta wait and see if anyone around you sees the same thing.”

It just so happened that most people gathered in the room could see spirits, which was not usually the case.

In response to this warning, Alois blinked at first. He slowly looked outside the window again, then snapped his head back in alarm.

“Eh, wait a minute... Don’t tell me... Was that child I just saw... A ghost?” Alois started to open and close his mouth with no more words coming out.

With bitter smiles, Sieghart and Emma nodded.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it soon enough,” said Sieghart.

“Perhaps that boy was the gardener’s son,” said Emma.

As one might expect, the time that had passed since they could see—or at least sense—spirits around them had made Sieghart and Emma much calmer when encountering them.

Ernst pressed his face against the window and squinted hard, but dejectedly admitted, “I really can’t see a thing.”

As if reflecting Ernst’s mood, the brilliant guardian spirit behind the young knight lost some luminosity. Noticing this, Char could not help but snort with laughter. His senior apprentice had surrounded herself with some quite pleasant companions in this life.

In the meantime, some time had passed, and a restrained knock finally came at the door to the drawing room.

The house steward, who had apologized a little earlier, entered the room. Just as everyone thought that they could finally meet the lord of the manor, the steward announced the marquess would still be busy for a bit longer and apologized once more.

The man’s face remained as motionless as a theater mask, giving the unshakable impression that he harbored nothing but contempt beneath his courtesy. There was no telling how he felt.

“In the meantime, I would gladly escort you to His Lordship’s collection room. Would you be at all interested?”

There was nothing to do as long as they remained in the drawing room, and they could see no particular reason to refuse this offer, so the five travelers went along with it. Char tossed a few paper dolls behind him to tip his senior apprentice off to their whereabouts as he walked through the corridor.

The group arrived at a room near the back of the second floor. But the moment Char stepped inside, he grimaced as a sudden wave of discomfort passed through him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It hurts.”

“No, don’t.”

“Forgive me.”

“I’m scared.”

A swarm of negative emotions swirled around in Char’s head. He required a few seconds to allow these to pass as they ate away at his thoughts. He frowned as he realized such emotions filled the entire room.

“Our present lord or his predecessor collected everything you see here. You are free to handle any of these items if you so wish. Please, enjoy them at your leisure,” said the house steward.

The steward gave a final, courteous bow and withdrew from the collection room. After checking the door was closed, the group of five looked around the room.

If they had to sum it up in one word, that word would be “chaos.” The room had small and large paintings, sculptures, tomes, swords and suits of armor, various furnishings, and some tools whose purpose was a mystery. Things of this nature decorated the room, imparting no sense of unity. Honestly, this made it difficult to credit the marquess with having good taste.

Char knew nothing about what made an antique desirable. But seeing Alois and Sieghart’s doubtful expressions, he could tell that the collection did not fit their sensibilities.

Emma leaned toward a bronze statue about thirty centimeters in height until

her face almost touched it and frowned.

“He doesn’t seem to take good care of his collection either. There are places where it looks like he touched this with his bare hands and didn’t wipe it down after.”

Everyone in the group was hesitant about touching such valuable items, but the items’ careless handling made things different.

“Oh?” said Char, reaching toward the bronze state to touch it. When his fingers made contact with the statue, a sudden wave of emotions and pain overcame him. He was unable to withstand this and pulled his hand away. “Ugh... Crap!”

It was too late when he realized he had knocked the statue off its stand, and it turned upside down as it fell. Thanks to Ernst catching the statue in a split second reaction, it did not hit the floor.

After wiping the cold sweat from his brow, Char whistled and said, “Damn, you’ve got fast reflexes.” He tried to appear calm, then said to Ernst, “Thanks for catching it, but we’d better not spend too much time handling that thing... I think they used to hit someone now dead or very nearly dead. It definitely has a super shady past.”

In response, everyone turned to stare at the statue.

“How can you know that?” asked Ernst with a frown, looking unsatisfied.

With a shrug of resignation, Char explained, “You see, I was born with the power of psychometry... Though I don’t think you’ll have heard that word. Simply put, I can pick up remnants of thoughts that reside inside objects... I guess you’d call it a tendency?”

Powerful emotions and memories often leave a residue in objects and locations where they occurred. Char had a predisposition for picking these up, though only in fragments.

While everyone in Japan considered these claims dubious, he had heard that American intelligence agencies, such as the FBI and CIA, often worked with psychometers to find missing people or the bodies of those lost at sea.

As for Char, it was not as if he could intentionally obtain any information he wanted. The sensation he always had, of the thoughts and memories of other people eating away at his brain, was uncomfortable. For all the inconveniences psychometry triggered in his daily life, the skill had become useful in his work as an exorcist. Even his colleagues recognized it could be handy.

Ernst pondered whether to believe what Char had just told him. With a strained expression, he groaned while glaring at the bronze statue in his hands.

Flanking Ernst, Emma snatched the bronze statue from him and carefully placed it back on its stand.

“If Char says so, it must be true, right?” she said with a smile in Char’s direction. Char responded to his sister’s antics with a slight smirk and a shrug. It was difficult for him to prove his ability was genuine, so he found it quite reassuring to have Emma, who believed him unconditionally, by his side.

“That’s an amazing ability, Char! Hey, are there any other items here with such a shady past?” asked Alois. His eyes shone with admiration as he leaned toward Char.

Char also leaned over in contemplation before quickly looking around the collection room and stating, “Ah, well, for example... I think someone used that suit of armor in a real battle, I guess? Also, I feel like the dagger over there was probably once used to stab someone.”

He pointed out a number of the swords and daggers on display. That, however, was often the case with vintage armaments and was not especially surprising.

“Besides that...” Char continued. After looking around the room again, his eyes fell on a diorama in a far corner. “Yeah, even though I feel like there’s something different about it, how about that?”

As he pointed to a corner of the room, he smiled mischievously, indicating that this item was unexpected and exactly what they were looking for.

Hearing this, the others all walked over to the diorama, which was an elaborately crafted miniature town. The town spanned about forty centimeters on each side, with a fountain in the plaza at its center. It formed a semicircle

that partially surrounded a lake, so it was immediately obvious this was a miniature version of the very town in the March of Ludendorff.

For some reason, the house at Ludendorff Manor was the only place missing from the miniature, leaving a gaping hole. The garden that they had passed through to arrive at the mansion was recreated in exacting detail, though. It was so precise that it was almost as if someone had shrunk the town around the mansion and put it in a box.

“Incredible, isn’t it? It’s so well made...” murmured Sieghart, clearly impressed as he peered intently at the miniature town.

From its buildings to the trees in the garden, the diorama was so perfect that it could almost be mistaken for the real thing. Char also felt impressed as he gazed at the diorama.

Even the street lamps and houses had such fine details that one could almost hear the people inside them breathing. The lake was clear and beautiful, with light sparkling on its surface.

From out of nowhere, a wind blew through the town. The trees by the lake’s shore swayed, and the sound of birds chirping and children playing were present.

“I want to go there...” echoed a voice in Char’s head. He unconsciously extended his hand toward the diorama. Right before his fingers made contact with the diorama, another hand reached beside him and grabbed his wrist. Looking over in surprise, he realized Nicola had suddenly returned. She stood beside him with her eyes narrowed.

“What are you doing...?” she demanded.

“Whoa, that was close!” cried Char. “For a moment there, I was about to be sucked inside... But, well, I really don’t think this diorama can be too dangerous...” The diorama itself probably was not so dangerous. The feeling ingrained into it that made Char think, “I want to go there,” had nearly dragged him inside.

Char exhaled softly and lightly shook his head to clear away errant thoughts. Now that his senior apprentice was back, he snapped his fingers to dispel the

shikigami. Once the piece of paper had fluttered to the ground, Nicola reached down to retrieve it before gazing at the diorama.

“Wonder what this is?” she murmured.

“In my work, I’ve only encountered something like this once... I think it’s probably similar to the ‘House for the Lost,’” answered Char.

“The House for the Lost...? You mean like the one in Tono?” asked Nicola.

Char nodded, confirming his senior apprentice’s suspicions. The House for the Lost was the subject of tales passed down in the Tōhoku and Kantō regions of Japan about an otherworldly empty house. Said phantom house was deep in the mountains and supposedly bestowed riches on those who visited it.

The House for the Lost was a utopia, like the lost city of gold. Char had been offered a job as an exorcist that concerned such a house in his past life. For that reason, he recognized the sensation of being near one.

“I mean, it isn’t literally the House for the Lost, but how can I put it? Though I can tell there’s obviously a spirit realm right there, I can’t bring myself to feel cautious around it. Not only does it not seem bad, but it’s almost like I’m drawn to it... I’ve got it. It neither rejects visitors nor chases them away. That’s the feeling I get. Yep, it really is kinda similar.” Char muttered all this in a halting voice as he let his eyes fall on the scenery inside the diorama again.

Most likely, anyone who wished to enter this spirit realm could do so, and leaving it would not be difficult either. Char felt sure the diorama was not something dangerous that would actively try to pull people inside and trap them.

“Well, I suppose it doesn’t look to be bad... I’d say it’s more of a Town for the Lost than a House for the Lost,” said Nicola, nodding in agreement next to Char before looking up from the diorama. No sooner had she done so than Alois leaped in between them.

“What is it? What is it?” he cried with his eyes shining. “It looks like you’ve reached a conclusion, so what is it?!”

Nicola openly scowled at Alois and said, “Keep it down.” This declaration probably only delighted him all the more. He even tried to get closer to Nicola.

Sieghart shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, “Good grief,” before pulling the two apart, chuckling as he tried to calm them down.

“Char, Char, Emma wants to know too,” said Emma while tugging on Char’s sleeve. Seeing no alternative, Char opened his mouth to explain, but they were interrupted.

“That’s the diorama that the young lady made. Ah, it is well made, is it not?”

As they heard this voice from behind, everyone turned around in surprise. Standing there was the old woman who had guided them through the garden. After slowly bowing her head, she looked at the party.

“We apologize for keeping you waiting for so long. I will now take you to see the lord of the manor.”

The group would finally have the opportunity to speak to Marquess Ludendorff directly.

◇

The group encountered an unfamiliar gaze as they returned to the drawing room where they had first waited. A portly man who looked to be in his mid-fifties stood before them.

This man held out both arms in a welcoming gesture, the folds of his plump body shaking ostentatiously. It appeared this was Marquess Ludendorff himself.

Thinking she would not notice, Marquess Ludendorff rolled his eyes over Nicola’s body, from the top of her head to the tips of her fingers and toes. When he observed her chest, which was slightly flatter than average, he snorted with laughter.

Immediately losing interest, the marquess turned his gaze upon Char. After looking Char over with more or less the same creepy look in his eyes, his gaze finally settled on Emma, who was standing next to Char. A vulgar smile crept across his face after he had stared intently at Emma’s beautiful bosom. Nicola felt her skin crawl.

Ah, nope, I can’t deal with this guy. More than enough contempt and discomfort welled up inside Nicola to make her think this. Char mimed gagging

beside her, but she could not criticize him.

On Nicola's shoulder, Gemini fizzled with a dark aura as it expanded, as if trying to menace the marquess. She calmly comforted her familiar.

The marquess offered them a sofa to sit on. Sieghart politely declined this and stepped in front of Nicola to shield her from view. Alois also stepped forward, so Ernst inevitably also stepped to the front of the group.

With a very tall barrier now standing between them and the marquess, the three petite girls could breathe a sigh of relief.

"Marquess Ludendorff, I am sure you must be busy, and we do not intend to stay for too long either," Sieghart said coldly. In a rare occurrence in her heart, Nicola praised him.

However, the marquess responded to Sieghart's statement with a daunted look before snorting derisively. Although Sieghart was young, he bore the same rank as Ludendorff and was theoretically an equal. Despite this, Marquess Ludendorff very plainly looked down on him.

As if he had not even heard what Sieghart had said, the marquess turned his attention exclusively on Alois. Forcing a smile, he spoke up.

"My, my, this simply won't do. Though this town at the center of my realm is considered a resort, the very thought of you staying in civilian lodgings... If you would do me the honor of staying in my mansion, Your Highness. I'm sure you will not be disappointed. Otherwise, it would be a pity... I have always prided myself on providing the finest hospitality imaginable."

The marquess slumped his shoulders in an exaggerated display of disappointment, underlining this by shaking his head. Not only were these gestures obviously staged, but his flattering tone made Nicola's discomfort grow. Securing lodgings in the town was a fine play on Alois's part—in her heart, Nicola applauded him.

"Ah... Thank you for your consideration. However, this is an incognito journey, and I've always wanted to know what life is like for the townsfolk. I'll have to decline," said Alois, carefully choosing his words as he utterly rejected Marquess Ludendorff's offer.

For an instant, the marquess' face stiffened, but he soon wrenched a smile out of it again.

"In that case, where might you be lodging?"

"The mansion with the blue roof, by the lake shore. Let me think, what was the name..."

Ernst immediately responded, "Lakewater Manor, Your Highness."

Once Marquess Ludendorff heard this, he smiled and said, "I see, I see."

His flattering tone was as exaggerated as ever. According to the marquess, Lakewater Manor was one of the top two most luxurious estates under his dominion.

"That estate is for receiving members of the nobility, so I do not think its staff will disappoint in showing you proper hospitality, Your Highness. It is one of the estates I am most proud of." The marquess leaned back on his sofa, stroking the excess fat under his chin as he chortled. He continued boasting about his estates, their interior decorations, and the views they offered. But his eyes locked onto Alois as he no longer regarded anyone else in the room.

As for Alois, he seemed to ignore the marquess' gloats. With slightly off-timing, he occasionally responded along the lines of, "I'm looking forward to that." His voice was a perfect monotone.

Alois's responses were so wooden that the girls behind the boys took advantage of the cover and laughed. Still, Marquess Ludendorff did not register the prince's lack of interest, recounting the condition of his estates.

Eventually, Alois seemed to endure this no longer, and he had no choice but to cut the marquess off with a weary tone.

"Be that as it may, I've come here to meet with your daughter. I wonder if I'll have that chance."

This time, without a hint of hesitation, Marquess Ludendorff donned an apologetic expression. As if regretting the circumstances from the bottom of his heart, he let his shoulders slump theatrically.

"A short while ago, she was very well. Regrettably, her condition today is not

so good... My daughter was hoping to meet you as well, Your Highness. In her present condition, I am afraid that is not possible. I can only offer my sincerest apologies after you came all this way." The marquess responded with perfect fluency, almost like reading from a script.

Alois stole a glance at Nicola, who hid in Sieghart's shadow. She simply shook her head. Having acknowledged her message, Alois returned his gaze to the marquess and with a shrug, he said, "That is a pity."

"My deepest apologies, seeing that you honor me coming to my remote realm. Even though I know it hardly makes up for your disappointment, I must ask you to please enjoy the festival for which this region is famous."

"I'll do that, then. Sorry for taking up your time," said Alois, turning around to leave as soon as the conversation finished. The rest of his party followed him out of the room.

Declining the servants who offered to escort them as far as the gate and stepping out into the garden by themselves, they all felt liberated. Alois faced the other five with a bitter, apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry for subjecting you to so much discomfort," said Alois, finally frowning.

Sieghart shook his head. "It's not your fault, so don't apologize."

Indeed, Alois should not be at fault because the marquess was a reprehensible human being. Even Nicola acknowledged this since she could see everyone in the party felt the same way.

"I'd heard some rumors about him, but he does distinguish himself... Far more so than I'd imagined," Sieghart muttered with a bitter smile. Alois sighed in agreement.

Alois clapped his hands to lighten the mood and exclaimed, "Right, now that that's out of the way...!" As all eyes gathered upon him, he smiled cheerfully. "Now that we've got the 'official purpose' of our visit out of the way, we can enjoy the festival!"

He pointed past the wrought iron gate to the lively plaza in the middle of the town. Everyone's face lit up at this sight, and they all started walking toward the

gate.

As Nicola walked, almost skipping, she suddenly turned around to take one last look at the beautiful but peculiar garden. Like before, hydrangeas and other flowers that did not suit the season bloomed profusely.

Nicola narrowed her eyes in suspicion briefly but soon pivoted and dashed to catch up with Sieghart and the others.

Nicola's Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 7

The House for the Lost

The House for the Lost refers to a number of stories in folklore passed down in the Tōhoku and Kantō regions of Japan, relating either the tale of an otherworldly house that showers riches upon those who visit it or the tale of such visitors.

This legend was first recorded by the folklore scholar Kunio Yanigata in his book "The Legends of Tōno." Afterward, it came to be known more widely. According to "The Legends of Tōno," the house was said to not be deserted at all. Despite being empty, it was written that "One shall find a fire burning in the brazier of the sitting room, and water just boiled in the kettle." The house always appears in such a state that it seems like people were there just moments earlier.

It is said that those who visit The House for the Lost may take with them any single item they find there. If they get home with that item, they will become very wealthy.

Though it is still a spirit realm, this one seems harmless, so I would like to try getting lost there at least once.

Chapter 4: Where the Love Line Leads

1

When the group stepped out of Ludendorff Manor's grounds, a world that seemed like something out of a fairy tale greeted them.

People danced to merry tunes around the fountain in the center of the town square as others watched on while drinking liquor. Market stalls displayed juicy-looking fruit while sweet aromas wafted over from baked goods being sold nearby, enticing the fairgoers who walked past.

The main street that stretched from the town square to the lake had a paved cobblestone road. Brick houses with wooden, triangular roofs stood in rows along the street. So many stalls lined up along the street as well that they crammed into one another, including the sweet and fragrant smells.

As people came and went, the smiles on their faces were lively. Some of them even wore pastoral costumes adorned with many colors, perhaps the traditional garments of the region. This marvelous scene—like something out of a German folktale—caused Nicola to stop momentarily and gasp. Sieghart, standing next to her, gazed warmly at the square with his eyes half closed, apparently enchanted as well.

Eventually, Sieghart turned his head as his eyes focused on Nicola before greeting her with a gentle smile. He spied a stall selling flowers in the square, he said, "Wait here a moment," and walked away.

After watching Sieghart do that, Nicola took another look around the town square to clear her head. She took to counting the people she could see.

One, two, three... She smiled keenly as she realized a few dead people were among the fairgoers. It was nothing new. Be it Japanese traditions like Obon or Halloween in the West, festivals always attracted them. She would have to give up on the notion of attending one ghost-free.

"Nicola."

Hearing her name, Nicola turned around to look at the one who had called out to her. No sooner had she done so, Sieghart gently lifted a lock of her hair and inserted something underneath it. Nicola blinked in surprise before raising her hand to touch whatever it might be, but Sieghart stopped her by taking her hand in his own.

Nicola's hair swayed in a gentle breeze that followed, which carried a sweet fragrance to her nostrils. It reminded her of golden osmanthus—a fragrant olive shrub with orange flowers—that was somehow sweeter and less assertive.

"Silver osmanthus...?" guessed Nicola in a low whisper. Her childhood friend beamed, half closing his eyes. Although a hint of mischief lay in his smile, there was a definite tone of kindness. Nicola contorted her face in a jagged sneer, averting her eyes to escape Sieghart's gaze.

In the language of flowers Nicola was familiar with, the osmanthus denoted "first love" or "my one love" should seize the recipient's attention. Since she was dealing with Sieghart, she was confident he had made this selection with full knowledge of the flower's meaning. As Nicola turned her face away to hide the fact that her cheeks were suddenly burning red, Sieghart laughed merrily.

"Let's go, Nicola," said Sieghart, extending his hand. After some hesitation, Nicola placed her hand on top of Sieghart's. As she did so, an innocent smile broke across his face. He gripped Nicola's hand so they laced their fingers together. Briefly, she could not breathe, but she soon sighed in resignation.

Sieghart chuckled at Nicola's embarrassment, then leaned down so his lips were right next to her ear. He whispered something and cheerfully started walking.

Nicola furrowed her brow tightly and slightly pursed her lips. She could not claim that the words Sieghart had whispered, nearly lost in the square's bustle —"I love you"—had entirely failed to touch her heart.

Still, Nicola knew she could not return Sieghart's feelings or affection in kind. He had already given her too much, and she could not do so with the same passion.

Each time Sieghart directly displayed affection for her, Nicola felt something straining deep in her chest. She bit her lip tightly as her eyes fixed on her

childhood friend’s back.

2

With Sieghart as her escort, Nicola soon rejoined Alois and the others, arriving just in time to find Emma on the ground after another dramatic fall.

After Emma quickly sat up with tears in her eyes, she moaned and said, “Oh, someone must have grabbed my leg...”

Alois reached out to help Emma before turning to face Nicola and Sieghart, then blinked rapidly.





Having noticed that Nicola and Sieghart held hands, Alois's gaze lingered on them until his eyes suddenly sparkled. Nicola reacted to this unwanted attention by scowling.

Nicola sighed heavily, then said, "Just watch what happens."

She slowly raised her hand, still joined with Sieghart's, and quickly let go. In an instant, a mob of the dead surrounded Sieghart.

Alois's smile became much more strained for a moment, but after Nicola's satisfactory demonstration, he murmured, "I see."

"That's just the way it is," said Nicola as she sighed and gazed at the swarm of spirits around Sieghart. These spirits appeared to have gathered around Sieghart because his excessively refined features attracted them. Even so, there were a lot of them. If he had to drag this many spirits with him, he would start to feel under the weather.

"Hey there, I bought enough peaches for everyone, so for now, let's eat."

At the sudden sound of this voice, Nicola turned to see Char carrying peaches with one hand and waving with the other. He must have bought too many as Ernst, who walked beside him, had the rest. Apparently, they had only visited a few stalls to gather so many.

"The peach is a fruit that can ward off evil and misfortune! It's the perfect snack for us, right?" declared Char, handing each party member a peach. "Ernst might not need any kind of talisman, but well, I wouldn't want him to feel left out."

After saying all this, Char grinned. Ernst responded with a wry chuckle. The peaches Char had handed out were soft and emitted a sweet aroma. These were known as "flat peaches" and were smaller than those in Japan and had thinner skin, making them easier to eat.

Nicola carefully sank her teeth into her peach and took a bite. Fresh juice spilled out of the fruit, its sweetness spreading across her tongue. She looked to one side to see Sieghart also stuffing his face with a peach. His beautiful visage softened into an expression more suitable for his age.

Everyone besides Ernst had their eyes firmly fixed on Sieghart. They noticed that as they continued to eat their peaches, the dead surrounding them retreated before their eyes. The power of the peach to ward off evil was in full effect—everyone able to see this result could not help but snicker.

And so, while enjoying their peaches, the travelers set off along the main street once more.

All kinds of stalls stood along the street as the enthusiastic cries of the merchants clamored for attention. People laughed together merrily, dancing and singing. An air of festivity filled the entire area.

As one might expect from a harvest festival, produce made up most of what they sold at each stall. The many colored fruits overflowing from wooden wagons stood out. These all kept such a sheen that they must have come from a recent harvest, their colors so vivid that the wagons looked almost like jewelry boxes.

On the sides, street performers stirred up their audience with a series of acrobatic feats. Nicola could not keep up with them, even with her eyes darting back and forth.

Nicola found she walked beside different people as she weaved through the crowd. Before she knew it, she had settled into a steady pace alongside Alois.

Feeling eyes on her, Nicola looked up to one side and immediately locked eyes with Alois.

“Is something the matter?” she asked.

“No, I was just thinking that you look like you’re having fun,” replied Alois.

“Err, well... This is...fun...” Nicola admitted reluctantly, prompting Alois to snicker in amusement.

“You know, even though you and Char have memories from a past life, I never feel like I’m talking to someone older than me. Ah, I mean that in a good way!” said Alois before snickering again. He had turned away from Nicola, and she followed his gaze to see Char and Emma.

“Hey, sis, look over there,” Char called out, carried away by the festival atmosphere. “That looks tasty!”

“The passage of time alone does not make someone a grown-up,” Nicola muttered with a bitter smile. Nicola knew her ability to communicate and control her emotions were still very much those of a fifteen-year-old, in a negative way. In her past life as Rikka, the experience she had accrued in interactions with other people was hardly worth mentioning.

After all, anyone who could “see” as well as she could would trip up in relationships with other people at the first hurdle. From the beginning, she could not get along with her parents, and the more she grew and her world expanded, the more distorted it appeared.

As Rikka, she had never been “a good girl,” so in the end, the only proper relationships she had were with her mentor and the other apprentices. Of course, her communication skills would be poor.

If she had only attended school, things might have been different. However, the more one knew, the closer one became to the nonhuman world in everyday life. As a half-baked exorcist, places such as schools and hospitals were unexpectedly dangerous and to be avoided. Unable to attend school, Rikka spent her days cooped up in her mentor’s office as an apprentice exorcist.

She did not regret learning the skills she needed to defend herself but could not deny that her relationships with other people had grown thin. And she was sure that life had been the same for her junior apprentice.

“I can say this for myself, and I think for Char as well, that we are giving our childhoods a do-over.” Nicola smiled pointedly, then looked up at Alois walking beside her. She was unsure whether Alois had fully grasped the meaning of her words.

“Really?” said Alois succinctly before smiling and deciding not to pursue the matter further.

“More importantly, don’t you have something else you’d like to ask me?” said Nicola, facing Alois again. She peered up into his emerald eyes with a look of suspicion.

After looking slightly lost, Alois shrugged and asked, “Well, did Miss Elfriede really exist?”

This question was the one Nicola had been expecting. She furrowed her brow, then quickly shook her head.

“She seems to be missing, perhaps having run away... At least, that’s the way it seemed, judging by the maid’s reaction.”

Once Nicola summarized the old woman’s words and behavior, Alois put a hand on his chin and became lost in thought. Nicola glanced at Alois out of the corner of her eye as he contemplated this news.

For Nicola’s part, she was dead against being engaged to Alois. However, the second candidate had the inner personality of a man. The whereabouts of the third candidate were unknown. Given these conditions, Nicola had to admit this backed her into a corner.

Nicola frowned, then said, “What do you intend to do?”

At this question, Alois smiled sheepishly, then said, “Hmm, let me see... First, I will report to the palace that Miss Elfriede was nowhere to be found. After that, I suppose I’ll take steps to increase the number of candidates for my next fiancée.”

After saying this, Alois rested his hand on Nicola’s head and ruffled her hair. This act startled Nicola, and she raised her hand to brush Alois away.

Alois laughed merrily before saying, “There’s no need to look so worried. I’ll avoid a future where we have to get engaged. I promise.”

He did not say this in his usual frivolous tone but with the utmost sincerity. Nicola felt uncomfortable and bit her lip slightly in distress.

Nicola had no choice but to acknowledge that, objectively speaking, she was currently the best candidate to become Alois’s new fiancée. Though she felt uncertain about romance, if she had to choose a man to join her family, it would be Sieghart. She knew full well how selfish that sounded.

When Alois noticed the conflicted expression on Nicola’s face, he smiled and said, “You don’t need to worry. In the position I’ve been born into, it has always

been impossible for me to marry someone of my own choosing. I've long since come to terms with that."

Nicola looked up at Alois again to see him wearing his usual easygoing smile. This smile did not sit well with her, so she frowned even more. Alois patted Nicola on the head again.

Then, with his normal droll tone of voice having entirely returned, he continued, "That's exactly why I think what you and Sieg have is so precious. I want you two to be happy."

After this, Alois smiled, prompting Nicola to contort her expression again—for a different reason. Due to the flow of their conversation until that point, she felt hesitant to dismiss what Alois had said. In the end, she kept her mouth shut.

With a small sigh, Nicola turned away from Alois. Her eyes settled on a nearby street stall with natural stones of many colors. She was drawn irresistibly toward the display and faced it.

"Oh...?" Nicola crouched and peered closely at necklaces and bracelets made from natural stones threaded together. Stones of various colors—red, blue, yellow, and green—all sparkled under the sunlight. The owner of this stall must have had an eye for quality, as there were many fine stones amongst those on display.

"Miss Nicola, do you like this sort of thing?" asked Alois, staring over her head.

Nicola stood up and turned around to face Alois.

"I thought that I might give Sieghart one of these to carry. It would serve as a talisman, after all."

Though not as potent as the amethyst Sieghart already carried, a high-quality natural stone could become quite a powerful stone. While they may be less suitable to show on one's body as accessories, even if carried sneakily, they would still be effective.

"Oh, so these have a talisman effect as well? If I asked you to pick one that looks particularly effective, separate from the one you're getting for Sieg, would that upset you?"

“It wouldn’t upset me, but...” *That’s an odd way of putting it*. Nicola had a puzzled look. She would have expected Alois to say something carefree, like “Pick one for me too.”

She heard Alois chuckle beside her, as if he had read the doubt written on her face.

He whispered, “I’d like to give it to Emma.”

Nicola could only blink in response. She then looked up intently at Alois’s face once more. Following Alois’s gaze, she saw Emma smiling cheerfully in front of another street stall. After apparently tripping over an uneven cobblestone, Emma tumbled to the ground again. Char could only stare in amazement.

“You seem quite concerned about her,” noted Nicola.

“We’ve been together ever since we were small. She’s like a little sister to me. And since she’s always on the verge of hurting herself, I can’t leave her alone.”

Then, something occurred to Alois.

“Although Emma is actually a year older than me,” said Alois with a laugh. He sounded so gentle to Nicola, as he did not speak in his usual amusing tone. She could detect a certain amount of sadness behind his words.

“I feel like there’s as much difference between saying ‘a little sister’ and ‘like a little sister’ as there is between fruit and Fr■■■ Loops,” muttered Nicola. If a man cheating on his girlfriend said, “She’s like a little sister to me,” then he must inevitably be stabbed.

After Nicola finished muttering to herself, Alois turned to her with a puzzled look.

“Er, I mean, it’s as different as a rider carrying a horse instead of the other way around,” Nicola said, hastily rephrasing her analogy.

Alois snorted with laughter and said, “What? You’ve got some unique analogies.”

Nicola turned away in a huff, her frown creating deep lines on her forehead. This look was something Alois also found worthy of laughter, which became a nervous chuckle.

“You’ve often said that if I ever give a name to something ambiguous, defining its existence, then it will take on a definite form,” said Alois as he exhaled softly. Then, he murmured in a low voice, “I have no intention of giving a name to feelings I know will never be answered. So long as I don’t define them, the ambiguous will remain ambiguous. Otherwise, I may no longer keep her by my side.”

“Is that so?”

Alois’s gaze upon Emma was earnestly kind but somehow wistful and painful.

Nicola picked out one onyx necklace and *two* malachite bracelets, then paid the stall owner. She held out the two bracelets for Alois to take, and his eyes widened.

“It would not harm you to carry a talisman as well, Your Highness,” said Nicola. If he kept the bracelet hidden in his pocket, he would not have to reveal that he and Emma had matching jewelry. In any event, it was the kind of accessory that commoners would buy at a market stall, not something that a prince could get away with wearing openly. This made it perfect for this application.

His eyes lit up for a moment until he chuckled. He gratefully accepted the wrapped-up bracelets Nicola had offered him.

“Thank you,” said Alois, smiling.

“Your Highness! Please inform me before visiting any market stalls!” cried Ernst. After hurrying over from a few stalls away, he directed a few more words of protest at Alois in a low voice.

“Sorry, sorry, I’ll be more careful from now on,” said Alois.

The other three waited for Nicola at the same nearby stall, having walked some distance ahead. Emma enthusiastically waved her hands before tripping on another curbstone.

After catching up with Emma, Alois chuckled and said, “Ah, goodness, what am I to do with you,” before taking Emma’s hand and helping her. He held Emma’s hand as they walked together.

“Your Highness! Allow me to assist Emma!” Ernst protested, but Alois ignored him entirely. Ernst growled, expressing discontent on his face, and obeyed his master’s wishes. “Blasted Emma, making trouble for His Highness yet again.”

Next to Nicola, Ernst continued to grumble and groan. Judging by his attitude, he had likely not realized how Alois really felt about Emma.

What a stick in the mud, thought Nicola, with an irritated look at Ernst. Suddenly, words that she would not have uttered if she had not just learned about Alois’s feelings for Emma came out, “I wonder, just what is romance?”

Ernst turned to look at Nicola with a look of mild distaste on his face.

“This may sound like a foolish question...” began Nicola.

“I’d like to say, ‘Then don’t ask it,’ but come on, out with it,” said Ernst with a sullen look, sighing before urging Nicola to continue.

After some hesitation, Nicola asked, “Have you any experience of...first love?”

An inscrutable expression fell over Ernst’s face at this unexpected question. Then he answered, “I have, but what of it?”

Nicola widened her eyes in surprise at this response. She thought they were cut from the same cloth, but even this stubborn brute had experienced love before. She was a little shocked and unable to conceal this.

Reading her expression, Ernst said, “Just what do you take me for?” He had an increasingly sour expression on his face.



In all honesty, Nicola had thought of Ernst as nothing more than a slightly clever Dobermann. Of course, she could not say that, so she maintained her silence.

After a dramatic sigh, Ernst folded his arms and glanced at Nicola from the side.

“So, what of it? If you have something to say, then say it.”

Nicola fidgeted for a moment, rocking her shoulders back and forth. Her eyes slowly wavered in all directions until she made up her mind and spoke again.

“How does it feel...to love someone? Why do people fall in love?” Nicola had never considered this question in her past life. Although she had watched romantic dramas and read comics with love stories, these were all nothing more than fiction. Having only her mentor and junior apprentices make up her inner circle, she lived in a tiny bubble that never included such feelings.

A dumbfounded look overcame Ernst’s face after his eyes widened at Nicola’s question.

He let out one more dramatic sigh before saying, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world, “You don’t need a reason to fall in love.”

Nicola could not help but frown upon receiving this answer. It was so mundane, so unsatisfying.

Are you really telling me people love each other without any reason?

Her discontent must have been plain from her expression since Ernst scowled as he looked down at her.

“You really are quite a pain in the neck, aren’t you...?” Ernst regarded Nicola like a small child who would not listen, which irritated Nicola intensely. “When people say ‘I love you because you’re kind’ or ‘I love you because you’re handsome,’ that has always sounded to me like a distortion of the facts, more or less a lie. Those who always seek a reason for their feelings are people I can’t understand.”

Ernst said all this with utmost sincerity, but Nicola was still dissatisfied. What she wanted was a definition that was easier to understand.

Seeing Nicola continue to pout in silence, Ernst raised his voice in irritation and cried, “Ah, damn it all! This is why I can’t stand argumentative people! If you want to know what it is, romance is the search itself! The search for a reason behind those feelings of affection whose reason you don’t understand! It’s what you’re doing now, so I hope you’re satisfied. This conversation is over!”

After unilaterally ending their conversation, Ernst took long strides, quickly outpacing Nicola.

As Nicola watched him depart with a blank expression, she muttered, “Hey, no matter how much of a pain I might have been, there was no need to make such a nonsensical argument.”

Ernst clearly overheard this because he stopped a few paces ahead of Nicola. Looking over his shoulder, with a tone of disbelief, he said, “In the first place, no matter how you look at it, I was the wrong person to talk to.”

“I suppose so...” admitted Nicola. Though she had thought there would be no harm in asking, Ernst was absolutely right.

3

“Hey, hey. Sorry to interrupt your little chat... But is your familiar all right? Only, it’s stretched awfully thin.”

A voice suddenly called out to Nicola, so she turned to see who it was. She saw Char looking at something behind her with a cheerful smile. Following Char’s gaze, she looked back over her shoulder. Upon doing so, she noticed Gemini stretched out very thin, extending from her shoulder *way* back behind her, all the way back to one of the market stalls she had passed.

“Whoa... Sorry, Gemini, I didn’t realize,” said Nicola. Gemini appeared interested in the baked sweets on sale at the stall. She whispered to it, “Would you like some?”

In the blink of an eye, Gemini snapped back into its original shape and bobbed up and down on Nicola’s shoulder.

“All right, take the form of a suitable human and come with me.” Nicola smiled as Gemini floated away and hid in a nearby alley. In almost no time at all, it returned in the form of a boy who looked about ten years old, wearing a flat cap.

Nicola felt like she remembered seeing that very boy somewhere before but could not recall exactly where. However, she decided not to worry about that for the time being, instead prioritizing her familiar.

Once Gemini, as a small boy, gripped Nicola’s hand with both hands, it pulled enthusiastically, trying to lead her to the stall it wanted to visit. Nicola found this very cute, and she could not help but smile. She allowed Gemini to pull her all the way to the market stall, finally arriving in front of a stand where a sweet fragrance filled the air.

“I was thinking of visiting the very same stall!” exclaimed Char, having followed them at some point. He peered inside the stall with visible delight. Among the sweets on display were apple and pumpkin tarts, cookies, and other baked sweets of every imaginable color.

That one over there, that one, and this one here, Gemini desperately tried to communicate by pointing around the stall. The stall’s owner smiled cheerfully before skilfully preparing all of the sweets Gemini had ordered.

“Young ladies, you have an adorable little brother,” said the merchant. Contradicting this assumption would have only seemed suspicious, so Nicola and Char smiled ambiguously. After each selected a sweet for themselves, the kindly old man running the stall stated the total cost. Once they had handed him the money, he packed all the sweets in a paper bag and gave it to them.

They happily took the bag from the merchant, but just as they were about to leave the stall, the stall owner’s voice surprised them from behind.

“This may be a festival but do not take your eyes off your little brother, young ladies. Until recently, whippersnappers around that age got kidnapped all the time.”

Nicola and Char turned around at this sudden warning. The stall’s owner was looking at Gemini with a meek expression.

“Though, well, it looks like a different group is the target now, but... Either way, you still gotta be careful. You see, it’s young ladies around your age who are the target...” said the stall owner while pointing at Char.

With a stupefied expression, Char pointed at himself. He looked sideways at Nicola before putting a hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. Nicola struggled to keep her face from stiffening.

“We understand. We shall be careful,” answered Nicola. This time, they left the stall behind. Once they were out of earshot, Char no longer attempted to suppress his laughter.

Nicola glared at Char while pouting. She could understand why the stall owner had only pointed to Char when they were the same age.

“Well, maybe it’s that—You know, the gap in our development?”

Indeed, Nicola’s height was well below average for a girl her age. Still, Char’s derisive gaze focused firmly on Nicola’s chest, which was flatter than average. Though it pained Nicola to admit it, Char’s chest was quite large.

“I’ll just ask and swallow my pride for now... How did you achieve that kind of growth?” muttered Nicola resentfully.

Without the slightest hint of shame, Char cackled and said, “Eh, you want to know how...? Given breasts that I could legally touch as much as I wanted, I rubbed them. What could I call it but every man’s dream?”

“What do you mean, dream? Go suck an egg.” Looking like she had just stepped on a bug with bare feet, she quietly snarled at Char in disdain.

They quickly realized that after stopping at the baked goods stall, they had fallen behind the rest of their group.

Thankfully, Ernst and Sieghart were tall enough that they could not lose sight of them. Still, they were now quite some distance away. As such, Nicola grabbed Gemini’s hand and quickly weaved through the crowd. Just then, she finally spotted the backs of Ernst and Sieghart ahead. But her shoulder collided with a man coming the other way, making her lose her footing. She would have fallen flat on her face if Gemini had not supported her from one side.

Nicola immediately bowed her head to apologize, but the man just tutted at her and scowled in irritation. This interaction only lasted a moment. Once the man spied Gemini, he widened his eyes in shock and muttered something to himself as he walked past Nicola.

Still, Nicola was sure she had heard him, and what he had said caused her to furrow her brow.

“That brat... Didn’t we sell him off just the other day?”

After watching the man leave, Nicola turned to face Gemini and connected the dots. She remembered why the form Gemini had taken was so familiar. The boy’s likeness appeared in the newspaper she had seen aboard the steam train.

A boy of about ten years of age, wearing a flat cap. Gemini must have seen the same missing person article they had read on the train.

“Once you eat your sweets, you should probably return to your normal form,” murmured Nicola, patting Gemini, still in boy form, on the head. Gemini nodded obediently. After it finished stuffing its little face with baked sweets, it ran into an alley again.

“Hey, what’s up?” asked Char, walking behind Nicola.

“Nothing,” replied Nicola, and the two set off along the street again.

◇

When Nicola and Char caught up with Alois and the rest of their party, they found them looking at a notice on a wall. Once Nicola approached Siegart, he explained what it had written on it.

Of all things, the notice advertised a magic show that was to take place in a nearby plaza. This intrigued the group, and they all decided to attend.

They soon arrived at a circular plaza near the main street. The plaza was lively, with a large crowd already assembled there. The show seemed to have already started, as there was a commotion.

Despite stretching to stand as tall as possible on the tips of her toes, Nicola could not see over the crowd. After exchanging a glance with Char, who stood beside her, Nicola shrugged and chuckled. No matter how hard they tried, with

a girl's stature, it would be too difficult to see past the crowd.

"It doesn't look like the girls will be able to watch. Shall we give this show a miss?" said Sieghart. But the three boys were above average height, and they could watch easily. Nicola, Char, and Emma all looked at each other before shaking their heads.

"Feel free to enjoy the show. We'll look at the stalls around this plaza," said Nicola. Tents of various colors surrounded the plaza. A walk around those stalls would surely provide more than enough enjoyment. After agreeing on a place to meet afterward, the boys and girls broke into two groups.

The plaza's circular shape made it perfect for walking one lap around it while viewing the stalls. Alongside Char and Emma, Nicola gazed into each tent as they walked around the plaza.

As soon as they started walking, a pleasant aroma tickled their nostrils. The source was a market stall selling mutton grilled on skewers. After entrusting Nicola with the task of holding Emma's hand, Char ran over to the stall by himself.

Nicola and Emma both shrugged and shared a quiet chuckle.

"Gemini, you were welcome to watch the show," Nicola whispered gently as her familiar returned to her shoulder. Gemini's body briefly trembled, seemingly racked with internal conflict. Yet it stuck to Nicola's cheek.

"Oh, how cute," said Emma, half closing her eyes and gently prodding Gemini with her finger.

"I heard from Char...that your eyesight wasn't poor from birth but became worse later on," said Nicola.

Emma peered at Nicola through the very thick lenses of her glasses, then smiled pleasantly.

"As long as I have my glasses, I can see, though everything's still a little hazy. This little one moves around a lot. So I couldn't miss it."

Gemini heard this and ballooned to a bigger size before Emma's eyes, then contracted repeatedly.

“Isn’t it sweet?” said Emma, half closing her eyes again.

Nicola suggested they move to the side of the street until Char returned. Unfortunately, Emma tripped on a cobblestone yet again, nearly falling flat on her face. As Nicola hurriedly caught her and helped her up, Emma apologized profusely. The cause of her frequent tumbles seemed to be the properties of her glasses, which wildly distorted her depth perception.

“From the look on your face, you’re probably wondering why I’m working as His Highness’s personal maid, given my condition?” said Emma, with a nervous smile.

Emma had hit the nail on the head. Nicola subtly avoided making eye contact.

“It’s all right. I think anyone would find it strange.” Emma removed her glasses, smiling as she wiped the lenses clean. As one might expect from how they were blood related, she was a dead ringer for Char.

“Although no one has recently attempted to kill His Highness, a lot went on in the past.”

Emma half closed her eyes as she reminisced before putting her glasses back on. Nicola knew Emma’s vision had become significantly impaired from an injury while protecting Alois when they were still very young.

“Some would wear this injury as a badge of honor,” declared Emma with a foolish laugh. “As for why the good-for-nothing Emma still serves as His Highness’s personal maid, it is thanks to the goodwill of the place! Now that the cat’s out of the bag, it’s easy to understand, no?”

So said Emma before smiling cheerfully.

I see, thought Nicola. *From the palace’s perspective, her continued employment is a form of compensation*.

“His Highness is a very kind person. I can recommend him as a fiancée,” continued Emma with a faraway look. Her blonde hair—which looked very soft but which she kept in a long braid—swayed in a gentle breeze that blew through the plaza. Viewing Emma’s face from the side, Nicola could see a mix of resignation and sadness. She suddenly felt a tightness in her own chest.

“Nicola, if you would be good enough to offer His Highness your hand, it would be a great relief for me,” murmured Emma.

Nicola cast her eyes downward and, in a lamenting tone, she said, “I... I do not want to be engaged to His Highness.”

“Sounds that way,” said Emma, giggling. “It seems like you have your sights set on someone else, but it’s a pity.”

Emma looked back at the crowd in the plaza. A mischievous smile crept across her face.

Nicola scowled, a sour expression falling over her face. It was as if everyone had decided that her union with Sieghart was a forgone conclusion.

“Just what is love?” muttered Nicola as she sulked. “I don’t... I don’t understand it.”

“Oh my,” said Emma, opening her eyes wide as a smile broke across her face. “You need to decide for yourself what is and isn’t love. If you have a feeling that you would like to call love, it’s love. That’s what Emma thinks.”

Behind Emma’s glasses, Nicola saw her close her olive-colored eyes as she smiled. Perhaps it was just Nicola’s imagination, but it sounded like Emma was trying to tell herself, “As long as you don’t mind not calling your feelings love... As long as you think that, it isn’t love.”

Nicola recalled the words that Alois had spoken only a short while ago. “I have no intention of giving a name to feelings I know will never be answered.”

She looked down silently as she contemplated Alois and Emma’s similar words. She wondered just what she felt.

“Ah, look, Char is back,” said Emma, snapping Nicola back to her senses. Nicola looked up to see Char walking back toward them.

“What, what, wassup?” asked Char as he stuffed his face with a mutton skewer. With a confused look on his face, he looked at Nicola and Emma.

Nicola and Emma exchanged a glance. Then, in perfect unison, with smiles on their faces, they said, “Nothing.”

Char blinked, clearly still puzzled, but soon lost interest.

“Oh yeah? Well, whatever,” he quickly said. “Those tents look interesting, so let’s take a look.”

Char walked off toward the tents.

Unlike the other stalls, the tents mainly dealt with paintings and handicrafts. They found wooden dolls, glass paperweights, bolts of beautiful carbic, tiny music boxes that fit in one’s hand, and many other distinctive items as they calmly moved from one tent to the next. Finally, they stopped in front of a tent that somehow stood out from the others.

The tent was much smaller than the others, with a piece of cloth draped diagonally over its entrance. As a curious aroma floated inside, the three looked at one another.

“Oh, is this a perfume stall?” wondered Char.

“Maybe,” said Nicola.

Considering Emma’s poor eyesight, rather than seeking craftworks with her hazy vision, she was probably more likely to enjoy something that engaged her other senses. So Nicola thought as she lifted the drape hanging over the entrance and stepped inside.

It was gloomy inside the tent, lit only by the flickering flame of a lamp. Just as they could tell from outside, it was a very cramped space.

In the center of the tent was a solitary desk with some vividly colored glass bottles arranged on top of it. Beside these burned some incense, which was the source of the peculiar fragrance.

However, they could see no one inside the tent who operated the stall.

This was a bit careless of me, thought Nicola as she cast her eyes around the tent until she noticed that something was amiss.

The drape that had previously half covered the entrance was now all the way down. Though it had been diagonal when they arrived, it now blocked light from outside completely.

“Someone dropped the curtain at the en....trance...” Though Nicola knew

these to be her own words, they sounded like they were coming from far away. Her voice was indistinct, almost as if she were speaking underwater.

Nicola gasped, and her vision started to falter. She suddenly slammed her hands down on the table to try and remain upright, but she could not stop herself from keeling over. She was unable to stop herself from falling to the ground.

As her consciousness faded, she saw her familiar squeaking while hopping around the tent, along with Char and Emma, who also crumpled to the ground.

4

When Nicola awoke, she was in another gloomy place, which looked to be a warehouse. She slowly picked herself up from the floor, choking on the dusty air in the room and moving sluggishly since she still felt drowsy.

What on earth happened? Nicola tried desperately to retrace her memories. *That's right. I remember going into a tent that seemed to sell perfume when I suddenly felt very sleepy.*

"Was it that incense burner?" Nicola muttered softly, then tutted in irritation. It had been a small tent someone must have filled with some drug or fragrance to induce sleep before they ever entered. By dropping the curtain over the entrance when customers entered the tent, the kidnappers could create an enclosed space in the blink of an eye. All three companions had fallen prey to their devious methods.

Nicola sighed heavily. Whatever had happened, their situation was dire. Though she had no serious injuries, her hands were tied together behind her back. There was also a length of hemp cord tied around her feet. She could not move except by crawling like a caterpillar. Somehow, she made her way across the wooden floor until her back was resting against a wall.

"Hey, you're awake too?" asked someone with a carefree tone.

"Are you all right, Nicola?" asked another voice.

Nicola saw Char from where the carefree voice originated, then Emma sprawled on the floor next to her. Although their arms and legs were bound the same way, they at least seemed fully conscious. After meeting their eyes, Nicola felt relieved.

However, her relief only lasted for a moment. There was no way she could relax under these circumstances.

"I wonder where this is..." murmured Emma.

"Well, it's definitely not the tent we were in before," muttered Char.

While listening to these comments, Nicola quickly looked at her surroundings.

They appeared to be inside someplace similar to a warehouse. One corner had shelves, wooden crates, and barrels. Not a single window in sight, though. A grimy sheet of cloth lay over the floor. Nicola was sure that people must walk all over the floor in their boots daily since there were muddy or sandy tracks wherever she looked.

The warehouse appeared fairly dilapidated because a few thin shafts of light broke in through gaps in the boards making up the walls, their paths made visible by the dust floating in the air. The orange hue of the light suggested that the sun was beginning to set. And there were no signs of anyone in the room besides Nicola's group of three.

There was only one way in or out—a door at the center of one wall made of wooden boards.

"On the other side of that door is another room. For a while now, I've been hearing people coming and going. But I'm pretty sure they're the guys who kidnapped us," said Char.

Upon hearing this, Nicola grimaced. They would need to break through another room crawling with kidnappers if they wanted to escape. What a troublesome state of affairs.

Now that Char mentioned it, Nicola realized she could hear voices engaged in conversation just outside the room.

They were all men's voices, so she assumed these were the kidnappers and noted that they were arguing.

"You know damn well this month's order was for a blonde, sixteen or seventeen years old! But you still went and picked up that brat with the black hair!"

"So what?! He's only buying one of the blondes anyway, so we'll have to sell the other one! We can just sell the black-haired one off at the same time!"

"Huh. If she doesn't fetch a good price, you'll take responsibility, won't you? Until we make a sale, the food we buy will put us in the red! Got it? Then go and grab another blonde!"

Because the door was thin, Nicola could make out every word of their

conversation without straining to hear. She could not help but narrow her eyes in annoyance as she listened. It was true that she was not blonde, but the kidnappers did not even regard her as close enough to sixteen or seventeen. Instead, they treated her as a “brat.” This disrespect was not at all what she would have wanted.

“I don’t get it...” she muttered. As soon as she did so, she heard Char burst laughing as if he could no longer help himself. Emma had a somewhat conflicted smile on her face.

“Well, don’t worry so much. Your familiar’s already gone to fetch the others. Let’s chill out and wait,” said Char with an easy smile. Based on his comment, Nicola noticed Gemini was nowhere to be seen.

By the time Char and Emma woke up, Gemini was pressed firmly against Nicola, squeaking while nudging against her from either side. Char said that he gave Gemini the instruction to get help.

“It’s already been about half an hour since Gemini left, so help should come soon. This place is likely not very far from the town,” said Emma. “Emma’s ears are very sharp.”

She held her head high and smiled. Indeed, Nicola could faintly hear the clamor of the festival and water.

“Though I’m not certain, I think we’re somewhere on the lakeshore,” added Emma.

I see, thought Nicola. *If we’re close enough to hear that and the festival, we can’t be too far from the center.* Once Nicola realized this, she immediately felt much better.

Despite his graceful looks, Sieghart was also very strong. As for Ernst, he was a qualified knight. As soon as they discovered this place, things would work out. It was only a matter of time until they rescued them

“All right then,” said Nicola. It suddenly felt ridiculous to remain tense, so she relaxed her shoulders. Knowing she had her arms tied behind her made this challenging But looking at it another way, this was a perfect opportunity to correct her poor posture.

Char sprawled lazily on the floor. Emma just yawned audibly.

“I guess that leaves us without much to do,” muttered Char.

“Guess so,” said Nicola.

“Indeed,” said Emma. Nicola and Emma nodded in agreement, and no tension lingered in the room.

In that little shed, a fourth voice rang out where only three should have been.

“Ah ha ha! You ladies are so strange!”

5

“You... You scared me, said Nicola, breathing heavily. A face had suddenly sprouted from the wall she had been leaning against. She was so shocked that she remained frozen as the speaker slipped through the wall and approached the center of the shed.

The speaker’s body was translucent, allowing Nicola to infer that it was not physically there. Judging by the stature, this was a child about six years old. The child, whose freckled face made an immediate impression, looked down on Nicola and the other captives while floating in the air.

“C’mon, gimme a break. Is it only a ghost? I was totally scared,” said Char before sighing dramatically. Nicola thought it was a bit strange to calm down just because they learned their intruder was a ghost. As a fellow exorcist, she could understand his reaction.

“Eh? Ladies, you can all see Lila? You’re even stranger than I thought!” said the child, who shrieked with laughter. The child seemed to be a girl called Lila. While laughing in delight, the ghost performed a twirl on the spot.

“That was a good turn,” said Emma. When Emma smiled at the little girl, she smiled back proudly. The girl’s plain dress fluttered around her when she spun, and it was easy to guess that she was a commoner. Considering that she still clearly remembered her own name and had her appearance from before death, she must have passed away recently.

“Say, Lila. A moment ago you called us all strange. Why was that?” inquired

Nicola. The girl stared back, puzzled.

“Because... You can all see Lila?”

Char chuckled wryly and said, “Yeah. Yeah, that’s true. That’s strange as well.”

At first, Char simply affirmed Lila’s words. After wriggling to pick himself up off the ground, he looked her in the eye and continued.

“But you know, Lila, you called us strange before you knew that, right? Why was that?”

Lila blinked when she heard this question, but then she grinned widely.

“That was ’cause after being kidnapped by those nasty men, you ladies don’t seem scared at all!”

I see, thought Nicola after a moment of silence. The sight of Nicola and her companions remaining calm despite being captured was strange enough for this girl.

“Hey, hey, why aren’t you ladies scared? When Lila and her friends were here, we cried the whole time, you know?”

When Nicola and her companions heard this, they shared a silent glance. This meant that at least one group of several children had been kidnapped and held here. And at least one child had died before being sold, which was hard to believe

They could be sure that no one had saved those children. So, there was no way that they could tell Lila they were relaxed because they had friends coming to the rescue. While Nicola agonized over how to answer Lila, Emma spoke up.

“We’re much bigger than you and your friends, Lila, so we’re pretending to be fine. If no one else was around to watch, I’m sure we’d be so frightened that we’d cry too. Just like you and your friends.”

Emma then looked at Lila with a smile.

After widening her eyes slightly, Lila looked satisfied, and with a bright smile, she said, “Is that right?”

Moving her legs, which remained bound, Nicola crawled to Lila before

meeting her eyes.

“Say, Lila, what are you doing here anyway? If there’s something you’re concerned about, we can help you,” said Nicola.

People only became ghosts after death if they still had unfinished business in this world. If possible, Nicola wanted to help Lila resolve her problems so she could pass on to the afterlife.

In response to Nicola’s inquiry, Lila said, “Really?!” Her face lit up. She looked around the shed before saying, “Well, um, you see, when they brought Lila here, she lost her mom’s ring. So she comes back here from time to time to look for it.”

Then, a troubled frown fell over Lila.

Nicola murmured, “I see.”

She was then quiet and took a slow, deep breath.

“Understood,” said Nicola. “All right, Lila, hold tight for just a minute.” Nicola cast her eyes around the room, then crawled along the floor like a moth larva. She headed toward a wooden crate she had noticed in a corner of the room. If she was going to help Lila look for her mother’s missing ring, she would need to break the cords binding her hands and feet.

Once she was close to the box, she was expectedly pleased to see it had sharp angles on its corners from aging.

Focusing on a single point of the hemp cord around her wrists, Nicola rubbed it against one corner of the crate. With some effort, she created a weak point. The friction caused her wrists to sting where the cord rubbed against them, but it was nothing she could not endure.

While Nicola focused on the task, she ignored her surroundings. Suddenly, however, she felt someone staring at her and looked up. She found Char staring at her with a look of disappointment.

“What?” asked Nicola, without pausing to break through the bindings on her wrists.

Char sighed slightly and said, “Hey, Nicola, just one thing. What are you going

to do when the kidnappers come in here? You know you're the least valuable one here. Don't do anything suspicious, and stay still. I'm telling you, you need to put yourself first. You're still alive."

For a moment, Nicola stopped. However, she soon started working away at the cords again. With a slight smile, she echoed Char's warning.

"I'm just going to help her look. If they don't find out, it won't be a problem. I know what you say is logical. But my ideology is as follows: I obey seniority in reverse. There's no way around it."

Nicola continued her work in silence. Char skillfully shrugged his shoulders despite his bindings before sighing with disbelief.

"I won't help, you know."

"That's fine. Keep your sister company."

"Just don't break the rope around your feet."

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Because Nicola had her hands tied behind her back, she could always put them back to hide that they were free should the need arise. But there would be no disguising her feet if she freed them. Nicola nodded obediently and returned to breaking the ropes around her hands.

◇

After Nicola struggled with the ropes for five minutes, she had finally freed her hands. She celebrated this by stretching her upper body.

When Lila noticed this, she ran over to Nicola with her face lit up. Her eyes brimmed with expectation once she crouched in front of Nicola.

"By the way, it was a silver ring with a blue stone."

According to Lila, the ring had disappeared when she woke up in the shed. Lila, who had apparently died before being sold off, occasionally returned to the shed to search for it.

With her legs still bound, Nicola used her hands to bring herself onto her knees. To begin her search, she shuffled over to the wooden crate and opened it to find bundles of hemp cords.

She found hemp sacks and sheets of cloth after opening more crates. Some others were completely empty. In any case, she saw nothing that looked like a ring. If she had to say, she would classify the items stored here as tools used in kidnapping.

Just to be sure, she looked inside the barrels in a corner of the room, then thoroughly inspected the barren shelves. Regrettably, she still could not see any ring.

Silence descended over the room after some time had passed since Nicola began her search for the ring. Lila looked up at Nicola, a worried expression on her face.

“Emma doesn’t mind helping too,” said Emma.

“Nah, forget about it. You’ll have a hard time with your eyesight, sis,” said Char, shaking his head. Emma would not be suited to search for small objects based on how she saw them hazily, even when wearing glasses.

Moreover, the gloom in the room was only increasing. Light broke through gaps between the boards in the walls and changed from orange to red. Nicola would find it difficult to search if the sun were to set completely. With her feet still bound and restricted, she had already lost a lot of time.

Maybe I should just bring out my shikigami. I can duplicate myself and bind its arms and legs with the spare hemp rope, thought Nicola.

If Nicola also placed a spell of concealment on herself, she would no longer need to leave her feet bound together and could move freely. With this in mind, Nicola slipped her hand into her pocket only to discover its contents were all missing.

“Ah... I see.” Nicola unconsciously placed one hand over her face and could not believe she had failed to notice something so obvious.

Had she been thinking clearly, she would have realized that much. One could consider that kidnapped people might have something like a fruit knife hidden in their pockets. They must have taken all of their possessions at the outset.

These kidnappers had been thorough, seeing they had confiscated a strangely shaped piece of paper. Nicola finally acknowledged that this was why they had

felt comfortable leaving their captives unattended.

Char and Emma must have inferred what Nicola thought by her actions and expressions. They both turned to look at Lila.

“Lila, your ring might have been confiscated before they brought you to this room,” said Emma.

“In that case, it wouldn’t be anywhere in here, would it?” said Char.

Nicola silently looked at the single door leading out of the room. The ring was bound to be in the adjoining room where the kidnappers came and went.

As if in agreement with Char, Nicola quietly took a breath.

“So you think Lila’s ring might be in that room over there?” asked Lila with a mixture of worry and expectation.

Char shrugged, and answered her while half-sighing, “Maybe, or maybe not. Don’t get your hopes up.”

Nicola avoided making obvious statements, patting Lila on the head instead. Then, using only her arms and dragging her legs behind her, she crawled over to the door.

The door was not thick, consisting mainly of planks. Appropriately for a dilapidated shed, tiny holes eaten by termites were visible here and there. There was no doorknob on the inside, nor was there a keyhole. It probably had a latch only for the other side.

Nicola leaned against the wooden door, peeking through one of the larger termite holes. She could easily observe what was happening in the adjoining room.

This room seemed to have windows because it was much brighter than the shed Nicola found herself in. She could see three men, one of them being the man who had bumped into her and Gemini at the festival.

In the room’s center, there stood a shoddy table. While each held a liquor bottle in one hand, the men seemed to sort some items.

“For the love of— Is there nothin’ here worth any money?” said a slightly chubby man, red-faced as he slammed his fist on the table in irritation.

“It’s all junk ain’t it? What were they thinking, walking around with all this trash?” spat the man who had bumped into Nicola as he plucked the piece of paper she would have used to summon her shikigami from a pile. They continued sorting through the confiscated possessions, hoping to sell those too.

The third kidnapper, a small man, lifted an onyx necklace and a malachite bracelet and sighed. These were two of the pieces of natural stone jewelry Nicola had purchased earlier from a stall at the festival. He placed those items in a separate wooden box and shoved everything else into a hemp sack, which he threw down onto the floor.

“Even so, this box is getting pretty full. Ain’t it about time we looked for a buyer?” said the small man, shaking the box and peering at its contents. After grabbing a handful of those contents, he scattered them recklessly over the table. What tumbled out was an assortment of miscellaneous items.

Accessories and lockets, brooches, belts and ribbons, vials of perfume, and all kinds of items clattered as they tumbled onto the table. Among those items, Nicola spotted a shining silver ring.

“That’s it! That’s Lila’s mommy’s ring!” Lila passed through the door, swooping over to the table where the ring was sitting. When she was just one step away from reaching it, one of the men snatched it back up. The man with the red face clearly did not see Lila as he busied himself by inspecting the inside of the ring, fussing in lamentation.

“Give back Lila’s ring! Give it back! That’s Lila’s!”

“Tch, there’s a damned inscription. What a pain. Guess we’ll sell the stone,” said the red-faced man, standing up with the ring still clutching it. He then took a rusty hammer out of a nearby drawer and raised it above the ring.

Lila’s eyes widened in shock, and her lips trembled. She reached for the ring, but her hand sadly met only thin air and passed through the man.

“No, no, no! Stop!” Lila cried plaintively. Before Nicola could stop to think, she had already started to move. Without giving any thought to the consequences, Nicola threw her upper body against the door, slamming into it again and again.

“Ah, c’mon, you idiot... You really are an idiot!”

Nicola heard Char cursing at her, but she paid him no mind. She continued to throw herself against the door. After repeating this several times, she suddenly heard a loud crash behind her.

I broke the door down, thought Nicola as she looked at what was behind her. Yet the wooden door was still closed, seemingly unaffected.

Beyond the door were cries of outrage, followed by the shrill sound of glass shattering, then the sound of something falling to the ground. After a moment, all was silent.

Ka-thunk came the sound of the door being unlatched. Nicola planted both hands on the floor and slowly backed away from the door. The wooden door opened with a creak, and light poured into the murky room. A figure in the doorway, silhouetted by the light from behind, slowly stepped into the room. Nicola took a breath and braced herself.

“Nicola.” A deep voice called her name with no shred of sweetness she was used to hearing, only naked anger. Nicola broke out in a cold sweat, her shoulders stiffening.

Sieghart slowly approached her, step by step, while quickly casting his eyes around the inside of the shed. His gaze fell on Char and Emma, whose arms and legs were still bound, then Nicola, whose arms were free.

Still deathly silent, Sieghart swiftly removed the ropes around Nicola’s feet.

“Ah, um, the thing about that is...” began Nicola.

“If you have an excuse, let’s hear it,” said Sieghart. As his amethyst eyes stared down sharply at Nicola, she made a squeaking sound in her throat.

Her childhood friend’s eyes were as cold and sharp as icicles but also appeared to be boiling like magma, heated by the anger that lurked behind them. Nicola’s eyes darted all over the room.

“Well, um, er, you see, since Emma and Char have blonde hair, they’re just the kind of girls the kidnappers were looking for... So I thought if I took some slight liberties, the kidnappers wouldn’t harm them...”

“Huh, really...”

Nicola realized she had chosen her answer poorly as she felt her body temperature plummet. She could almost feel Sieghart's cold rage prick her skin all over, and she cowered in fear.

"So, Nicola, knowing that, you recklessly exposed yourself to danger. Knowing full well that the kidnappers had judged you to be a low value target."

So that's what an icy smile looks like, thought Nicola. Although Sieghart's detached smile was beautiful, it must have approached absolute zero. Unable to look directly at him, Nicola averted her eyes. But she knew that if she retreated at this point, things would only get much worse for her, so she searched desperately for something to say.

"But... But, those awful men were about to destroy Lila's ring..." As her eyes continued to wander, Nicola bit her lip.

Before she knew it, Alois and Ernst had untied Char, who said helpfully, "Ah, Lila is the ghost of a child they kidnapped in the past."

In between sighs, Sieghart muttered, "I thought it might be something like that."

"Ah, um... We'll be outside until you finish lecturing Nicola," said Alois before hurrying out of the room. Only Nicola and Sieghart remained in the dilapidated shed. After an awkward silence washed through the room, Sieghart sighed mournfully, then quietly stowed away his anger.

"Nicola, I fully recognize that your kindness is a virtue... But the one you were trying to help is already dead. You should not weigh her against yourself, a living person." Sieghart's lecturing tone had turned lighter, but it still had a cold edge that stung Nicola.

"How can you put it like that! So are you saying I should have sat back and pretended not to see anything?" said Nicola, becoming emotional and raising her voice. In Nicola's eyes, Lila's existence was clear. Given that people could not see ghosts or hear their voices, it was incumbent on those who could to show them respect. What else could she do?

Without even raising an eyebrow, in a soft voice, Sieghart declared, "Even so, the dead are still dead. They can neither die again nor be injured. Unlike you,

Nicola.”

Sieghart picked up Nicola’s hand, then frowned at the grazes the ropes had left on her wrists.

“You’ve never been good at taking care of yourself, Nicola. I’m begging you, pay attention to that in future. You may have mysterious powers, but you’re not strong.”

“It’s only physical violence I can’t defeat,” Nicola shot back, drawing her mouth into a thin line and looking away from Sieghart.

Sieghart furrowed his brow in consternation.

“Of course I know that. It’s true. As long as things don’t get physical, you aren’t so weak. However...”

Nicola was silent.

“If I exert just a little strength, like this, see? You can’t do anything.” Sieghart grasped Nicola’s wrists, a little lower than where they had been bound together, and applied pressure. It did not hurt. But she could not shake Sieghart’s grasp or move his hands one inch. He whispered in a dry tone and lower voice than usual, “I’m sure it would be easy for me to push you to the ground now.”

His breath on her neck sent a shiver down her spine. As she realized she did not feel one iota of aversion toward this, she noticed her cheeks become red on the spot, much to her frustration.

Sieghart chuckled awkwardly before slowly releasing Nicola’s hands. She expected him to pull even further away, but she found herself cradled in his arms—gently, as if he were holding something precious.

“As long as I’m around, Nicola, I’ll take care enough of you for the both of us. Please put your life before anything else whenever I’m around.” Sieghart’s tone was pleading, to which Nicola could not object any further and fell totally silent.

From the start, she had known that what Sieghart was saying was correct.

Whenever he got mad at her, it was for a good reason. With an air of resignation, Nicola nodded slightly while Sieghart embraced her. He smiled in

relief before letting go.

Suddenly, Nicola felt another pair of eyes trained on her and looked up. Her eyes met those of Lila, who was staring at them with her hands clasped over her cheeks.

Nicola felt her own cheeks instantly turn crimson. Flustered, she stretched her arms out to push Sieghart away, creating distance between them. She shook her head to drive off the heat that had accumulated in her cheeks, then coughed to regain her composure.

Nicola asked nervously, “Say, Lila, what about your ring?”

Lila held up the silver ring with a large grin on her face.

“Thanks to you nice ladies and men, it didn’t get broken! Thanks!” exclaimed Lila with a smile stretched across her face before carefully stowing the ring away in her pocket. “Bye-bye, Lady! Lila will go back to be with her friends.”

After watching Lila run off, Nicola blinked in surprise.

“Eh, she’s not passing on after all?” she muttered without thinking. When she thought about it carefully, she smiled bitterly and realized that Lila need not have only one piece of unfinished business. The girl had died at such a young age with many things she wanted to do.

But Nicola decided that if she had helped Lila ease one such regret, that might be good enough.

6

Nicola emerged from the shed to find the kidnappers tied up and sprawled on the floor. She saw Ernst hand them over to a group of men dressed in the local garb of the town and stared in puzzlement.

Alois walked toward Nicola and chuckled before saying, “Those are more of my knights, who were guarding me while disguised as members of the local crowd. They only came as a precaution, having heard the reports of kidnappings. To think that we ended up catching the perpetrators.”

That was when Nicola recalled Alois mentioning they would have bodyguards

traveling incognito wherever they went. Everything seemed to fall into place. She felt as if she had noticed them once or twice among the crowds at the festival.

"What will happen to the kidnappers?" asked Nicola abruptly.

Alois shrugged slightly and responded, "I guess the knights will hand them over to Marquess Ludendorff. The lord of the region has a certain amount of autonomy. And judging criminals is among his duties."

"Is that...right?" *He'd better prosecute them justly*. Nicola glared at the kidnappers. In any event, she would not be having nothing more to do with them.

A familiar dark blur suddenly appeared at the edge of Nicola's vision, and she turned to look at her shoulder. At some point, a crow had alighted there, looking very proud.

"Ah, thanks Gemini." When Nicola praised her familiar, it swiftly abandoned its crow form and returned to its circular blob shape. It then hopped up and down on her shoulder.

Nicola tilted her head up to see stars faintly visible in the sky. Though she could still hear the festival's commotion, it seemed far away. Just as Emma had speculated, they were not too far from the center of town. The shed stood on the shores of the lake. In the distance, Nicola saw lamps getting lit. A gentle breeze blew past, sending a wave across the lake.

"It must be about time," said Emma lazily. This prompted Nicola to look back at the town just as a few small lights climbed into the air. Tiny lights dotted the sky that was a blend of violet and ultramarine. They came one by one, then two by two. The effect was indescribably fantastical, and Nicola could not stop a sigh from escaping her. Char's mouth hung wide open as this sight entranced him.

"The drop in temperature in the evening and the wind blowing over the lake signals that people can send up their lanterns," whispered Sieghart in delight, gently enclosing Nicola in his arms again.

The sun had just set, and the season was already late autumn. As Nicola felt

the cold air on her skin, though she would not have actively sought Sieghart's embrace, she did not shake him off. Instead, she gazed at the lake.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" said Sieghart.

"Yes..."

The specks of light floating in the sky swayed back and forth, almost like the stars had come down to earth. And the lanterns illuminated the lake surface, making it appear as if it was glowing.

Alois had said that this trip was partly for his personal affairs. Now she understood why. This scene, celebrating the festival of light, was something that even Emma, with her poor eyesight, could enjoy.

"Sieg, Miss Nicola, Ern. Let's launch Miss Olivia's lantern from right here on the shore," murmured Alois, smiling. Nicola nodded slowly and slipped out of Sieghart's embrace. While still holding Sieghart's hand, she met the others near Alois.

Once Alois had finished assembling the lantern he had received from Marquess Lüneburg, it appeared large. The balloon-shaped lantern, open only at the bottom, was large enough that Nicola could not wrap her arms around it. They had to insert the frame through the opening at the bottom, and once it had a paper wick soaked in oil fixed at its center, they could light the lantern.

Of course, when the fire became lit and the lantern's interior heated up, the density of the air inside would decrease. The buoyancy of that air would exceed the lantern's weight, causing it to float.

With help from Emma and Char, they soon assembled the lantern. Nicola, Sieghart, and Ernst held it up as Alois struck a match. Their preparations would come to fruition with the fire inside the lantern.

The four who held the lantern waited for a strong gust of wind to blow toward the lake before holding it up and letting go. Once they did, Olivia's lantern slowly floated away as if drawn to the evening sky.

Rest in peace, thought Nicola.

Specks of light increased their altitude as they crossed the lake and joined

their fellow lanterns. Nicola and her friends enjoyed a truly mystical sight.

Nicola wondered how long she had spent watching the crossing of the lanterns. Around the time Olivia's lantern floated so high into the sky that she could no longer see it, Alois spoke up.

"Now then, I suppose we'd better head back to our lodgings," he murmured. Everyone had a reluctant look, but they agreed all the same.

Apparently, Sieghart and the other boys had hired horses in the town when they rescued Nicola, Char, and Emma. Their group headed to their lodgings with two people on each horse. The pairings naturally resulted in Alois and Emma, Sieghart and Nicola, and Ernst and Char.

Nicola ended up sitting astride the horse in front of Sieghart, nestled in his arms. While there, Nicola gazed up at the swaying light particles accompanied by the twinkling of the stars.

Sunset came early in autumn. The clock had only just struck six, so there was no need to hurry home. The group kept their horses at a relaxed gait.

Nicola stared vacantly up at the lanterns floating in the sky for a while, but phosphors dancing around Sieghart's ring distracted her. Her eyes fell on his hand, which was holding the horse's reins.

His hands had calluses left from writing with a pen, blisters left by practicing with a sword, and slightly bumpy knuckles. They were the one part of her childhood friend's body that was misshapen and did not fit his overall graceful image.

Nicola did not look back at Sieghart, instead shooting a glance at Alois and Emma riding ahead of them. The two seemed to have an enjoyable conversation, even sharing an occasional laugh.

After narrowing her eyes with a hint of hesitation, Nicola said, "Sieghart... The first time you asked for my hand in marriage, why was that?"

The first time Sieghart asked Nicola to marry him was some time ago. Both were still young enough to be called small children. Nicola wondered what Sieghart could have been thinking when he asked her to marry him back then.

“So now you’re finally asking me,” said Sieghart. Nicola could hear him laughing behind her at this sudden question.

I spent the whole day of the festival asking everyone questions about love, so I shouldn’t be too surprised that he found out. Nicola knew she couldn’t have kept it a secret forever.

Although Nicola could not see Sieghart’s face, she could still more or less imagine the expression on it.

“I was just a kid back then. If you’re asking me about the very first time, I can’t give you an elaborate answer.”

Sieghart’s tone was entirely peaceful again. Just the sound of it allowed Nicola’s heart to calm down. As she listened to him, Nicola closed her eyes.

“I realized that I couldn’t imagine a future without you. You had to be there, whether it was ten years in the future, the next year, the next week, or even the next day. Whenever I thought about anything, I imagined you by my side. That’s why I asked you to marry me. See, it was simple, right?”

Hearing this, Nicola slowly opened her eyelids again.

What, that’s it? She could not help but sulk. After all, she could remember thinking the same thing as Sieghart. She had thought that if they were to become family, she could marry him and even wanted to.

Sieghart was a handful. As a child, he had always looked to Nicola as if he might end up passing to the other side if she took her eyes off him for even a moment. At some point, he had become someone she could relax around, even put her trust in. The very thought of Sieghart getting himself killed annoyed her, so she thought it would be best to keep him close for observation.

He had even made his way inside Nicola’s heart. She was sure that would not change in ten years or twenty years. So, on one occasion, she had accepted his proposal.

Emma had said that if Nicola ever felt something she could call love, then that was it. Perhaps she was finally ready to call these feelings “love.” If she could do that, she might face Sieghart more honestly and not feel guilty.

Still in Sieghart’s arms, Nicola silently looked at the countless specks of light gaining altitude. They had reached a high enough point that they appeared to form a tight line, which slowly drifted away from the town.

7

“That was a lovely festival, huh?” murmured Char with total sincerity, stretching as he looked at the night sky from the balcony of their room. He must have expected the others to respond in agreement.

But Nicola remained curt. From inside the room, she merely said, “The bathwater will get cold.”

Char’s senior apprentice, predisposed to get cold quickly, had not elected to come out onto the balcony after finishing her bath.

Until a short while ago, Char’s group of three had gotten tied up on the floor of a dilapidated shed, which was not very hygienic. Nicola insisted on taking a bath before supper as she started feeling comfortable again.

Only Char and Nicola were present in the room provided for the girls. Emma had stepped out, saying she would get something to drink. The laughter of Alois and the other boys was faintly audible from the room next door.

The balcony, which jutted out over the lake, was dark, but the town’s streets had lamps lit throughout and the town could be seen very clearly. At this moderate distance, even the clamor of the remaining revelers was pleasant to the ear. Although the festival was past its peak, lanterns were still trickling into the sky, almost like a display of the celebration’s afterglow.

As Char gazed lazily at the scenery, a faint voice arrived at his ears.

“I’m...sorry. I put us all in danger, even Emma.”

Char rested his elbows on the balcony fence, propping his face up before glancing to one side.

Nicola, who stood by the window, wore an expression that was difficult to interpret. She did, however, have the slightest hint of a frown. Char sighed and turned around.

“No kidding,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “But don’t worry about it.”

In the worst-case scenario, Char and Nicola would have had the option of

using a spell of concealment to hide from their captors, which they both knew all too well. Therefore, Char could tolerate Nicola's recklessness and had not been too angry with her.

Nicola seemed to be relieved by Char's reply and even smiled slightly.

"I can tell that you really care about Emma," said Nicola, ever so slightly teasing Char.

Char blinked in surprise. He appeared too embarrassed to affirm Nicola's assertion, but felt it would be wrong to deny it.

With a snicker, Char said, "Yeah, I guess so. After all, she's the only family I have."

Emma and Char had been born to different fathers. After the death of Emma's father, their mother had gone to work for Marquess Rosenheim as a live-in maid. The marquess's affair with their mother resulted in Char's conception.

When their mother was eventually cast out of the marquess's household by his legitimate wife, it forced her to give birth to Char in a grimy environment, making her very ill. That was what happened, according to Emma. Char could only rely on this account.

Char stared at the sky again as he leaned over the railing.

"When my mother from this life died, I was only two years old. I may have had the mind of an adult, but as an infant, there was nowhere I could work. And you can't live without money, can you? Honestly, I thought I would die of starvation."

The fact of the matter was that Char nearly starved after his mother passed away. He and Emma once collapsed on the side of an alleyway, very close to death. Even now, that memory was still fresh in his mind.

"Even my big sis was only a kid back then, just six years old. I only burdened her. So, would it have been better for her to just go on living and increase her odds of survival by tossing me aside? I mean, I even told her as much. 'I have the mind of an adult; I can manage somehow. Just leave me here and go,' I said."

As Char remembered this, he smiled ever so slightly. He had spoken to his sister with perfect fluency as a two-year-old baby. Emma must have found it quite unsettling and considered he was possessed.

“So, what do you think my big sis said?” quizzed Char as he stifled a laugh, looking over his shoulder at Nicola. Nicola did not venture to answer—she simply stared back at him, waiting for him to finish his story.

After Char returned Nicola’s stare, the corners of his mouth curled into a smile as he looked back fondly on that day.

“She said, ‘For starters, I won’t call you Lotte from now on, but Char instead.’ From now on, she said. This meant she wanted us to stay together in the future. To think that she even accepted I had the mind of a grown man... She left me totally stumped.”

Resting his elbows on the balcony railing again, Char chuckled wryly.

“Even though Emma was still a little girl, she went into service and looked after me until I was old enough to earn my cash. She was the real little kid who must have wanted to spend her days playing, but she worked to look after a strange soul like me.”

Nicola pondered what would have happened if Emma had abandoned Char back then. As a mere infant with no ability to work, he would not have survived, no matter how hard he struggled.

While Char still had his memories from his past life, some obstacles were not easy to overcome. He would not have survived. But Emma ensured he did.

“It pains me to say it, but I owe my life, body, and soul to my big sis, who was only six years old. So, I can’t thank her enough.”

“Really? Emma is kind, huh?”

“Too kind. I worry about her,” said Char, gazing at the sky in his prior position. During their conversation, the moon had risen over the lake, not to be outdone by the lights of the town or the lanterns in the sky.

The wind that blew across the lake picked up Char’s blond hair—still damp after taking a bath—almost with an air of mischief. Just like Emma, his hair had

once been a vivid golden hue. It was not unusual for blond children to find their hair changed when they grew up.

Char exhaled as he remembered the distinguishing features of Alois, who was presumably still in the next room. Alois had blond hair and emerald green eyes. Emma's eyes were olive-colored—in short, her eye color was one of the many varieties of green.

It did not seem unlikely Emma had sustained her childhood injury when she was required to stand in for the prince. Char could easily imagine that being the case, considering how prone Emma was to put her well-being second as she protected others. The thought made Char's head hurt.

Fort being so kind that her actions bordered on foolishness, his senior apprentice was just the same. He half closed his eyes and chuckled.

"Why does everyone around me have to be generous to a fault?" he wondered. He sighed and let the railing in front of him take the weight of his body. Then he looked out across the lake. *At least I don't have to bother protecting Nicola. I'd have to say that she has my back, almost like a big sister.*

Besides, it seemed someone else fulfilled the role of protecting Nicola. As that fact warmed Char's heart a bit, he smiled slightly.

"You'd better hold on to that transcendently handsome young man," said Char teasingly.

"Shut up..." Nicola muttered bluntly.

Nicola looked embarrassed. Char was sure she must have been glaring at him from behind. He could picture her expression so effortlessly that he laughed again.

"What do you intend to do? Now that you're recognized as the daughter of a marquess, you cannot escape your duty to get married. Will you run away from home and hide in the mountains?"

Char turned around to find Nicola staring at him with a serious expression. She looked genuinely worried about him, just as a senior apprentice should.

Despite Nicola's seriousness, Char just snickered and shrugged his shoulders.

Then he said, “Hmm, well, I’d like to stay a member of the nobility. I mean, it’s an easy life. Besides, I don’t want to worry about whether I get to eat ever again, you know?”

Although a noble rank did not guarantee happiness, it allowed one to evade many of life’s misfortunes.

Char glanced at the lake’s surface, which glistened like a mirror under the moon’s illumination. After gazing at his own reflection, he laughed bitterly.

Objectively, Char’s appearance was that of a beautiful girl. If he returned to life as a commoner, he would be exposed to many risks. Such was evident when he thought of how his mother from this life, also cursed with beauty, had ended up. He could not discount the risk of getting persecuted as a witch, which hindered the possibility of profiting from his knowledge of the future.

There was also no guarantee the palace would continue to employ Emma forever. Char intended to look after his sister if the need ever arose, and he did not wish to choose a life with greater risk.

He sighed quietly and rested his elbows on the balcony railing again. Looking up at the lanterns still being launched now and then, he muttered to himself.

“Well... To tell you the truth... I think it would be ideal to find someone else willing to marry out of a sense of duty and be married in name only. That way, it would be okay no matter how many mistresses he brought home. It would also be no problem if a child born of one of those affairs inherited his title. I don’t care what else happens so long as I have my private room. Ah, also, though Emma might not perform well, if I can ensure my big sister’s continued employment, I’m honestly good with anyone.”

“You ask a lot...” muttered Nicola in disbelief. Char just laughed, as he had been speaking from the heart. He would feel satisfied if Emma did not end up on the streets again.

“Ah... It’s cold,” said Char, shivering slightly before moving away from the railing and back into the room. It seemed like he had spent too long outside, after all. So Char thought as he came back inside the room. Even when Char was inside, the chill he had experienced did not go away. In fact, he almost felt as if it was getting worse by the second.

He finally realized the cold weather had not caused the chill and scowled. A severe discomfort fell around his solar plexus, and he was nearly sick.

It was a familiar sensation, and Char's instincts had set off alarm bells. He looked over his shoulder to see that Nicola had a grimace as she got up from her chair. Her expression was stern—Char guessed she must have felt the same thing.

Char and Nicola stared into each other's eyes as they tried to judge what they ought to do. Neither of them could provide an answer right away. The only thing they knew for sure was that something strange was headed toward them, even if they could not tell what it might be. They were only aware of an oppressive feeling, as if they each had knives pressed against their carotid arteries. This feeling only grew stronger with every passing moment.

And then, a sudden knock at the door caused Char and Nicola to gasp simultaneously. After glancing at Nicola, Char ran over to the door. Still, Nicola stared steadily at the door with a stern expression.

Slowly, warily, Char placed his hand on the doorknob. He carefully pushed it open to find a braid of blonde hair before his eyes.

"Big...sis...?"

Emma's familiar face first greeted Char at the open door before she burst into the room. The alarm bells inside Char did not stop ringing as the oppressive feeling that had troubled him for the last few minutes grew even more. He felt like a needle had just pierced his heart as he sweated profusely, and a strained voice emerged from his throat.

Emma must have found Char's reaction very peculiar since she looked back at him with a puzzled expression.

"Char and Nicola, a package has arrived for you. But what could it be? It certainly makes an odd sound," she said, holding out a paper bag in both hands for Char to take. Just as she said, Char and Nicola could hear a bizarre noise coming from the bag.

They heard a series of cracks at irregular intervals, almost like the sound ice made when one poured room temperature water over it. *Crack... Crack...*

Crackle... Crack... Each time the sound came, the intervals between each crack became shorter and shorter. In proportion with the increasing tempo, a smell like rusty iron grew steadily stronger.

Nicola could not breathe properly. She could not look away from the paper bag, like her eyes were fixed in place. Her heart beat so hard it hurt, as cold sweat gushed from her temples.





“Emma, please let go of that at once!” shrieked Nicola.

“Eh?”

“That paper bag! Let go of...!”

This final scream from Nicola came just as Char knocked the bag out of Emma’s hands. As he swung his arm wildly, the tips of his fingers brushed against *it*.

Crack, crackle... Crack.

As soon as that final crack sounded, the stench of death was suddenly so thick in the air as to be incomparable to what they had detected before, seething forth from the parcel. Horrible images of black-red liquid, hunks of flesh, and white bones suddenly filled Char’s head.

“O-Oooh, it hurts, it hurts! Why, why?! No, no, no! It hurts, it hurts! Help, help, help me.”

“Please, let me go home now! No! Hah, hah, big brother! Help me! Help me! I’m scared! Help me! Big...brother... It...hurts...”

“Please forgive me! I’ll stop saying selfish things! I won’t cry anymore! So please, take me back...home...! Aaah...!”

“I can’t take it anymore! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Help me! Mommy, help me! Mommy!”

“Tell me, why, why, why are you doing this?! I haven’t done anything...wrong...! Aaah! It hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts!”

“Ee-eek, u-urgh, so-sorry, sorry, sorry, don’t kill me, sorry, sorry, sorry!”

“No...! No, no, no! It hurts, it hurts! It... hurts! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts... Aah, ooh... A-Aah, why, why, why, why?”

WHY?

The dying screams of small children filled Char’s head. Some of their voices were lisped, infantile, or clumsy. Yet their cries were plaintive, filled with grief and resentment. He desperately covered his ears with his hands and shut his eyes. But try as he might to shut them out, things did not get any better. Their

tiny corpses were strewn in pools of blood and burned sharply into his mind's eye.

Blood poured like tears from empty, wide-open eye sockets. Others had pale faces with expressions of fear and despair still frozen upon them, their clouded eyes no longer able to see. Some corpses had their bellies slashed open, their entrails spilling out. It was too late once Char had seen and understood this vision.

"Uh... Ah..." moaned Char. He was in danger of his consciousness drifting in the vast wave of emotion.

I can't... Take it. I feel sick. Char clasped a hand over his mouth, falling to his knees and vomiting. When nothing but fluids remained in his stomach to be expelled, something from deep inside him, trying to escape, continued to cause his throat to spasm.

The stench of rotting flesh that assaulted his sinuses swept away the smell of his vomit. This sensation perpetuated the vicious cycle that sent his stomach acid flowing in reverse through his esophagus. His mouth dealt with the rank stench of blood and the sour taste of his stomach acid.

"Ah, crap, this sucks..." Char half moaned as he spat these words, wheezing and breathing raggedly repeatedly. As he looked at the floor, he could see a wooden box, stained dark red, peeking out from inside the paper bag that had fallen there.

"Sis... Don't you dare touch that..." *That's a kotoribako... A Childcatcher's Box.*

A Certain Interlude, From Before They Were Nicola and Char

The grimy office in the multitenant building had a sign that read “Spiritual Consultancy,” which was so incredibly untrustworthy that it made those who worked there want to cry. Inside the office, Rikka Kurokawa sat slumped over her desk, staring at her smartphone.

Regrettably, her mentor and boss, Sousuke Matsukata, was out of the office. Rikka’s finger glided smoothly across her smartphone screen and stopped once she reached the page she was looking for.

Childcatcher’s Box (kotoribako):

An urban legend that originated with a post on an internet message board before spreading elsewhere. Following the initial post in 2005, it continues to be discussed online—a horror story in the genre of lethal curses and considered a landmark horror story of the modern age.

As Rikka further read the site’s explanation, which opened with this introduction, she exhaled.

Written using Chinese characters, the meaning of kotoribako—Childcatcher’s Box—became clear to Rikka. The story occurred in a region of the Shimane Prefecture. The users who posted the original article, by sheer coincidence, found a strange box in an old house. Their story began with a recollection of their personal experiences. The box that they had been unfortunate enough to discover was the most powerful cursed artifact anyone knew of, created by the sacrifice of many children more than a hundred years ago.

Its origins went back to the Meiji era. After the Oki Uprising, a man said to be “on the side of those who instigated the rebellion” faced terrible discrimination and persecution. Eventually, he fled to a remote, impoverished settlement.

The people of the settlement decided if they allowed any more trouble to

plague them, their persecution would face something far worse. And they resolved to kill the man.

But the man offered them a deal, saying, “If you spare my life, I’ll grant you a weapon.”

And that weapon was nothing less than the method of constructing a Childcatcher’s Box.

The steps to enact the curse of the Childcatcher’s Box went as follows:

First, build a wooden box with enough complexity that one cannot open it so effortlessly.

Fill the box’s interior with the blood of a she-beast and wait one week. Before the blood has dried, close the lid.

Place a body part from a child culled inside the box. *Note: The required body part may differ depending on the child’s age. If the child was a newborn, take its umbilical cord, the tip of one of its index fingers, or blood squeezed from its entrails. For a child under seven, take the tip of one index finger and blood squeezed from its entrails. A child between seven and ten years of age only requires taking the tip of one index finger.

Finally, either send the box to the home of the person or persons you wish to curse or let it rest in a dark, humid place.

The curse of the Childcatcher’s Box, thus completed, would only wreak terrible harm on children and women of childbearing age. Though touching the box was necessary to activate the curse, even standing near the box and looking at it would cause one’s organs to slowly be torn to shreds, eventually resulting in death.

When the village headman who had taken part in the persecution of the poorer settlement had received the Childcatcher’s Box, it was sad that his woman and his children coughed up blood, dying in agony. Once the other villages in the surrounding region became aware of the threat of the Childcatcher’s Box, persecution against the settlement and interference in its

affairs ceased entirely.

But the curse was too strong, and the passage of time did nothing to weaken its terrible effects. The only known method of reducing its effect was to “lay it to rest” in a shrine or temple for a prolonged period, purifying it little by little. The online message board had ruled the box a negative inheritance.

“This summarizes what we know about the Childcatcher’s Box. It is uncertain whether any still exist, but if this story is true, there may still be one stored secretly in a shrine or temple somewhere.”

Once Rikka finished reading the explanation of the urban legend with this final paragraph, she set her smartphone on the desk and leaned back in her creaking chair.

A horror storyline of this nature—involving the hidden conventions and mysteries of a remote settlement—was fascinating. While it did not contain such strange phenomena as ghosts, she could say that the tragic and horrific story of the box made for good reading. There was even a movie based on the legend of the Childcatcher’s Box, so it must be well known.

Rikka sighed heavily again but heard another sigh overlaid on her own, coming from behind her.

Her mentor was not present. So, the one who did that action behind her must be a junior apprentice.

“Seriously, every channel just shows the same story.” As Nicola’s junior apprentice, Youta, flipped between channels on the TV, there was a note of frustration in his voice.

The TV headline “Serial Cases of Child Abduction” danced across the screen. It was a case that had daily reports recently. The victims were a six-year-old girl, a four-year-old boy, an eight-year-old boy, and a nine-year-old girl; four victims in total.

The official report was that an unemployed man got arrested as a suspect, “Motives unclear.”

“Although I tend to think there might have been some issues with the initial

investigation by the police...” stated a commentator on the TV.

Overhearing this, Youta laughed slightly and said, “They’re beating up on the police. I feel kinda sorry for them. Just investigating those with priors for sexual deviancy won’t get them anywhere. Normally, no one would ever even imagine someone having a motive as baffling as taking a made-up horror story from the internet seriously and trying to make a Childcatcher’s Box.”

“No, they really wouldn’t,” agreed Rikka. Apparently, it had not been the police who had first discovered the culprit behind the case. It was one of their fellow exorcists.

There was a region where women and children complained of illness one after the other. When an elderly man of deep piety in that region realized this might be a case of divine punishment, he sought the help of an exorcist, which led to the culprit’s location.

As for the cursed artifact itself, many skilled exorcists had convened to discuss how to deal with it. They were still in the middle of their discussions. Incidentally, Sousuke Matsukata was one of the exorcists summoned to this meeting.

In their profession, Rikka’s mentor was in fact a man of not inconsiderable repute. Despite his irresponsible attitude, it pained her to admit that his skill was undeniable.

Matsukata’s apprentices, though, were deemed half-baked exorcists relegated to monitoring the office while he was gone. And so, they had nothing but time on their hands. Rikka rested her elbows on the desk beside her, her face in her hands.

“Say... Once a Childcatcher’s Box is “finished,” do you think you can seal it away again?” asked Youta.

“Well, who knows... Isn’t that what they’re discussing at the meeting right now?” answered Rikka with little thought. At that very moment, the rattling of keys turned in the door, until the door got opened violently.

“Gah, man, I’m so freakin’ tired... You two, fetch me some salt. Salt...”

They turned around to see a man in his thirties, dressed in threadbare

morning clothes, with a disgruntled expression.

Besides his scruffy black hair and scraggly beard, he had dark bags under his eyes. Although his eyes looked sickly at the best of times, he had an unpleasant demeanor about thirty percent worse than usual. He seemed to be in a bad mood.

“Ugh, Sousuke, you’re covered in bad residue,” said Youta, as a potent spiritual residue came off the man, almost like the stench of death. When the junior apprentice gagged and stuck his tongue out, the man turned to glare at him, narrowing his eyes.

“Yeah. That’s why I told you to get me some damn salt. I’m not coming in, am I, dumbass? So hurry up and give me some salt.”

Not only did the man have an unpleasant look in his eyes, but his words and attitude also left much to be desired. Still, Rikka had to admit this man was their mentor.

Rikka and Youta replied, “Yeah, yeah.” Both shrugged their shoulders before standing up together.

After fetching the somewhat expensive purification salt, they shook it over their mentor with enough enthusiasm to cover him completely. When they finished, their mentor stepped into the office. After taking long strides across the room, he sank into a sofa, whose leather upholstery was peeling away in places.

“You’re back surprisingly early. I didn’t think you’d make it back today,” muttered Rikka.

“Does this mean that you sealed away the Childcatcher’s Box?” asked Youta, leaning forward in anticipation.

Their mentor just put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, then slowly shook his head. After breathing out the smoke with exasperation, he formed a sarcastic smile and spoke up.

“Nah. Sealing away somethin’ like that is impossible, impossible. Everyone in the room said the same thing the moment we saw it. Of course, we didn’t waste time chatting about it.

“That bad?”

“Yeah, that bad. That thing’ll probably continue working its curse for another eighty years.” Matsukata expelled another cloud of cigarette smoke with a bitter expression. After dropping the spent cigarette in an ashtray, he leaned against the sofa and gazed at the ceiling. “The grudge is too powerful. It’s not the item that a ceremonial bonfire can handle. The seal will probably unravel after a few months, even if a dozen of us worked together.”

Matsukata cut his explanation short. He sighed and took a long drag on a cigarette, seemingly replenishing his breath. Then he took his time, puffing out smoke once more.

After a long silence, Rikka and the junior apprentice looked at each other.

“So, what will you do?” asked Rikka.

“Nothin’ we can do,” said Matsukata, fiddling with his cigarette. Only his eyes moved to rest on his apprentices. “All we can do is regularly place seals on the box that’ll unravel in seconds, waitin’ for the grudge to die down... That was the conclusion. Ah, but—skipping over female practitioners—we’ll have each male practitioner take turns placing the seal. Each of us will have our turn about once every six months. Then it’ll rotate again. In other words, a real pain in the ass volunteer work.”

The reactions of the apprentices to his words were like night and day. Rikka, a woman, performed a fist pump of relief. On the other hand, Youta expressed despair and groaned as if this were the end of the world.

“Maybe you can excuse me, on account of my particular quirk...? Seriously, gimme a break...” said Youta.

Hearing the sincerity in his voice, Rikka could not help but give her junior apprentice a look of sympathy.

Youta had a quirk of unintentionally picking up any lingering emotions or memories stuck to objects and places, and handling the box would definitely be an arduous task.

But Matsukata just scratched his head, where he wore his hair in a loose ponytail, and said, while making a face, “Yeah, yeah, I know. As long as I’m still

working, I'll take care of your turn. No way 'round it, huh? Leaving that aside, you two'll learn how it's done. So you can teach your successors."

The two apprentices looked at each other. In unison, they nodded. After noting this with a snort of satisfaction, their mentor ground his dwindling cigarette into his ashtray.

After resuming the news broadcast on the TV, which had been left on, Matsukata muttered, "Looks like the scariest thing in the world ain't gods, ghosts, or vengeful spirits. It's people."

Final Chapter: The Inconceivable Paradise

1

Along with its contents, the paper bag hurtled through the air before succumbing to gravity and landing on the floor. To Nicola's eyes, this all seemed to play out in slow motion.

Upon impacting against the floor, the bag's contents fell out with a thud. As the wooden box with its dark red stain tumbled out, the remains of shattered natural stones scattered across the floor.

A smell like rusty iron and the foul odor unique to rotting corpses stimulated Nicola's nostrils. Then, she was aware of a sudden pressure on her abdomen that felt like it would crush her internal organs.

"Ugh..." Nicola tried to speak, but her voice got caught in the back of her throat, never forming words. She began to gasp, her breathing becoming irregular. Her fingers began to spasm bizarrely.

Run, get away from here quickly, she thought. But her body did not move how she wanted it to. With a side glance, she saw Emma crumple to the ground like a marionette whose strings got cut.

Char, too, was overcome. He had a face that was no longer pale but ashen, and he continued throwing up. As he gasped for air between bouts of vomiting, he groaned a few words.

"Sis... Don't you dare touch that—This is a Childcatcher's Box."

After hearing Char utter those fateful words with a trembling voice, Nicola opened her eyes wide. The instant she understood what he meant, she felt all the blood drain out of her body.

Nicola immediately flipped the bag, tipping out its contents before picking up a couple of sacrificial standins—wooden boards shaped to look like people—from the floor. She quickly wrote her name on some of them, then Char and Emma's names on those that remained. She noticed blood dripping from her

nose, falling onto the pieces of wood and staining them, but this was no time to worry about such things.

Despite still breathing raggedly, she had written each person's name on three standins. She finally felt the intense pressure on her abdomen—that threatened to crush her organs—suddenly become much lighter. Nicola slowly drifted down until she was sitting on the floor.

At that moment, the wooden standins fell out of her hands, but she was afraid to pick them up. She slowly raised her head to see that Char was still breathing raggedly. Yet he appeared to be alive.

Nicola glanced at the wooden box that had tumbled onto the floor, resembling a piece of intricate Japanese marquetry. She then turned her gaze to the shattered natural stones nearby and scowled.

She could no longer hear the intermittent sound she had noticed earlier of something hard breaking. From her perspective, the most likely source of that noise was the shattered stones scattered across the floor. Seeing how this time-limited provision she had prepared had performed, she tutted loudly. She glanced at her junior apprentice as she wiped the blood from her nose.

"You... Did you...touch *that thing* directly...?" she asked Char, who slowly raised his head and nodded slightly with an air of bitter regret.

"Yeah... At the same time we heard that final noise, and my fingers just brushed it for a moment."

On closer inspection, Nicola saw streaks of bright scarlet throughout the pools of vomit Char had left on the floor.

Nicola screwed up her face and groaned, "You're lucky you're still alive."

"I know, right..." Even as he wiped the bloody vomit from his mouth, he could not help but chuckle bitterly, realizing they had already exchanged those words. Their roles had reversed from what they had been at Olivia's grave only the day before.

Their faces were both pale—Char looked anemic. Still, after they got back on their feet, the two peered down at Emma, who was still on the floor.

“I’m pretty sure I knocked it out of her hands before the last stone broke, so sis hasn’t touched it since that last crack. Based on how sensitive she is, the miasma alone could have shocked her.”

Char nervously reached down to place his hand on Emma’s neck to check her pulse.

After a relieved sigh, he said, “Thank goodness.”

Emma remained sprawled on the floor, motionless. But her breathing was regular, meaning she had merely lost consciousness. Char lifted her off the floor and laid her down on her bed.

Nicola picked up the wooden standins scattered on the floor and arranged them on a table. She frowned as she examined the cracks running across the standins.

“They’ve... Cracked in different ways?” Nicola picked up the first of the standins, which had their names written on it, and looked carefully at it.

As Nicola compared the standins, she realized hers alone had larger cracks than the others.

The cracks on Emma and Char’s standins were about the same size. While they had received progressively deeper cracks, little by little, their damage had not developed as far as that of Nicola’s standins.

Considering that the curse of the box should only affect children, she would have guessed that the damage to younger targets would be greater. Nicola would have understood that result if that was the intention. But why did her standins appear much more damaged than Char’s when they were both the same age?

As Nicola racked her brains over this problem, Char looked at what was in Nicola’s hands.

In an ironic tone, he muttered, “Ah, yeah. I see, so that’s how it is... Even though I have the body of a child, a girl at that, my mind is that of a man. Probably why I was able to hang in there despite touching the box directly. Maybe that puts me in a gray area according to the box’s judgment.”

Nicola's eyes widened because the hypothesis seemed persuasive. The two looked down as cracks continued to slowly spread across their standins, neither saying a word.

Fortunately, Nicola had at least a few dozen standins. These remained from when she nearly died during the incident with Olivia when Sieghart and the other boys had gathered them in huge quantities.

Regardless of how many they had left, she did not doubt their situation could worsen. They could not just stand there twiddling their thumbs.

"I'll use what we have here to seal it temporarily. But after that, I'm leaving everything to you, senior apprentice," said Char.

"But..." began Nicola.

Sealing the box would provide an extension to their time limit. However, they could only do this on the last Childcatcher's Box for a few months before it became undone, even with the efforts of several exorcists. They could not solve the problem like this, as her junior apprentice was physically a child and a female, which put him in considerable danger.

Char shrugged and chuckled as if he had read Nicola's mind like the back of his hand.

"I mean, what else is there to do? You don't have any better plans, do you? The risk of damage to me is still less than it is for you, so it's an easy decision. Right?"

Nicola was silent. She bit her lip and stopped herself from objecting further. As long as she could not suggest a course of action that replaced Char's plan, she had no right to dispute it further.

As he looked back at Nicola, Char smiled slightly, then swiftly sorted through the contents of Nicola's bag. He picked out a few paper talismans and other tools of the trade.

"Don't worry. The talismans you make are more precise than mine. It should all work out," said Char, smiling as casually as ever.

Nicola closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She then slowly breathed out again

and raised her eyelids.

“Use this too,” said Nicola, tossing the onyx necklace she had meant to give to Sieghart for Char to catch. She quickly turned away from him.

“Oh, thanks... Well then, I’ll leave my fate in your hands.” After he spoke these careless words, Nicola sensed Char turning his back to her.

“Leave it to me,” Nicola murmured before they resolved to devote themselves to their tasks.

While inscribing names on wooden standins, Nicola glanced to one side to see what was happening behind her.

Each time Char touched the Childcatcher’s Box directly, a crack suddenly appeared in the corresponding standin. Cracks soon spread endlessly across the surfaces of the successive ones. To keep up, Nicola quickly picked up new ones, one after the other, to inscribe Char’s name on them with all her might.

After some time, over ten standins for Char had broken. Suddenly, Nicola felt something pressed against her back. She knew what it was without turning around. Her junior apprentice had returned with his back still facing hers.

Char’s standins, including Emma and Nicola’s, had stopped cracking.

“Is it done?” asked Nicola.

“Yeah, though I dunno how long it’ll hold. I think I did pretty well,” replied Char. With his back still pressed against Nicola’s, he slowly slid down until he was sitting on the floor. Looking back, Nicola saw that his face was practically ashen.

Once Nicola took her junior apprentice by the hand and guided him to his bed, Char obediently sat on the mattress before collapsing and staring at the ceiling.

“You okay?” asked Nicola.

Char answered weakly, “At the very least, there’s no physical damage.”

He appeared mentally exhausted due to his unavoidable tendency to pick up residual emotions.

“Damn that was rough. Ah, crap, I can still hear children screaming in my head. Lemme tell you, I’m never doing that again...” muttered Char, balling his hands up and resting the back of his fists against his eyes.

Nicola knelt on the side of the bed, then ruffled her junior apprentice’s hair before standing up again.

“You can leave the rest to me, the senior apprentice. Sleep well,” said Nicola, clenching her fists slightly.

There were only two exorcists in this entire world, and it just so happened they were still children in female bodies. Words could not describe just how ill-equipped they were to deal with the Childcatcher’s Box.

Just how long Char’s seal would last—against an artifact undone in a few months, even when seals were placed by several exorcists—was still unknown. They had only extended their time limit by a small amount, doing nothing to resolve their problem. And it was not as if Nicola had any solution in mind.

Even so... By risking his life, Nicola’s junior apprentice had bought them some time. So Nicola had to do whatever she could in the time he had given her. She turned on her heel and headed to the room next door to fetch the other three.

2

“A little present just arrived, addressed to Char and me, bearing a curse filled with murderous intent. There’s no time to waste! Please give me a hand,” stated Nicola, immediately bowing after knocking on the door of the boys’ room and entering.

The three boys looked startled, but their expressions soon turned serious. With all of them in tow, Nicola returned to her room. After closing the door behind her and locking it, she gave the boys a summary of what had happened.

She explained what the Childcatcher’s Box was, that Char had placed a seal on it all by himself, and that they did not know how long said seal would last. When doing this, she was candid with them, hiding nothing and explaining everything. No one else ventured to open their mouths until she finished

speaking.

Once she went through everything as best she could, Nicola sighed and slowly raised her head. In front of her were the three boys, still silent, with stern faces.

Usually, Ernst would have doubted the authenticity of Nicola's claim of a "curse," but he remained silent. The sight of Nicola's nosebleed as well as Emma and Char sleeping with the blood drained out of their faces must have allowed him to infer the severity of the situation.

Following a prolonged silence, Alois was the first to speak up.

"Is...this the Childcatcher's Box you speak of?

"Yes..."

Their gazes soon focused on *the box* as it sat on the table, carelessly placed there.

The exterior of the wooden box, which Nicola recalled appearing stained with a dark red liquid, was now covered with talismans. Not a single patch was left uncovered, so its surface was no longer visible.

Several stones making up the onyx necklace—resembling rosary beads—around the box had already cracked. Underneath the gems cracking were the paper talismans, which were slowly becoming stained dark red.

Before their eyes, one of the damaged gems shattered into pieces with a dry *crack*. No sooner had this happened than the other onyx stones showed large fractures. Nicola bit her bottom lip slightly.

For the time being, many onyx stones suppressed the curse. But as more of these gems broke apart, the burden on those that remained would grow heavier just as the rate at which they shattered would accelerate. As expected, the seal might not last much longer.

After glancing at the blinding body of Ernst's guardian spirit, Nicola pointed to the Childcatcher's Box sitting on the table.

"I beg your pardon, but...Ernst. Please hold this."

"H-Hold it...?"

Having heard what was involved in creating the Childcatcher's Box, Ernst was understandably hesitant, and his expression stiffened. He soon picked up the box, albeit with an air of reluctance. When he did so, a dry rattling sound came from inside... *Rattle-rattle-tat.* A sour expression unfolded across Ernst's face. Without a doubt, he had just imagined the contents of the box.

The guardian spirit behind him recoiled as its intensity fell dramatically. Thanks to its effect, the pace at which the onyx beads cracked slowed noticeably. Amazed as always by the strength of the guardian spirit, Nicola sighed quietly to herself.

Sieghart looked away from the Childcatcher's Box and placed his hand on his chin, contemplating.

"Come to think of it, I don't think we can do too much to help with a matter that Nicola and Char can't deal with. Though we can help find the one who sent it, I'm afraid we're only laymen in dispelling the curse itself..." declared Sieghart.

"That's true," said Nicola, at first nodding along with Sieghart before suddenly gasping and turning back to look at him. "Wait one moment. What did you just say?"

Nicola stared straight into Sieghart's amethyst eyes, her eyes shining with excitement.

"Are you saying you know who sent the Childcatcher's Box?"

At first Sieghart had a puzzled expression, his locks of silver hair swaying as he inclined his head. Then, he smoothly answered Nicola.

"Uh, yeah. If that's all, we have enough information to make a good guess. Unfortunately, we have no evidence at all. Nicola, don't you know the answer yourse—"

Nicola interrupted Sieghart by shaking her head forcefully. Sieghart looked surprised but then stared at the box in Ernst's hands.

"A cursed object that kills women and children meant for you and Char. If you consider the sender's motive, I think it should be self-evident."

She furrowed her brow. Even with all that prompting from Sieghart, she still had no idea who it could be.

The only thing she and Char had in common was that they were both exorcists in their past lives. But those who knew this had gathered in this room.

In this life, she had met Char a few days ago, and she could not recall them conspiring to do anything that would warrant someone wishing death upon them. As much as she pondered, she was getting nowhere.

After watching Nicola struggle, Alois shrugged lightly and smiled awkwardly. Finally, he leaned against a wall, folded his arms, and sighed as he spoke up.

“The motive in question has no value to you and Char, so it probably couldn’t have been further from your thoughts. But you two belong to a minority.” After a brief pause, he continued in a voice lacking warmth, “There are those who would do anything just to decide who marries me.”

At this, Nicola gasped and looked up at Alois.

A wry smile spread across Sieghart’s face before he nodded slowly in confirmation.

“Come on... Even I know enough to understand the interests at play here,” said Ernst.

With even Ernst looking at her in disbelief, Nicola felt uncomfortable and averted her eyes.

Sieghart chuckled at this interaction as he looked down at Nicola and said, “Right. Some people would benefit if you and Char died right now. Miss Elfriede, the third candidate to be Alois’s next fiancée, and her father, Marquess Ludendorff. With the marquess, he even knows where we’re staying.”

Nicola gasped again after hearing this explanation from Sieghart. Now that he mentioned it, that was indeed all true. However, the image of a little girl whose time stopped at age ten suddenly rose from the back of Nicola’s mind.

“B-But, she’s...” *Run away, or else otherwise lost.* Supposing that Nicola and Char had died, leaving only Elfriede as a candidate, there was no point in the marquess having done this if the girl did not exist.

In response to Nicola's confusion, Sieghart smiled awkwardly and quietly finished his explanation.

"Nicola, you told us that when you were locked in that dilapidated shed, you heard the kidnappers targeted girls with blonde hair. You reasoned that they wouldn't harm Char or Emma..."

Nicola nodded but stopped as it finally hit her, and she vividly remembered the conversation between the kidnapper.

"You know damn well this month's order was for a blonde, sixteen or seventeen years old!"

"So what?! He's only buying one of the blondes, so we'll have to sell the other one!"

"You don't mean... They meant to procure a blonde girl to take Elfriede's place...?" murmured Nicola in shock, her voice dry.

"I have no definitive evidence. It is only speculation," said Sieghart with a nervous smile. He then looked at Alois, and they shrugged at one another.

When she saw this, Nicola bit her lip slightly, and frowned. Indeed, they had no physical evidence despite the pieces fitting together. She cast her mind back to the manor, with out-of-season flowers blooming in the garden and a house filled with older housemaids.

She supposed Marquess Ludendorff made the Childcatcher's Box and was behind the kidnappers. If that was true, then there was a possibility that he had used children abducted in the past as "materials" for the box.

Thinking of the hydrangeas in the garden that had supposedly changed color by chance, Nicola looked down and clenched her fists tightly. So tightly that her nails dug into her palms, causing her pain. But Nicola was almost grateful for the pain because it sometimes helped people clear their heads.

After taking a deep breath, Nicola raised her head.

"We are going to Ludendorff Manor at once. If we're lucky, we might just be

able to bury this Childcatcher’s Box.”

3

The travelers lit their oil lanterns and exited the inn.

“Please, look after Char and Emma,” said Nicola, turning around and bowing to Alois before she left. Only three of them—Nicola, Sieghart, and Ernst—would go to Ludendorff Manor. They had agreed that Alois would remain at the inn where they had their lodgings.

“I will also place our lives in your hands,” continued Nicola, handing her remaining wooden standins to Alois.

Under the present circumstances, the Childcatcher’s Box had become a ticking time bomb. While Sieghart and Ernst were men, they had not reached the age of majority and might be targets of the box’s killing curse.

The group decided Alois would stay behind as insurance, to act as a lifeline if they could not even out the seal Chard and placed and failed to destroy the Childcatcher’s Box.

At first, Alois seemed reluctant to be the one to hold the fort, but in the end, he gave in to pressure from Nicola and agreed.

“Be careful, all three of you,” said Alois just before they left. The three nodded and took their first steps along the main street, where night had finally descended. The flames inside their lanterns flickered.

Children and other youth had filled the street during the day, but only adults attended the festival at night. Bars and open stalls selling alcohol were a roaring success, as lively laughter and people singing dominated the space. Nicola’s group ignored this commotion as they walked quickly along the street.

“Ernst, could you tell me what pace it is breaking at?” asked Nicola.

Then, Ernst looked at his pocket watch before responding, “Under ten minutes. One breaks about every eight minutes.”

“I see...” murmured Nicola. She gazed at the onyx necklace wrapped around the Childcatcher’s Box in Ernst’s arms. Roughly three-tenths of the onyx beads had shattered into pieces. A red-black stain seeped into the paper talismans

beneath the necklace at a rate directly proportional to the number of broken beads.

With each passing second, the seal continued to unravel. Nicola recognized that discomfort—like hands groping at her internal organs—slowly growing stronger again.

“Let’s hurry, shall we?” said Sieghart. Nicola and Ernst nodded in agreement, and the three picked up their pace.

Finally, they could see the opulent gates of the manor just ahead of them. Behind the gates, the moonlight illuminated the spacious garden, and the stately house beside it had lamplight glowing in the windows. The three looked at each other and nodded in unison.

A middle-aged man with tightly combed hair and a cold gleam in his eyes greeted them after they rang the bell at the gate. He was the impudent house steward who had received them at the mansion earlier that day and made Nicola think of a piece of wire.

The man looked suspicious as he regarded these unexpected guests and confirmed their identities. Although Nicola might have imagined it, the steward’s eyelids twitched when he recognized her.

Sieghart took a quick step forward to represent their trio.

“We would like to meet with Marquess Ludendorff at once. I trust you don’t mind?” Sieghart had a forceful tone, brooking no objection, which was rare for him. His usual peaceful demeanor now had faint lines in his brow, and his eyes were sharp as he observed the house steward.

It appeared the steward flinched but quickly composed himself and bowed courteously.

“Wait just one moment. I will seek my lord’s permission,” the steward responded.

Just as the steward was about to return to the mansion, Nicola stopped him. She wore a fake smile and called out to him..

“While we wait, might we walk around the garden? It looks so beautiful under

the moonlight."

"That shouldn't be a problem," replied the steward, beckoning the trio into the garden before turning on his heel and heading back to the mansion. After watching him withdraw, Nicola stepped carefully into the garden under the veil of night. The spacious garden glowed under the half-moon hanging in the night sky.

Pale light poured down the fountains and flower beds where spring flowers bloomed profusely. It was a fantastical sight compared to how it had looked during the day, but Nicola paid no mind to its beauty. She silently kept walking ahead.

Nicola eventually came to the spot she was interested in and stopped. She had come to the corner of the garden of pink hydrangeas, still in full bloom. There was just one bed in that space where the flowers had petals of a different color, a patch where blue hydrangeas bloomed.

While hydrangeas turned blue in acidic soil, they would turn pink in alkaline soil. The aluminum that contributed to the pigment of the blue flowers would readily dissolve in acidic soil, but little would dissolve in alkaline soil. And in Europe, *most soil was alkaline*.

Unless one took special measures, blue hydrangeas would not naturally bloom there. Nicola cast her eyes down and bit her lip.

Oxidation was most pronounced early in decomposition when dead bodies were buried in the earth. As this acidic decay occurred, bodies released gas.

As proteins in the body's tissues broke down, alkaline replaced this. However, at least in the early stages of decomposition, the surrounding soil tended to be acidic. Nicola gently ran her fingers along the petals that had turned blue.

Finding bodies buried underneath red hydrangeas was a cliché in mystery novels. Phosphorus, one of the main components of bones and teeth, played a part in inhibiting the absorption of the aluminum that resulted in blue coloration. Such hydrangeas would rapidly turn pink and gradually change to a vivid red.

When Nicola heard footsteps behind her, she turned around. A small boy with

freckles, chestnut brown hair and eyes the color of burnt sienna stood there. She locked eyes with this diminutive figure, and his eyes widened in shock. The boy, who wore knee-length trousers with suspenders, looked about seven or eight years old.

Nicola knelt to bring herself down to eye-level with the boy.

“Hey,” she said softly to stop the boy running away. “Could it be that it’s your body underneath these flowers?”

Beside Nicola, Sieghart and Ernst gasped and said nothing. They just watched, waiting to see what would happen next.

The boy stared back at Nicola with confusion, then shook his head vigorously.

“No, everyone else’s body is here, but my dad took care of my funeral. So I’m not... I am not down there,” replied the boy, awkwardly attempting to be polite before glancing at another corner of the garden. In that corner, there stood an unassuming wooden hut.

The household’s gardener would usually stay in such a structure in the garden of the estate Nicola guessed this was the son of the gardener, who had died only a week or so ago. When she asked the boy his name, he said it was Finn.

“Well then, Finn, have you ever seen this before?” asked Nicola, pointing to the Childcatcher’s Box in Ernst’s hands. The boy’s eyes wavered almost imperceptibly, but then he quickly nodded.

With some hesitation, he mumbled, “We received it... From the lord of this manor...”

“The child was still of tender age, began coughing up blood one day, suffering... They told me the doctor said it was a rare disease whose cause was unknown.”

Nicola clenched her back teeth as she remembered what the old woman said. She was so furious that she felt her blood was about to boil. So many blameless children endured excruciating pain, the sensation of their organs torn to pieces, before dying. She wondered how terrifying that must have been.

“I see... That must have hurt and been hard,” muttered Nicola in a subdued voice.

Smiling through his tears, Finn nodded.

“Well then, Finn. Just where is “everyone” now?” asked Nicola.

Finn immediately pointed up at a corner of the mansion’s second floor. When Nicola recalled her mental map of the building, she recognized it as the marquess’ collection room.

“Do they all still play together in *that town*?”

“Yes! Usually, I play too, but sometimes I worry about my dad and the flowers in the garden, and come outside to check on them,” said Finn before laughing sheepishly.

When Nicola asked him if he would lead them to the place where “everyone” still played later on, he happily agreed to do so.

She thanked Finn and stood up, looking back at Sieghart and Ernst. As always, Ernst stared in the wrong direction, frowning and groaning. But Sieghart looked where Finn was with a mournful expression.

“Looks like we’ve found the gardener’s child,” he said. Because Finn had no intention of harming Sieghart, he could only vaguely grasp Finn’s presence. By piecing together fragments of the conversation between Finn and Nicola, he had more or less understood what had happened. Sieghart slowly exhaled and cast his eyes down.

Nicola’s eyes met those of Sieghart’s, and they could read their foremost thoughts through this. Though this might only be circumstantial evidence, they could be sure the marquess was guilty.

◇

Marquess Ludendorff’s gaze stopped on Nicola after viewing his visitors from the staircase landing. An overt look of disappointment appeared on his face.

It was often said eyes are the window to the soul, and sometimes eyes let slip secrets without their owners speaking.

“What on earth are you thinking, visiting at such an hour?” spat Marquess

Ludendorff as he descended the stairs into the entrance hall. Although the clock had only struck eight at night, one could consider it late, without a prior appointment.

While cramming his folds of excess fat into his dressing gown, the marquess snorted in a nauseating manner and said, “Don’t you think this is a bit ill-mannered, eh?”

Sieghart stepped forward, but Nicola grabbed his sleeve to hold him back.

Pulling her chin back, Nicola turned her gaze to the marquess as if to challenge him and remarked, “Huh... Ill-mannered, you say? I have no intention of being lectured on manners by a man who would send me such an inhumane, cursed object.”

Nicola lacked the courtesy and rhetoric that nobility usually engaged in as she gave the marquess an icy glare. Ernst raised his arms, still holding the Childcatcher’s Box, to show what Nicola was referring to.

“My, whatever do you mean?” said the marquess in a bare-faced attempt at feigning ignorance. When looking at the faint smile on his lips, it was hard to tell if he meant to go on hiding the truth. As Nicola felt her rage begin to well up, she squeezed her hands tightly into fists.

“Erm... You buried the children’s bodies under the blue hydrangeas, did you not?” Already sure of the answer, Nicola looked right at the marquess.

In a contrived display of contemplation, the marquess placed one hand on his chin.

“Let me see, I’m not quite sure,” said the marquess, still playing the fool. He rubbed his fat fingers against his chin as his grin widened, and he continued, “Regrettably, I left the work of *disposal* to my steward. I don’t know their exact location. Oliver, you heard what the young lady said. Is she right?”

The marquess looked over his shoulder at the steward, who stood attentively behind him. But the slightly older man remained expressionless.

“She is not mistaken, m’lord,” said Oliver, lacking any intonation.

“Oh,” said the marquess, a gleam appearing in his eye before an amused

chuckle emerged from deep in his throat. “I don’t know how you came to know that, but it looks like you’re right.”

After saying this, Marquess Ludendorff’s portly bellow rumbled with laughter as a grin raised the corners of his mouth again.

Nicola clenched her teeth as she glared at the hateful creature in front of her. Everything about the man was so repulsive that she thought she might vomit. But she knew becoming enraged would play into the enemy’s hands. With great effort, she convinced herself to calm down before speaking up.

“There’s just one thing I’d like to know. How did you learn about its effects and how to make it?” said Nicola in a low voice after pointing at the Childcatcher’s Box.

At this question, the marquess snorted while laughing and said, “And what would you do if you knew?”

The marquess answered her plainly, dispensing with any further pretense. According to him, he had found a description of the box in a tome that was part of his predecessor’s collection.

“Let me see, the author’s name was...”

“It was Rumpknecht, m’lord,” said the steward, taking over the marquess’ explanation and casually uttering that fateful name.

The name came from a being that delivered unwanted gifts to naughty children. Upon hearing the name of the demon who had tempted Olivia and constructed this entire world, Nicola could not stop herself from scowling. But this was somehow not unexpected, and everything fell into place.

The Childcatcher’s Box should not have existed at this time and place, unquestionably an out-of-place artifact. Given that the construction method first appeared in an urban legend in early 2000s Japan, there was no other way of classifying it. Nicola could think of no one besides the demon who could have managed such a feat.

You mixed some dangerous stuff into this world when you created it, didn’t you? Nicola thought while tutting dramatically. There seemed to be no end to the demon’s villainy and vulgarity. His very nature, delighting in treating people

like toys, continued to rub Nicola wrong.

Although she knew this behavior was not her priority, she glanced at the box in Ernst's hands. Only about half of the onyx beads wound around the Childcatcher's Box remained intact. Their time limit was steadily approaching.

"Nicola," whispered Sieghart, then scanned their surroundings to keep Nicola safe. He looked at the marquess and continued, "The lord judges the crimes of the people. But the kingdom will judge the crimes of the lord. If any bodies get found beneath those blue hydrangeas, they will surely find you guilty. Despite that, you have confessed your crimes most straightforwardly."

Sieghart narrowed his eyes, staring daggers at the marquess. Yet the marquess did not recoil at this threat and laughed derisively at Sieghart, displaying a total lack of concern.

The marquess shrugged theatrically and responded, "Well, of course. No matter what I say, the dead tell no tales."

A door opened behind the trio, followed by vulgar laughter. They saw the kidnappers who had abducted Nicola, Char, and Emma from the festival standing in the doorway.

About a dozen more men dressed as coachmen or chefs stood behind them. Nicola guessed that these must be servants of this house. Though they shared none of the kidnappers' glee, they held such improvised weapons as machetes, axes, or kitchen knives.

After looking at the men, the marquess grinned widely, then said, "Bandits who took advantage of the festival attacked you, and you never made it to the mansion tonight. There will be no witnesses, and your bodies will be found floating in the lake a few days from now. That will be the end of it."

The marquess drew back his neck, which was so fat that it had merged with his chin.

"Yet another shortsighted act..." muttered Ernst. Nicola and Sieghart sighed in agreement. The marquess' confession would remain shrouded in darkness if they died there.

While the marquess' methods might be hasty, they had a certain logic.

“Kill them,” commanded the marquess, at which the men at the door readied their weapons. These men had already blocked the entrance as an escape route. In that case, there was nothing to do but to escape through the mansion.

Sieghart effortlessly hoisted Nicola off the ground before he and Ernst started running.

4

Nicola ended up with Sieghart’s arms around her knees and waist. But at this moment, she could not refuse this treatment and knew that her dismal lack of athleticism would only slow the two boys down.

Though it pained her to admit it, Sieghart could still run faster than Nicola, even while carrying her. One might say that this demonstrated how quick Sieghart and Ernst were on their feet. She could do nothing but cling tightly to Sieghart’s shoulders as her childhood friend carried her.

The entrance hall had a two-floor wellhole arrangement, with a grand staircase leading to the second floor in its center. As Sieghart raced up the stairs, Nicola glanced past his shoulder to see what was behind them. Looking downstairs, she saw Ernst matching Sieghart’s pace as he ran.

A few meters behind Ernst, the kidnappers and servants followed. The marquess and his steward walked at the rear, most likely due to his obesity not allowing him to catch up with them. Still, he remained calm and composed as he watched this attempt on the trio’s lives from a safe distance. This attitude infuriated Nicola.

Once the trio reached the top of the stairs, they faced long corridors running left and right.

“Please head to the collection room,” Nicola quickly declared. Without hesitation, Sieghart advanced to the left-hand corridor.

“What is the pace now?” Nicola asked Ernst, her eyes falling on the Childcatcher’s Box underneath his arm.

Not sounding even slightly short of breath, Ernst answered, “One is breaking every five minutes.”

Nicola bit down hard on her lip. The door to the collection was already in front of them.

“Ernst, please hold on to the Childcatcher’s Box and come with me. Sieghart, I will ask you to stay behind and deal with our pursuers,” said Nicola, though she felt the arms carrying her tighten.

“What... What if I say no?” said Sieghart, furrowing his brow and frowning as he kicked open the door to the collection room.

But Sieghart’s hesitation only lasted for a moment, and his grip on Nicola immediately loosened.

“Only joking,” he said with a smirk before gently setting Nicola back on the floor.

Nicola also smirked as she marveled at how understanding her childhood friend was. He must really have wanted to stop her or go with her and Ernst. Nicola had a prior offense, so this reaction was understandable.

During the incident with Olivia, Nicola ran off with only Ernst to accompany her and nearly ended up dead. Once again, she was about to leave Sieghart behind, taking only Ernst. It was understandable that Sieghart would conflate these two scenarios.

In the end, Sieghart respected her wishes. Just as always, Nicola presumed her childhood friend’s kindness.

“Don’t worry,” said Nicola, brushing her hand across Sieghart’s forehead before they parted. She then took her childhood friend’s hand and gently removed the ring he was wearing. The signet ring was made from the amethyst drawn to Sieghart.

Even when Nicola placed the ring on her thumb, it was far too bulky for her, with a visible gap between it and her skin. She let out a brief, wry chuckle.

“Look, I’m borrowing this signpost. Don’t worry, I will come back to you,” said Nicola.

She held Sieghart's hand, which she remembered being so soft when they were children but had become strong and covered in calluses and blisters from his studies and swordsmanship. Even so, the warmth she remembered remained unchanged.

"I'll be back soon," she said, smiling and turning on her heel. Then Nicola and Ernst ran off together.

◇

Nicola's black hair became darker than the night sky, streaming behind her as she ran ahead without looking back.

Even though she always put on a brave face, Sieghart knew his childhood friend could be fragile. After watching her slender legs carry her away, he quietly looked down. Despite always grumbling about this and that, she still threw herself into dangerous situations. Nicola was just that sort of person, and Sieghart knew this all too well.

Because she could see so many things very well, the boundary between her and them was somewhat ambiguous. Perhaps that was why his childhood friend seemed to be a bit closer to that side than he was.

Though it appeared she put no value on her own life, for the sake of those close to her, she would happily weigh her life against theirs. In that way, she never seemed far away from peril. On top of this, she did not clearly distinguish between the living and the dead when choosing whom she would save. As a constant onlooker, Sieghart felt uneasy.

If he had been honest, he would have told Nicola that he did not want her to leave his sight. Still, he wanted to respect her wishes. He reflected on just how bothersome the weakness that comes with love can be.

After looking around the collection room to see if there was anything he could use as a weapon, Sieghart let out a small sigh.

While there were some things only Nicola could do, other things were impossible for Sieghart. Unlike Ernt, he had no powerful guardian spirit following him wherever he went. It was difficult for him to defend against spiritual beings. Frustratingly, he spent all of his days being saved by Nicola.

As long as Nicola had someone to protect, she would always find some way to return. Sieghart decided that if he could act as a wedge to separate her from the next world, then perhaps there was some point in staying behind. Regardless of how blurry the border might be to Nicola, she felt closer to the other side.

"I'll be right here," murmured Sieghart. *Look back, don't lose sight of me. Make sure you come back. Please, let me be a wedge to keep Nicola on this side.*

After finishing his prayer, Sieghart turned to look at the entrance to the collection room. After pulling a saber down from a display on the wall, he held it, still in its sheath, at the ready.

5

Upon grabbing Ernst by the wrist—on the arm that was not holding the Childcatcher's Box—Nicola started running.

"Hey, do you know something? By saying, 'I'll be back soon,' you've assured him you will return home," said Ernst.

"Of course, I know that," replied Nicola. *Nobody here trusts me. I know I have a horrible record, but there's no need to doubt me. I wish they'd put a little faith in me*. As she pouted, she spied the one item she was looking for and ran toward it.

"Over here!" shouted Finn, suddenly appearing and waving to Nicola and Ernst. Next to him was the miniature town, the diorama that the marquess' daughter, Elfriede, had apparently made.

It was a beautiful recreation of the town, about forty centimeters on each side, with the fountain in the town square at its center.

A wind blew, seemingly out of nowhere, and the trees by the lakeshore swayed gently. Nicola could hear the voices of children playing. With no hesitation, Finn leaped inside the House for the Lost—or rather, the Town for the Lost.

Watching Finn vanish, Nicola gripped Ernst's wrist—she had held to drag him

—even more tightly.

“Ernst. We are about to jump inside that diorama,” she said.

“Eh? Huh... Hey, you wait just a minute. There’s no way that’s poss—”

“Hey, don’t be so stubborn! If I say we can do it, we can do it.”

Nicola heard Ernst continue to panic, but she ignored him. While still holding Ernst by the arm, she took a running leap.

◇

Suddenly, Nicola succumbed to gravity and fell into the diorama. As her insides seemed to float upward, she instinctively opened her eyes.

“Eh, uh, wha...” shrieked Nicola

“W-Why, you, we’re falling!” Ernst was right. They were falling.

They fell headfirst, almost like a giant hand had tossed them out of the sky. At a rate proportional to that at which the clouds receded into the distance, the town’s streets spreading out below them grew steadily larger.

“Wah, Finn, hang on! We seem to be falling?!” cried Nicola in a shrill voice.

The freckled boy just smiled as if he were having the time of his life.

“It’s all right. Inside this garden, nothing can hurt you.”

Even as Finn said this, the earth continued to draw closer. Just as Nicola shut her eyes tightly, bracing for impact, the speed at which they were falling decreased drastically.

While Nicola gawked in astonishment, she was on the ground before she knew it, sitting on a surface.

“Eh, that... That didn’t hurt...?” She could feel grass and damp soil under her hands, which she had planted on the ground.

The wind blew softly against her cheeks, filling her nose with the fragrance of grass and flowers. Cries of children as they played, trees swaying in the wind, even the distant sound of the water—it was all just like the real thing.

Nicola nervously looked at her surroundings and noticed flowers of every

color blooming. When she recognized the meticulously pruned flower beds, she realized it was the garden she had seen a short while ago.

On the far side of the stately ornate fence that surrounded the garden, just past the gate, the large fountain in the center of the town square sprayed water high into the air. Beyond that were the town's beautiful streets and the lake.

When Nicola checked what was next to her, she saw Ernst flat on his back. He was still holding the Childcatcher's Box and had his mouth wide open. However, it was not as if Nicola could not understand how he must have felt. All of one's senses—touch, sight, smell, and sound—were all recreated faithfully, so it would probably be more unusual to feel shocked.

As Nicola silently exchanged a glance with Ernst, still seated on the ground, a shadow suddenly fell beside her. She looked up to find a little girl with blonde hair standing there with her hands on her hips.

"My, you're our new friends, right? Welcome to my garden!" she exclaimed.

The girl's golden hair, trimmed somewhere around the small of her back, swayed gently as the wind blew through it. A friendly smile raised the corners of her bright eyes.

"My name's Elfriede. I'm part of the nobility, but you don't need to call me lady! It would be boorish to pay attention to status when we're playing together, would it not?"

The girl, who looked like she had leaped straight out of her portrait, said this with a cheerful smile. Elfriede held her hands for Nicola and Ernst to take before leading them to the town square. She gave human form to the words "lively" and "naive," far from the sickly image that Nicola had formed of Elfriede. On the contrary, she matched her former nanny's description—a tomboy—far better.

Although Nicola and Ernst were slightly taken aback, they quietly followed the girl.

The children were playing near the fountain. Their ages and genders varied, with the oldest looking about ten years old and the youngest being four or five.

As soon as they stepped into the town square, the children stopped playing and ran over to them. They got surrounded in the blink of an eye.

“What, what, are these newcomers?”

“I brought them with me.”

“It’s Finn! Welcome home!”

“Are these our new friends?”

“Ah! You’re the lady from before! Tell me, what are you doing here?”

Upon hearing a loud voice among the excited children coming from behind her, Nicola looked over her shoulder. She found the girl she had met in the kidnappers’ lair, Lila, looking up at her with eyes as round as saucers.

“What? Lila, do you know them too?” It was a boy with a flat cap, about ten years old, who asked Lila this. Nicola recognized him too. He was the missing child whom Nicola had seen in the newspaper aboard the train.

Together with Lila, this boy appeared to be one of the oldest children here. From the way he held back the children who tried to crowd around Nicola’s group, showing caution, it seemed they recognized him as the leader. With his somewhat insolent manner, he gave the impression of having been the leader of a gang of street urchins.

But Lila overlooked the boy’s caution as she showed him a carefree smile.

“Yep, that’s right! This lady got caught by those kidnappers too. She even helped Lila look for her ring!”

“Hmm, I guess you two got yourselves killed by the lord as well.”

These words from the boy in the flat cap left Nicola aghast. As Nicola struggled to speak, Finn answered in her place.

“The lady and her friend haven’t gotten killed yet, but they might be soon.”

I mean, that is the truth. But this tactless choice of words made Nicola’s face twitch.

The boy in the flat cap looked at them curiously as if he were appraising them.

“Well, fine,” he muttered. “In that case, I’ll let you join in. You can play with us. I’m Theodore, but call me Theo. And this girl, the smallest one, is Ann.”

“Ann isn’t small!”

“I’m Connie!”

“And I’m Laure!”

“Hey, Lila, I wanna play hide-and-seek next.”

“Ann wants to play hide-and-seek. No, drawing is more fun.”

“Oh, but Finn has just got back. We should play whatever game he wants to play next,” declared Elfriede.

Following Theo’s self-introduction, the other children gave names and argued over what they should all play. Including Finn and Elfriede, there were seven children in all. They made quite the racket.

Once Nicola finished gazing in disbelief, she raised her voice to calm the children down.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on.” After meeting the children’s eyes, she continued, “Sorry. We’d like to play too, but I’m sorry to say that we don’t have much time...”

The children all blinked in surprise and seemed genuinely perplexed.

“Why are you worried about the time? As long as we’re inside the garden, time barely moves forward outside,” said one of them.

“That’s right,” piped up another. “Even when we play here all day, the clock outside hardly changes.”

Nicola gasped and turned to look at Ernst.

But with a look of suspicion, he muttered, “I’m sorry, but I have no idea what’s going on. Who are you talking to?”

When Nicola asked what he meant, Ernst explained he could not see anyone apart from Nicola and Elfriede.

To cut a long story short, Nicola told him time did not progress inside this spirit realm. Ernst immediately took out his pocket watch.

“I see... Indeed, the hands appear to have stopped.”

Strictly speaking, the second hand moved so slowly that they could barely tell whether it moved. On close inspection, it moved little by little, a hair’s breadth

at a time. In all the time they spent looking at the face of Ernst's watch, the second hand did not advance one full second.

When Nicola's eyes finally fell on the Childcatcher's Box, she noticed that the onyx beads cracking had almost entirely died down. The children were telling the truth, and Nicola mused she might consider herself lucky. They had far more time to play with.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Ernst.

Nicola looked up at his face. She could hear children rushing each other along from a short distance away, shouting, "Let's hurry up and play!"

"Hmmm..." intoned Nicola, placing a hand on her chin as she contemplated what needed to be done. After a while, she turned to face Ernst once more. "I'm going to play with those children for a little while."

She wanted to convince the children to yield this garden to her. To that end, she knew that if she did not first get along with them, her plan would go nowhere.

◇

And so Nicola played with the children. Once they had played such games as tag, hide-and-seek, and red light, green light, she taught them the rules she had learned in Japan, and the children participated wholeheartedly.

In Nicola's past life, when she was still a little girl, she had often found that the other children kept her at a distance. The truth was she had very little experience playing with children around her age. She felt like she had reclaimed part of her childhood and played to her heart's content.

At first, Nicola had expected them to wear her out with their inexhaustible stamina, but this was not the case. No matter how long Nicola ran around within this spirit realm, she did not get tired or feel out of breath. As a bonus, she did not scrape her knees or even get her clothes dirty if she fell.

The Town for the Lost, much like the House for the Lost Nicola already knew, was a paradise for children.

From time to time, she asked Ernst to confirm the rate at which time passed,

yet the hands of his pocket watch barely moved. After playing for what felt like three hours, the second hand had only counted something like ten seconds. Nicola was shocked.

While playing with the children, Nicola understood each of their personalities.

In Theo's case, he gave Nicola the impression of being the leader of a gang of street urchins based on his mischievousness. But he was unexpectedly caring, fulfilling his role as the leader.

Lila came off as spoiled, like the youngest family child, whereas Connie was shy and easily embarrassed.

Laure was a girl who liked to leave things to others, unlike Ann, who enjoyed doing what everyone else did despite being the youngest.

Finn, the middle child, was a good listener and might have been the most sensible child.

As for Elfriede, she was energetic and the girl most likely to behave recklessly. She liked to climb trees and house roofs. Simply put, she was full of vigor.

When it was Elfriede's turn to be "it" during a game of tag, she quickly descended the tree she was climbing. Nicola watched her with a faraway look in her eyes and believed a better description of the girl was unruly rather than a tomboy.

Despite this, she noticed Elfriede took pains to see no one spent too long being "it." She took on the role of coordinator when the game divided opinions. When Nicola saw that Elfriede could behave responsibly, she could not dislike the girl.

Each child was full of individuality. Nicola did not tire of their company, even when she only watched them.

"Ann wants to play hide-and-seek one more time!" When Nicola joined the umpteenth game at the behest of the youngest, she coincidentally had chosen the same hiding place as Theo. That hiding place was behind the gardener's hut in a corner of the garden of Ludendorff Manor.

"Hey, I found this hiding place first. You go hide somewhere else," snapped

Theo.

“If I go look for another place now, the seeker will already be on the move by the time I find one,” protested Nicola.

Lila, the seeker, approached their hiding place while they were bickering. Both zipped their mouths shut, waiting for her footsteps to pass.

They breathed sighs of relief once they were sure Lila had moved away. Next to Nicola, Theo muttered, “Hey, what are you planning to do about that box?”

“That box?” Confused by the suddenness of the question, Nicola only blinked at first.

Theo puffed out his cheeks in exasperation.

“The thing that fellow over there, the one who can’t see us, is holding.” Theo frowned in dissatisfaction as he stared at Nicola.

For a moment, Nicola was at a loss for words, but she chuckled and marveled, “So you know what that is.”

Theo sat with his legs crossed. After propping his elbows on his legs, he grimaced and said, “Yeah, about that. We stood by and watched as our bodies were carved and stuffed into that box.”

“I see,” murmured Nicola. Theo had been wary of her and Ernst because they were carrying the Childcatcher’s Box. Nicola sighed softly, as this space she had entered was a place of kindness. Of this, there was no doubt.

Ghosts were vague in appearance since they forgot who they were. One day, a spirit might forget its name. Any unfinished business or grudges eroded along with those memories. At least, that was how it should happen.

But the children in this space could call each other’s names and confirm one another’s appearance. They would surely never forget the things that defined their existence.

Moreover, time progressed at a snail’s pace in this spirit realm. The grudge contained in the Childcatcher’s Box would likely never wear away if left inside this environment. She had unwittingly turned it into a perpetual engine of evil by bringing it here.

After falling silent and thinking for a short while, Nicola spoke up.

“You see, that box is... Right now, it will kill any women or children who get too close to it.”

“I know... Finn told me.”

“Right. The lord of this territory is trying to use it to kill the people who stand in his way.”

Once Nicola explained the situation, Theo tightened his lips out of frustration. A stern look came over him as his eyes focused on something behind him.

As Nicola followed his gaze, she saw the blank space where the lord’s mansion was missing. It was the only place in the entire diorama, which looked as if the real town had been cut out of the world and shrunk down, that differed from reality.

“To make sure that the lord can’t go on doing whatever he likes, we want to erase that box from existence. But to do that, we need this diorama. I’d like you all to hand it over to me. So, will you help us?”

After saying all of this, Nicola looked straight at Theo. She thought that if Theo, the group’s leader, did not give his approval, nor would the other children. Nicola had become familiar enough with the group’s ways she could tell that much.

Theo was silent for a while, clearly lost in thought. Finally, he looked up at Nicola again.

“If that box goes away... What’ll happen to us? Will we disappear?” he muttered.

This question made Nicola avert her eyes slightly. Then she slowly shook her head.

“If you have any regrets. If there’s anything you’re still worried about, or anything you’d still like to do, then you won’t disappear.”

He became quiet once more. After another moment, he exhaled, closed his eyes, and suddenly opened them.

“Got it. Then that’s fine. We’ll help you. We’ve still got things we want to do,

ya know?”

Theo stood up, stretched his arms, and crossed them behind his head. With a look like he had a burden lifted from his shoulders, he smiled at Nicola.

“It’s not like any of us wanted to kill Finn. And we can’t stand the thought of that lord, the geezer, doing what he likes with us any longer. Let me persuade the rest of these pip-squeak. Look, this is the perfect time. Lila’s whining about always being ‘it.’”

Just then, Theo turned away from Nicola and left their spot behind the hut.

As he waved to Nicola without looking back, he said, “Oh, but you’ll need to persuade Elfriede.”

When Nicola heard this belated warning, she was not sure how to feel, except the boy had some nerve. After watching Theo leave, she decided it was time to get up.

“What about me?” a voice suddenly announced.

“Ahh!” A jolt went through Nicola’s shoulders as she noticed Elfriede sticking her head through a hedge, grinning broadly. She was quite the tomboy. There was no rhyme or reason to her behavior, but she was consistently naughty.

Elfriede seemed satisfied with the reaction she had elicited and chuckled proudly before pushing her way through the hedge. Leaves rustled around her, and she came to stand next to Nicola.

“So, what about me?” Elfriede asked once more.

Nicola hemmed and hawed as she grasped for the right words. After all, this had arisen from her own father’s misdeeds.

Unsure of how to discuss the subject, Nicola groaned, thinking that *this* was not the way to put it, nor was *that*. Elfriede burst out laughing, then continued to laugh in amusement.

Once her fit of laughter had died down, Elfriede casually said, “I’ll do it.”

“Eh...?” responded Nicola dimwitted.

Elfriede snickered in amusement again.

“You want me to hand this diorama over to you, correct? So I’m telling you, I’ll do it. I overheard your talk with Theo.” She delivered her answer so breezily that Nicola just stood there with her mouth hanging open, looking intently at Elfriede’s face.

“You heard that... Erm, how much?” Nicola asked nervously. She was unsure how much Elfriede knew about the cause of Finn’s death or that of the other children.

A troubled expression fell across Elfriede’s face. She furrowed her brow and replied, “Everything. Ah, but I already knew that my father did terrible things to everyone. They all told me.”

Nicola’s eyes widened at this revelation, and she slowly looked down. She murmured, “I see.”

Elfriede slowly took Nicola by the hand and pulled her out of the shade of the hut. Then she led her to the flower bed, where spring flowers bloomed.

“Say, isn’t this diorama just like the real thing? I made it, you know. I know this town like the back of my hand,” said Elfriede, a look of pride on her face.

The way she held her head high with such pride was adorable and something one might expect from a child her age. With warmth in her eyes, Nicola gently stroked Elfriede’s hair.

“Yeah. I heard from your former nanny that you used to slip out of the mansion whenever she took her eyes off you. You were quite the handful,” Nicola said teasingly.

Elfriede’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment, and she pursed her lips. Then, she coughed to cover this up and glanced up at Nicola.

“Um, so you know my nanny, then? Was she...doing okay?”

“Yep. She’s been worried about you.”

“Really... Yeah, it was wrong of me to keep her waiting, to keep putting things off,” muttered Elfriede, seeming to come to a self-realization.

Seeming convinced of something, she nodded once, firmly. She turned to look at the open area where Ludendorff Manor should have been standing.

Finally, Elfriede turned back to face Nicola, looking like she had resolved to do something.

“Hey, you can do whatever you like with this diorama. In exchange, I’d like to ask you for one thing. Make sure everyone knows the horrible things my father did.”

◇

Just as Nicola returned to the town square, she found Theo and the other children sitting in a circle. Judging from their expressions, he had persuaded them. After noting Nicola and Elfriede’s arrival, they all hurried to meet them.

“I’d just like to ask once more to be sure. Are you all right with this?” asked Nicola.

After all, this was a paradise for children, where no one ever got tired, no matter how much they played. But Nicola was not sure if tiredness was relevant when it came to ghosts.

With all that in mind, Nicola checked with the children one last time, and they nodded without hesitation.

“Sure.”

“As long as I can play, I don’t mind where we go.”

“I don’t mind either, as long as we’re together.”

“Well, we started playing here in the first place because Elfriede looked so lonely. As long as she doesn’t mind, I don’t care either.”

As soon as one child agreed, the others expressed their consent. Nicola breathed easily and glanced aside at Elfriede to find her looking back with a friendly smile.

“Now that you’ve listened to my request, you can do what you want with this place,” said Elfriede.

After kneeling to meet the children at eye level, Nicola smiled and thanked them. She stood up again and immediately felt a hand pulling on the hem of her skirt.

“What should we do to hand this place over? Should we leave or what?” asked Theo.

The younger children followed Theo’s question by looking at Nicola with bemused expressions and repeated, “Or what?”

Allowing herself a chuckle at their adorable mannerisms, she nodded slightly to confirm Theo’s suspicions.

“Yeah, that’s right. But are you able to?” asked Nicola, inclining her head with an air of uncertainty.

For a moment, the children all looked surprised by her question. They looked at each other, then snickered..

“Why, that’s easy.”

“Sure is!”

“Yep.”

“Ann can do it too.”

“Actually, Lila can fly really fast!”

“If that’s all, we’ll get out of your way!”

Six children flew into the sky in the blink of an eye. After floating, they proceeded to fly away. Nicola reasoned she should have expected as much from ghosts.

Soon, the children were out of sight, leaving only Nicola and Elfriede. Meanwhile, Ernst stood at the edge of the town square with nothing to do. Elfriede gazed at the sky as her friends had vanished. Some time passed, and she collected herself.

“What am I to do?” she murmured, knitting her brows together. Elfriede spun and looked up at Nicola with a troubled expression. “I said I would hand this place over to you, but I can’t fly like all the others. I can’t leave...”

Nicola’s eyes widened slightly, but she chuckled and said, “Don’t worry. There are other ways to leave this place. She held her hand for Elfriede to take and led the girl to where Ernst was.

“Are you ready now...?” grumbled Ernst.

“Yes. Sorry to keep you waiting.” According to their sense of time, Ernst had been subject to at least four or five hours of idle waiting. Given that Nicola had dragged him into this spirit realm against his will, she could not help but feel somewhat apologetic.

She had expected to hear him complain, but he did not convey his discontent. On the contrary, he appeared to be suppressing his laughter when he saw Nicola, leaving her bewildered.

“What is it?” asked Nicola, narrowing her eyes in irritation.

Ernst’s shoulders shook as he chuckled. He explained that the sight of Nicola running all over the town square and falling over where nothing was visible was extremely comical. Unexpectedly, he had not gotten bored.

The view must have been a ridiculous spectacle from the perspective of someone who could not see the other children. Nicola felt a keen sense of regret. She made a valiant attempt to step on Ernst’s foot out of irritation, but he easily evaded her. While Nicola growled and gnashed her teeth, Ernst looked mockingly at her.

Elfriede also snickered and said, “You two almost act like a big brother and little sister, though very close in age.”

Nicola and Ernst let out strange, bloodcurdling cries upon hearing these frightful words.

6

“Forgetting about that farce for a moment, what are you planning to do now?” asked Ernst.

“Good question,” replied Nicola.

Though they had behaved somewhat immaturely and created a fuss, Nicola and Ernst had both somehow calmed down. After Nicola coughed to regain her composure, Ernst gazed at the Childcatcher’s Box he had tucked under his arm.

“For starters, please set the box down here.”

“Is it all right to let go of it?”

Nicola nodded to reassure Ernst. He still seemed nervous as he carefully set the Childcatcher’s Box on the ground. With some hesitation, he slowly took his hands off it. The very instant his fingers had all let go of the box, a tiny crack appeared in one of the onyx beads on the necklace wrapped around it. But that was all. Nothing else happened.

“We are going to leave the Childcatcher’s Box right here.”

The Childcatcher’s Box was a cursed artifact that could not be subdued for a few months, even if several people worked together to seal it. Only two exorcists—in this entire world—knew how to deal with it, and it was not realistic for them to go on sealing it incessantly.

In that case, what can we do? We can partition it inside another dimension and destroy it with that dimension, mused Nicola.

Them bringing the box into a spirit realm allowed them to leave it there and return whence they came. If Nicola burned the diorama out in the real world, the spirit realm and the Childcatcher’s Box within it would close off and vanish from this world.

Such a cursed artifact, which twisted children’s desires to inflict its curse indiscriminately on others, should not exist in this world.

“Now then, let’s go home,” said Nicola, taking Elfriede’s hand and looking back at Ernst.

But Elfriede looked up at Nicola, still puzzled. Deep ridges appeared in Ernst’s furrowed brow.

“But how? None of us can fly,” said Elfriede.

“When in spirit realms, I understand that the rule of thumb is always to go back the way you came. But we fell out of the sky,” agreed Ernst.

Nicola nodded firmly, then said, “Right. As a rule, we should leave through the same path we used to enter a spirit realm. But did I not also say this? ‘Every spirit realm is bound to end somewhere.’”

There was no such thing as a spirit realm that stretched on to infinity. Whether it was the blue sky above them, the hard ground beneath them, or any corner of the diorama, they would eventually arrive at an edge in whichever direction they proceeded. That much was true of any spirit realm.

If they could not take to the sky, they could walk over land.

Besides... Nicola grinned audaciously after stroking the bulky ring that rested loosely on her thumb..

This ring was also a cursed item, and all it did was return to its owner without fail, no matter how hard *he* tried to get rid of it. But Nicola realized that if she took advantage of this property, it could be a dependable pathfinder. In order to return to its owner, the ring would show them the shortest path back.

They could not find how much further they would need to walk if they blindly walked in one direction through the spirit realm. For that reason, Nicola usually insisted on returning the same way she entered.

In summary, as long as she knew which way presented the shortest path back to Sieghart, she did not mind which direction she had to walk in.

“This way. Please, follow me,” she said.

Guided by the ring, Nicola started walking.

The ring tugged on Nicola's hand, leading her toward the flower garden. It felt just like dowsing for water.

And so, Nicola walked through the flower garden into a vacant plot. This location was where one would expect to find the mansion at Ludendorff Manor.

As Nicola crossed the plot that had appeared blank, she looked down at Elfriede, who walked beside her. In truth, this aspect of the diorama had been bothering her the entire time.

She had wondered why the mansion was absent within this diorama, which was otherwise a perfect miniature version of the town. Elfriede must have chosen not to include it. There was simply no way she would have excluded it unintentionally.

"Are you wondering about this spot?" asked Elfriede with a quizzical look on her face, clearly noting Nicola's gaze.

After hesitating for a moment, Nicola nodded meekly.

Elfriede continued, "That's simple. I wanted to get away from my father. That was what I thought when I made this place, so I never built the mansion."

Once they had crossed the vacant plot, mountains stood behind it.

"It's been a long time since I've walked to the mountains at the back," said Elfriede, smiling and pulling on Nicola's hand. "My father paid no attention to me no matter what I did, and he was indifferent. So I slipped out of the mansion to head to the mountains or play in the town. Those days were fun... Every day I thought about how great it would be if I could play forever. I never wanted to return home, and wished that time would stand still."

The ring alerted Nicola to an unexplored path. Ernst took the lead, walking between the trees in the dense forest, trampling on the undergrowth. Meanwhile, Nicola and Elfriede held hands and followed a short distance behind him.

Elfriede resumed murmuring her memories, pausing now and then to choose her words. Nicola kept quiet, listening so as not to miss anything.

"But one day Lady Olivia in the neighboring territory was announced as the

one to marry the prince, right? From that day forward, my father was no longer indifferent. ‘You useless child,’ he said. And he hit me every day. He also said, “They didn’t choose you because you lack composure. Maybe you’d have been quieter if you had broken a bone or two.’” After saying all this, Elfriede squeezed Nicola’s hand, and Nicola reciprocated by doing the same despite frowning briefly.

With parental indifference, Nicola had some experience from when she was Rikka, born with the ability to see things others could not. She had always been a child who feared what lurked around every corner, was always wary, and recoiled at even the tiniest noises. Adults around her suspected her behavior indicated that her parents had abused her.

Her parents, faced with these unfounded suspicions, eventually decided on a policy of thorough indifference. Though, Nicola was grateful that they never subjected her to violence.

“I see... That must have been hard.” Although Nicola could not relate to every aspect of Elfriede’s story, she could at least sympathize with some parts.

Elfriede must have inferred from the tone that crept into Nicola’s voice that she did not truly share her feelings but was trying to align with them. While she smiled through her tears, she still smiled.

“That’s right, it was hard,” responded Elfriede.

“Yeah, but you held on well.”

For a moment, their conversation stopped until their field of view opened up after they had walked a fair distance.

“There’s a river here,” said Ernst, still at the head of their group, and Nicola and Elfriede immediately looked up.

Although the river flowed slowly, a considerable water volume ran through it. It was wide from bank to bank and also looked deep. But rivers, tunnels, and bridges—anything that formed a border between the near and far side—symbolized a rift between worlds.

Indeed, the ring on Nicola’s thumb tugged on her hand toward the opposite side of the river, seeming to tell her to cross it.

“Elfriede, I’m going to give you a piggyback. Hop on,” said Nicola.

Even though the river could be called a stream, it was still wide and deep. For Elfriede, who was still so short, it appeared dangerous to cross. As long as they were still inside this spirit realm, Nicola would never tire. Elfriede then timidly wrapped her arms around Nicola’s shoulders, as Nicola waited and diligently stood up again.

Ernst led again, selecting a relatively shallow part of the river, where there were few weeds in the water and firm footing so they would not easily fall. Nicola followed him and took her first step into the water.

The water was cold and clear enough that she could see fish swimming through it, down to the riverbed. The water sparkled under the specked sunlight peeking through the trees overhead, creating a beautiful sight.

“Pretty, right? You know, it was my nanny who said I should make this diorama. She said that when I broke one of my legs and couldn’t go anywhere. I started to get irritated. Then, I worked on it a bit whenever my injuries were bad,” murmured Elfriede while riding on Nicola’s back. As Elfriede dragged her feet through the river, water sloshing around her, Nicola lent Elfriede her ears.



It was only a little further until they reached the riverbank, which was practically under their noses.

“I like my nanny. Actually, I love her. But I always said things like, ‘I hate my nanny. She talks too much.’ When it became uncomfortable between us, I apologized over and over. I thought I could always apologize.”

Elfriede paused and reminisced.

“Always, or so I thought. But I was so wrong, wasn’t I?” said Elfriede, her voice muffled. She wrapped her arms around Nicola’s neck and pressed her face against the exorcist’s shoulder. Even if Nicola had looked up, she would not have been able to read her expression.

Then Nicola placed one foot on the opposing shore of the river. At that very moment, Elfriede said one final thing.

“Can you please do one more thing for me?” she whispered. Her voice was calm yet undeniably earnest. “Say, I’d like you to tell my nanny sorry in my place.”

7

When Nicola planted her feet on the far side of the river, she experienced a sensation that resembled passing through a thin membrane.

Rather than landing on dirt or grass, she had stepped on a deep crimson carpet and no longer saw the river or dense forest. All she spotted was the intricately constructed miniature town. Next to her, Ernst looked around the room frantically as it appeared that they had returned to the collection room in one piece.

Just as Nicola cast her gaze around the room, her eyes fell on Sieghart, standing without a scratch on him.

Marquess Ludendorff, his steward, the kidnappers, and the servants were all tied up with rope, sprawled in an unsightly heap on the floor. The marquess looked up at Nicola, expressing abject disbelief. Immediately after this, he contorted his face in rage as he glared at Nicola and Ernst.

“You insolent cowards! That corpse, where in blazes did you find...?!” bellowed the marquess, spit flying from his lips. His eyes stared at the space just above Nicola’s shoulder. She did not wish to understand the implications of what he had said but felt all her blood drain out of her.

That... Can’t be. There’s no way. Words of denial bubbled inside her head, floating up then vanishing, never making it far enough to be uttered.

Nicola followed the marquess’s gaze and looked above her shoulder.

“E-Elfriede...?” she asked.

Elfriede slumped over Nicola’s shoulder with her eyes closed and not moving a muscle. Her blonde hair, which had sparkled so brightly in the sunlight of the spirit realm, was now soaked with blood and stuck to her round forehead and cheeks. Somehow, her arms hung lifelessly over Nicola’s shoulders and bent in unnatural directions.

“W-Why?” A parched voice escaped from deep inside Nicola’s throat. She shook and staggered at the sudden realization of the weight on her back. The next thing she knew, Sieghart had wrapped an arm around her to hold her steady.

Ernst took away the previous source of warmth against her back. Nicola could only stand and watch in a daze as he put Elfriede’s body on the ground.

When Nicola looked down, she saw a shameful quarrel developing between the vulgar creatures tied up on the floor.

“Oliver! This mess only happened because you failed to clean up after me, as ordered! You worthless wretch!” snapped Marquess.

“B-But, by the time you had called me and I made my way to the room, the body was no longer in this—” exclaimed Oliver.

“Silence! I don’t remember giving you permission to talk back to me!”

As the marquess and his steward engaged in this ugly dispute, seven small figures slowly encircled them. That was when Nicola noticed Elfriede was among them, scrunching her face up in dismay.

Elfriede looked up at the bronze statue on a shelf in the room, then back at

Nicola with an awkward smile.

“You... You went so far as to lay your hands on your daughter?” said Nicola, her voice trembling with rage. She felt a sensation she had never experienced before, like all the blood in her body was boiling.

She looked at Theo, who was missing one of his fingers; Laure, Connie and Ann had their bellies slashed open; Finn’s mouth was covered in blood that he had coughed up; and Elfriede had blood pouring down from the top of her head. All the children stared at the marquess and his steward with solemn eyes.

Despite this, the two men continued their shameful dispute. Their eyes did not even register the sight of the children they had slaughtered.

Ah, to not be able to see. That’s cheating, thought Nicola. She addressed the children and said, “Are you all sure you want to do this?”

The children nodded in unison.

Their hands were as purple as sweet potatoes, blood streamed from their eyes, and some had entrails poking out of the slits in their stomachs. Yet the children smiled with untarnished innocence.

“I see,” said Nicola, before casting her eyes down. Then she gently shook off the arm Sieghart was using to support her. “Say, marquess. How do you think I found out about the bodies buried underneath the bed of hydrangeas?”

Very slowly, step-by-step, Nicola approached the marquess and the steward, who continued to yell at one another as they lay on the floor. She gazed down at them with eyes devoid of expression, and the men stopped bickering and looked back up at Nicola.

“The answer is simple. I heard about it from the children you two hurt.”

“W-What utter nonsense...” The edges of the marquess’ lips crept upward, but it was too haphazard to call it a sneer. Nicola continued looking at him with an icy stare before displaying a smile she thought was cold-blooded, then a chuckle of disdain escaped her lips.

“You said that the dead tell no tales... Aha ha ha, that couldn’t be further from the truth. After all, they are all around you.”

She watched the marquess and steward glance at their surroundings before chuckling again. At the same time, she raised her hand and subtly motioned her familiar to come forward.

Gemini understood Nicola's intentions and transformed into a blood-soaked Theo, clinging to the marquess. It discarded Theo's form and smoothly shape-shifted into Lila, Finn, Laure, Connie, Ann, and Elfriede. In each appearance, it reached out toward the men and wrapped its arms around them.

"W-What are you..."

"Eek! Ah, stay away, don't touch me...!"

While Gemini could take any physical form, it was only a trigger to make the men aware of the children's presence. But Theo and the other children were there. All Gemini needed to do was make the men conscious of that fact.

Nicola giggled as she watched the two men crawl across the floor like worms, trying to escape the apparitions.

"You couldn't have thought they were happy about killing women and children. With that in mind, who do you think these children resent and want to kill the most? Well?" she asked.

"A-Aaah—Stay back, stay back, stay back, stay back, stay back, stay back, I say!" exclaimed Marques Ludendorff.

"A-A-Aah, no, it wasn't like that! I-I was only following orders! A-Aaah!" shouted Oliver.

Even after Gemini ceased its mimicry, the men's eyes remained glued to the sight of the children. The children had been eagerly waiting to become visible to the men.

The marquess and his steward backed away from the children and yelled incoherently. Before they could form any words, the air that bubbled from their throats dissipated. It did not amount to speech and carried no meaning.

Despite Nicola imagining this was an attempted insult against her rather than the children, she ignored them.

"Contend with your sins until your death, heretics." Nicola averted her eyes

and quietly spat these words in disgust.

◇

The pure, brilliant moon had reached its highest point, with its pale glow faintly illuminating the ground below.

When the group had arrived at Ludendorff Manor, it had only been around 8 p.m. Yet a substantial period must have elapsed, and Nicola exhaled as she looked at the night sky. A lot had happened since the confrontation with the marquess.

Some good news was that Elfriede was found still breathing, even if very shallowly, and her chance of survival was not zero. Once Nicola and her companions realized this, they frantically called a doctor. At that time, Nicola hurried to summon Elfriede's spirit, which had floated away during that near-death experience, back to her body.

When Elfriede, who was ten years old then, was struck on the head with the bronze statuette, she had reached out for her diorama.

Elfriede had said, "I want to go somewhere where nothing hurts, where there are no people who do things to hurt others."

The diorama, which Elfriede had made amid her abuse with that lone wish in mind, had attained it and reached her shelter.

Thinking about things can give them form—the power of imagination. As a result, this diorama had unintentionally become a supernatural realm that resembled the House for the Lost.

Within that sanctuary, time did not pass and pain did not exist. Miraculously, she had found a way to escape the flow of time while her body remained on the brink of death.

Whether or not Elfriede's body returned to the real world and made it past this mortal crisis depended on the girl. Moreover, Nicola wanted Elfriede to fulfill her second wish and tell her nanny she was sorry. Nicola had Elfriede promise she would do her best. All Nicola could do was believe and pray as she waited for the little girl's condition to improve.

As for the news that was none of Nicola's concern, the marquess and his steward laughed as if they had gone mad before finally frothing at the mouths and fainting. When the two men next awoke, they might have been mental wrecks, but Nicola only thought they had brought it on themselves.

After all, Nicola had only told them the children were there. Supposing they had lost their sanity, that would only result from their awareness of their sins. It was fitting retribution, in Nicola's opinion.

The other captured offenders were in the hands of Alois's knight bodyguards. As this exchange occurred, time marched in what seemed like the blink of any eye as the day was about to change.

And so Nicola sat on the fountain's edge, bathed in the moonlight, gazing vacantly at the moon. Her breath turned white as she exhaled, making her keenly aware of the approaching winter. The only thing sparing her from the cold was the dancing flames in front of her. At that very moment, the diorama burnt, turning to ashes and crumbling down.

The Childcatcher's Box—a cursed artifact of untold sorrow, invulnerable to being sealed away—should not exist in this world. The children's paradise quietly burned, and nothing was left afterwards.

A thin plume of smoke rose from the ashes, reaching into the sky before dissipating. Eventually, the wind carried away the ashes and made them vanish. Nicola just watched this happen in a trance.

The clouds that had enveloped the sky until a short while ago had broken, allowing the moonlight to illuminate the world below. A curtain of silver threads that appeared as if the moonlight had dyed them through condensation swayed gently at the edge of Nicola's field of vision.

Nicola looked at the person sitting next to her and let out a little sigh.

A single word crossed her mind. It was what the marquess had tried to utter in those final moments, directed not at the children swarming him but at her. She knew what he had been trying to say from how his lips had moved without making a sound.

"Monster" was the word the marquess intended to say to her. At any rate,

this was far from the first time someone had called Nicola that.

She quietly stared down and let out a self-deprecating laugh, then said, “Are you frightened?”

The moonlight had the mysterious effect of making people sentimental. Before Nicola knew what she was saying, she had already posed this question. Deep purple eyes glowing in the moonlight beside her suddenly turned to look at her.

“Why should I be?” asked Sieghart, inclining his head with confusion. His mannerisms made Nicola think of a refined cat.

When asked why she would ask such a question, Nicola could only answer that it had just occurred to her. It was only a whim and carried no profound meaning.

“Don’t you think I’m a fearsome woman?” Although Nicola did not regret her actions that night, she murmured such an inquiry, clenching her hands together tightly as she rested them on her knees.

“Of course not,” whispered Sieghart, gently shaking his head. “I think you’re very kind, Nicola.”

He explained she had directed that kindness at those children on this occasion. Yet his voice remained gentle, almost as if reciting a lullaby that caressed Nicola’s ears. Sieghart half-closed his eyes, a smile parting his lips as he looked up the moon before continuing.

“Besides, you use your powers to protect people, to save them. What you did was proof of your conviction and working hard to defend something. Of course I’m not frightened.”

These words permeated Nicola’s heart, as this man always knew what she wanted to hear. It wasn’t fair. She could not stop from biting her lip and averting her eyes.

Sieghart took one of Nicola’s hands and gently removed the other, though she had clasped them tightly. When Sieghart touched her, his feelings poured into her.

Even for Nicola, who was so unused to being cared for or loved, someone thinking of her was precious and tickled her curiosity more each time she was reminded. At the same time, there was a steadily intensifying pain in her chest she could not do anything about since it was a most peculiar feeling.

Sieghart carefully slipped the signet ring off Nicola's thumb before putting it on his finger. His eyes became gentle and filled with affection as he spoke up.

"As long as you return to me safely, Nicola, I don't mind what you get yourself into. But I don't want you to forget to look back as you go."

He had a slightly troubled smile, and Nicola lost the ability to say anything else. When she bit down firmly on her lip and looked away again, Sieghart chuckled and stroked her hair.

Nicola reminisced on Elfriede's regrets and how the girl had said, "I thought I could always apologize." It reminded Nicola that the word "always" was not a guarantee.

As long as one lived, tomorrow would never be absolute, and regrets could strike without warning. "One day" or "sometime soon" might never arrive. People might tell themselves such things, but this was only a fantasy. That was why people must say what they meant and put it into words while they still had the chance.

Alois said that, as far as he was concerned, love was holding someone in your heart and remembering them. Meanwhile, Ernst said that love was the search for a reason for feelings of affection you cannot readily explain. But Emma said a person can decide if what they feel is love. If you did not mind calling it love, then it was love.

When Nicola thought forward ten years, to the following year, to next week, to tomorrow—though it still bothered her—she could not deny that her childhood friend was always firmly rooted within her imagination. That feeling had not just begun at that moment. Nicola wanted to acknowledge it if it was how she felt.. She wanted Sieghart to go on living, yet the thought of dying herself and leaving him behind frightened her a little.

She did not mind if that feeling was love and unexpectedly said, "It seems that

I do love you, after all, Sieghart... And have for a long time...”

Sieghart blinked at her with surprise before his expression softened, almost seeming to melt.

“Yeah, I know... And have for quite a long time,” responded Sieghart.

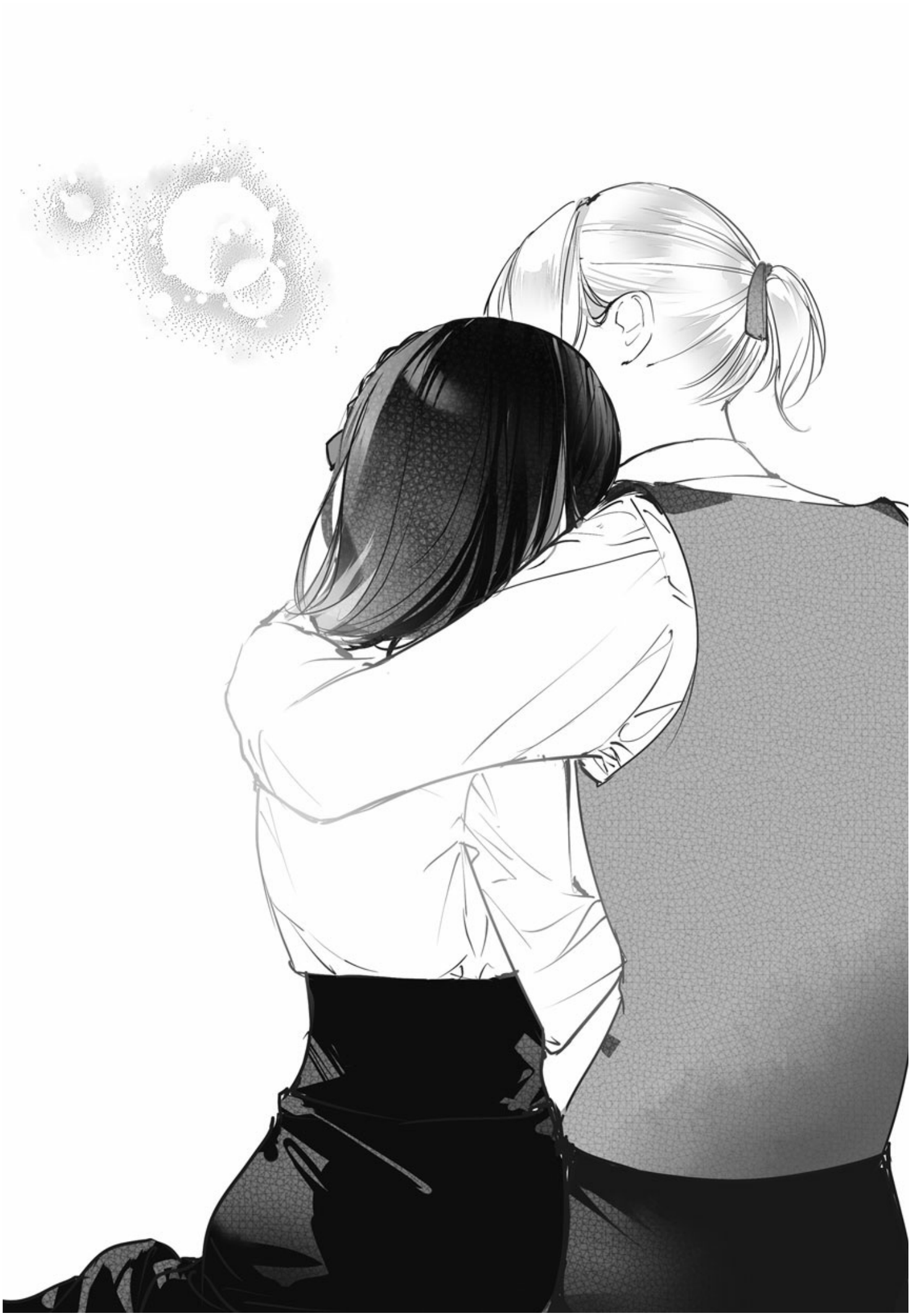
Still, Nicola could not help but feel frustrated by this response, pressing her lips together tightly. Her head was full of conflicting thoughts, and it felt as if it were heating.

“Any expressions of love from me will be desperately lacking in the future. I cannot return your love with the same passion,” she said.

“That’s fine. You might not know yourself, but I find you very easy to understand, Nicola. Don’t worry about it,” said Sieghart with a chuckle. “Besides, that’s what will make them so unique. Knowing that the nonchalant words and expressions you show me are your true feelings makes them feel like a reward only you can grant me.”

Having said all this, Sieghart narrowed his eyes with joy.

“You really have strange tastes,” muttered Nicola. Nevertheless, she leaped into his arms and closed the distance that was no more than the span of her fist.



Nicola felt like tightening her arms around Sieghart, bringing herself close enough to him that their hearts could touch. They were close enough that their heart beats would blend together and share the warmth within. She wanted proof she was alive at that very moment.

She heard a gasp from somewhere above her head. But she did not have the energy to deal with that after having summoned the courage to throw herself into Sieghart's arms. So, she resolved to ignore any protests from Sieghart and closed her eyes.

"Nicola... You know, this situation is just a bit..." said Sieghart after a brief pause, sounding somewhat conflicted.

This noble celebrity actively expressed his affection for Nicola daily. Now that Nicola had suddenly closed the distance between them on a whim, he was at a loss about what he should do and stiffened up instinctively.

However, Nicola was already in a losing battle with sleepiness since it had been a hectic day. A relieving smell surrounded her, so she could not help herself..

"So sleepy..."

Sieghart, still having trouble coping with the situation, was saying something. But Nicola was so sleepy that she had not listened to what he had said..

A chuckle cascaded down from above her head, seeming to want to say, "I guess it can't be helped." Then, her consciousness dozed off.

Nicola's Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 8

The Childcatcher's Box (Kotoribako)

The Childcatcher's Box is an urban legend that spread following a post on an online message board.

If only the Japanese name "kotoribako" referred to a box for a small bird... When written using Chinese characters, the true meaning becomes clear—Childcatcher's Box. It is a cursed box that will indiscriminately kill any children or woman of child-bearing age, intended to eradicate the clan to which its

unwitting recipient belongs.

Though that effect is horrifying, the inhumane “ingredients” used in its creation will likely send a chill up anyone’s spine.

Its unsettling nature reflects the series of events that led to its creation. The made-up story, wrapped up in historical fact, should make for a fascinating reading—supposing it is a made-up story.

I sincerely wish that it is only fiction.

Epilogue

Beneath the rattling train carriage, its wheels squeaked at a regular rhythm.

A peaceful atmosphere flowed inside the carriage as the scenery outside streamed past the window. Nicola gave in to the pleasant vibrations and gazed absently out the window.

Across from her sat Alois, Emma, and Ernst in the same order they had on the train ride to the lakeside town. On either side of Nicola sat Sieghart and Char. The journey was about to end, having changed Nicola's heart and being shockingly hectic.

While they had planned to return home the day after the festival, they had prolonged their stay to take full advantage of their holidays. Yet it still felt as if it had passed them in no time. As Nicola thought about this, she narrowed her eyes while the evening sunlight streamed through the window.

After all, they were dragged into a spirit realm when they first boarded the train to their destination as Nicola had reunited with her junior apprentice from her past life; kidnappers has seized them; and to top it all off, they became the unwitting recipients of a cursed artifact overflowing with murderous intent. It had been an unbelievably jam-packed journey.

Looking back on it, it had been surprisingly short and left Nicola with an indescribably strange feeling.

"Thank goodness that Miss Elfriede survived," said Sieghart.

Nicola blinked slowly, glancing up at him and said, "Yes... Indeed."

In her recovery from her injuries, Elfriede was apparently through the worst of it.

Her father was in jail, reduced to a mental wreck. It appeared to be a foregone conclusion that they would strip Marquess Ludendorff of his title based on the charges against him. Seeing that Elfriede had been missing for several years and returned at the same age she had disappeared would make it difficult for others to accept her into society.

After the group had discussed the matter with her nanny, they decided that “Lady Elfriede von Ludendorff” would be pronounced legally dead. She would be officially reborn as a distant relative of Sieghart.

Although Nicola’s family could have taken her in, Sieghart insisted that preserving Elfriede’s assets would be smoother if a marquess took her in. Nicola was grateful for this offer and had no objections since Sieghart did not mind.

When Nicola looked out of the window again, the sky had become a deep, rosy red. As she watched this backdrop with astonishment, she slowly blinked to fight her drowsiness.

The conversation inside the compartment was much more sparse than on the way to the town. But the traveling companions had all grown close enough that this did not feel awkward.

Because their brief time together had been so dense with experiences, it would be difficult to return to bland formalities. There had been more than enough events—or rather, troubles—to break the ice between them, so this much was inevitable.

Without a shred of reservation, Nicola yawned widely.

Emma giggled and said, “You have quite a big mouth.”

Time passed by at a relaxed pace inside the carriage.

“We’ll arrive at the royal capital soon, huh?” Alois mumbled in a subdued voice. Nicola believed she detected a hint of melancholy and resignation in his tone. But it was just as he said. As Nicola continued staring out the window, the scenery gradually became more and more familiar.

Looking back inside the compartment, Nicola noticed that the distance between Alois and Emma had returned to something more appropriate for a master and his handmaiden. Even from the sidelines, Nicola saw such a clear line of distinction between their differing social standings that she almost wondered if the interactions she had seen between them had all been an illusion.

Now that the trip was ending, so too would the escape from their lives, and they would return to the social constraints that bound them. Though Nicola was

still dazed, she contemplated that these two probably regretted this return to normalcy the most.

Silence continued to assert its dominance as it had throughout the return trip. No chatter quite amounted to a conversation, with each member of the party vacantly lost in their thoughts as they watched the streaking scenery.

Only the sound of the train in transit remained fairly loud. Amid this silence, Char blithely spoke up.

“Uh, by the way...”

All eyes gathered on Char. However, the speaker himself still had his eyes trained on the view outside the window. Nicola could not imagine what he might be thinking just by looking at his expression.

“Say, Prince. How would you like to get engaged to ‘Charlotte von Rosenheim’?”

Char had thrown these words so suddenly at Alois with no context. In a carefree tone, Char unleashed a real bombshell on the compartment, just as he had on the trip out of the capital. Everyone was taken aback but gasped in shock once they understood what he had meant..

“Huh?” exclaimed the other five passengers with perfect timing. Once they finished, silence returned to the compartment.

He had a look on his face as if he had succeeded in some mischief, all but saying, “Gotcha!”

Char added, “In exchange, I’d like to make my big sis happy.”

Nicola’s natural reflex was to frown. Neither of these lines had a logical connection. She could not find the intended meaning in Char’s words.

“Um... What do you mean?” asked Alois with utter confusion after leaving a gap for a few seconds. In a vain attempt to foresee his intentions, Alois stared steadily at Char.

But Char ignored the confusion Nicola and the others displayed, mischievously smiling and shrugging his shoulders.

“Strictly speaking, I want you to marry the marquess’s daughter Charlotte von

Rosenheim. That's all," replied Char.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute, what?" Nicola could no longer sit idly by and broke into the conversation between Char and Alois. Try as she might, she just could not understand the proposal.

Common sense dictated that an engagement between Alois and Char impeded the romance between Alois and Emma. How was this proposed engagement supposed to make Emma happy? Nicola could not find a connection linking Char's words, as they directly opposed reason.

Despite this, Char wore a solemn expression and explained that he was not joking or playing prank on them. Still, Nicola did not have the faintest idea about his intentions, reasons, or motivations.

As Nicola was desperate for salvation, she looked at Sieghart but noticed he also had a baffled visage. Alois, Emma, and Ernst all had more or less the same reaction, all seeming utterly lost. No one understood what Char's true intentions were.

After Char had enjoyed their unified reaction and laughed at the rest of the group, he reached out toward Emma's face. He snatched her glasses right off her nose.

He slowly placed the glasses on his face in a demonstration for everyone's benefit. Nicola, Sieghart, Alois, Ernst, and especially Emma watched with puzzled looks, waiting to see what would happen next.

"Whoa, these prescriptions are rough," said Char, groaning while screwing up his face. He immediately slid the glasses down to the end of his nose. Then, still half-wearing the glasses, he looked around at the rest of the group once more and smiled proudly.

Surprise overcame Nicola as she gasped softly. Char's eyes, narrowed in a playful grin, were the same shade of olive green as Emma's eyes. Both of them had hair of the same blonde hue. Their facial features were very much alike, despite Emma's Coke bottle lenses obscuring this fact, as one might expect from them being blood relatives. Perhaps Char's hair would need restyling, and he would need nonprescription glasses, but there was a resemblance.

“No way... Do you really intend to swap places with her?” muttered Sieghart, opening his eyes wide.

Char folded his hands behind his head with a carefree smile and replied, “You’re half right.”

He returned Emma her glasses and prepared himself.

In a casual tone, he said, “As far as I’m concerned, I wouldn’t mind swapping places with my sis entirely. But with her eyesight, she might have some difficulties. So, I propose we partially swap places.”

He continued, “Simply put, I’ll play the role of ‘Charlotte’ for official, public-facing events. My sis will continue attending the prince as his handmaiden. But when his public duties are over each day, I’ll swap places with her, pretend to be Emma, and take her bedroom.”

Char thrust his chest proudly, as if to say, “So whaddya think?”

He looked at everyone in the compartment with an air of defiance. Alois placed his hand on his chin and pondered the suggestion in silence.

As for Nicola, she remembered her conversation with Char on the night of the festival and chuckled while pressing a hand to her forehead. That night, Char had said, “I never want to starve again, so I’d like to remain part of the nobility.”

As long as Char shouldered the social standing of a noblewoman, he could not escape the duty of being married. And so this proposal seemed to offer the best outcome he had yet found.

Nicola folded her arms and glanced surreptitiously up at Sieghart, then asked, “What do you think... About this proposal?”

“Well it’s a delightful proposal, but I wonder...” Siegart furrowed his brow uneasily.

Until Alois’s next fiancée was determined, Nicola could not get engaged to anyone else as she was among the present candidates. Furthermore, one of the three candidates, Elfriede, was declared legally dead.

This offer from “Charlotte” to get engaged to Alois was, from Nicola and Sieghart’s perspective, a lifesaver. However...

“Will it go over so well...?” muttered Nicola, thinking aloud.

Char looked at Nicola suspiciously.

“If it doesn’t go well, we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” said Char before suddenly releasing a paper doll—a shikigami. After opening it like a fan and flapping it about, the junior apprentice gave Nicola a cunning grin.

Nicola covered her face with one hand and looked at the ceiling.

Supposing Char used such a trick, Nicola had to admit there was no way they could accomplish all this. She would say it was likely not impossible if asked about the probabilities..

“And you’d be fine with that...?” Nicola asked Char, astonished by his audacity. After glancing back at her, he just shrugged slightly.

“Didn’t I already tell you? My motto in this life is never to leave my big sis on the wayside,” said Char. “Even so, I don’t want to starve again. If the price of making my sis happy is to receive the finest in clothing, food, and housing myself, then well... I think that’s a fair exchange. Besides, you’ll be in my debt if we do this. Won’t you, senior apprentice? I thought it was a brilliant plan that killed *three* birds with one stone.”

Char pouted theatrically, and Nicola could not help but sigh. She stared deep into his eyes to ensure her junior apprentice was not fooling around anymore.

“Hey, what about your happiness?” she asked.

After blinking in surprise, Char laughed with his shoulders shaking.

“I don’t know if I should say this to a couple who looks so happily in love...” Char half closed his eyes in delight, then looked back at Nicola with a hint of defiance. Nicola felt a bit overwhelmed by the intensity of his gaze. But he flashed a broad grin and continued, “It’s not like love, romance, or marriage necessarily equals happiness. Eating tasty stuff, sleeping on a fluffy bed, and caring for my nieces and nephews could be another kind of happiness.”

As Nicola observed her junior apprentice’s face, she gasped softly. It might be true that love, romance, or marriage do not necessarily equate to happiness. At that moment, Nicola was not getting carried away by circumstance but truly

wished to be engaged to Sieghart.

If that wish could become true, she was not one to turn her nose up at becoming a conspirator or collaborator in Char's scheme.

"I suppose... I wouldn't be against lending you Gemini occasionally," she mumbled. After looking startled for a moment, a grin broke across Char's face.

"Nice! Then lend me it five days a week."

"Do you plan on being a NEET for over half of the week?" Nicola narrowed her eyes and whacked Char on the head.

When Nicola peeked at the seats across her, she saw quite a pleasant scene unfolding.

With a somewhat serious expression, Alois faced Emma, saying, "I love you so much, Emma, that I think I might leap at this proposal. For as long as we've known one another, I've wished to make you happy. If I could be granted that wish... Ah, right, hold on..."

After speaking as far as that, Alois covered his face with one hand and thrust the other into the air before suddenly groaning.

"I had no intention of telling you honestly how I felt before this moment, so I'm pretty lame... Wait, give me a few days to put this into words. Until I've had a chance to scrutinize Char's proposal, just hold on..."

Alois's face and ears were bright red and barely visible through the hand he held over it. It looked like steam was about to burst out of his ears, which Emma had not seen before. Emma also looked down with her cheeks flushed red so suddenly that a bittersweet air filled the train compartment.

Although that alone would have made for a very amusing tableau, next to the two of them was yet another stark reaction.

Ernst, sitting on the aisle side of the compartment, had his mouth hanging wide open as if this were the first he had heard of the love between these two. Nicola could almost see the lightning bolt strike behind his head.

Though Nicola had an idea about Ernst's obliviousness, she couldn't believe the man really had not realized that Alois and Emma had a "mutual crush" on

one another. Nicola shared a glance with Sieghart and Char before they all burst out laughing.

As sooty smoke passed by the window, the train decreased its speed with the sound of its steam whistle.

Even if this engagement between “Charlotte” and Alois was successful, it was not as if the proposed state of affairs, with Emma and Char swapping places, would begin immediately.

There would surely be a long period of preparations, and school life as part of this group was sure to be fun. A feeling of finally returning to ordinary life after an ample dose of the extraordinary welled up inside Nicola’s heart. After allowing herself a slight smile, she relaxed her shoulders.

Afterword

Hello, Iino here.

I would like to thank you for picking up the second volume of *Miss Nicola the Exorcist* on this occasion.

This story originally ended with the first volume. However, I had the privilege of being able to write a second volume. I am truly thankful.

That being said... That being said.

I created this world and setting and assumed the story would have a resolution with the first volume. The mystery of the world was entirely dealt with in volume one. What to do, I thought. Can I really write a sequel? What to do, I thought, scratching my head as I started writing again... But once I started, I found that the writing went smoothly. I keenly felt that my characters had their unique personalities.

You may think it sounds obvious that characters have personalities. But what I mean here by “personalities” is not quite the same thing as their personalities in the story itself.

For example, while a character might seem to say, “I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” another may be reluctant and say, “I’m tired already, I can’t be bothered.” One often hears that “characters have a life of their own,” so perhaps this is a similar phenomenon. When reading essays written by authors in the past, I often thought as a reader, “Hmm, is that how it is?” Surprisingly, it turns out to be true.

Applying this phenomenon to this series, Alois said, “I’ll do it, I’ll do it,” in the first volume and pulled the story along. But in this installment, Alois is slightly more restrained.

In his place for volume two, Char said, “I’m goin’, I’m goin’,” and dragged the story forward. Opposing him was Nicola, who said throughout, “Eh... Are you really going...? Eh... Are you quite sure?”

It is partly thanks to, or at least because of, Char that the story could expand further than I intended, as he took the reins and drove it forward. In that sense, I reflected that Nicola and Char really have a good relationship, almost like siblings.

Though I have left this until last, I would like to thank everyone who assisted me through the process until the book's printing. Thank you, Kinoko Hime, for providing more gorgeous illustrations, and all of you kind enough to pick up this book. I cannot fully express my gratitude. Thank you all so much.

This is the mass market light novel industry, where the correlation between sales and continued publication is severe.

Will we meet again with another of Nicola's stories, or perhaps something completely different... I do not yet know, but I will continue to pray that we will meet again.

-Ito Iino