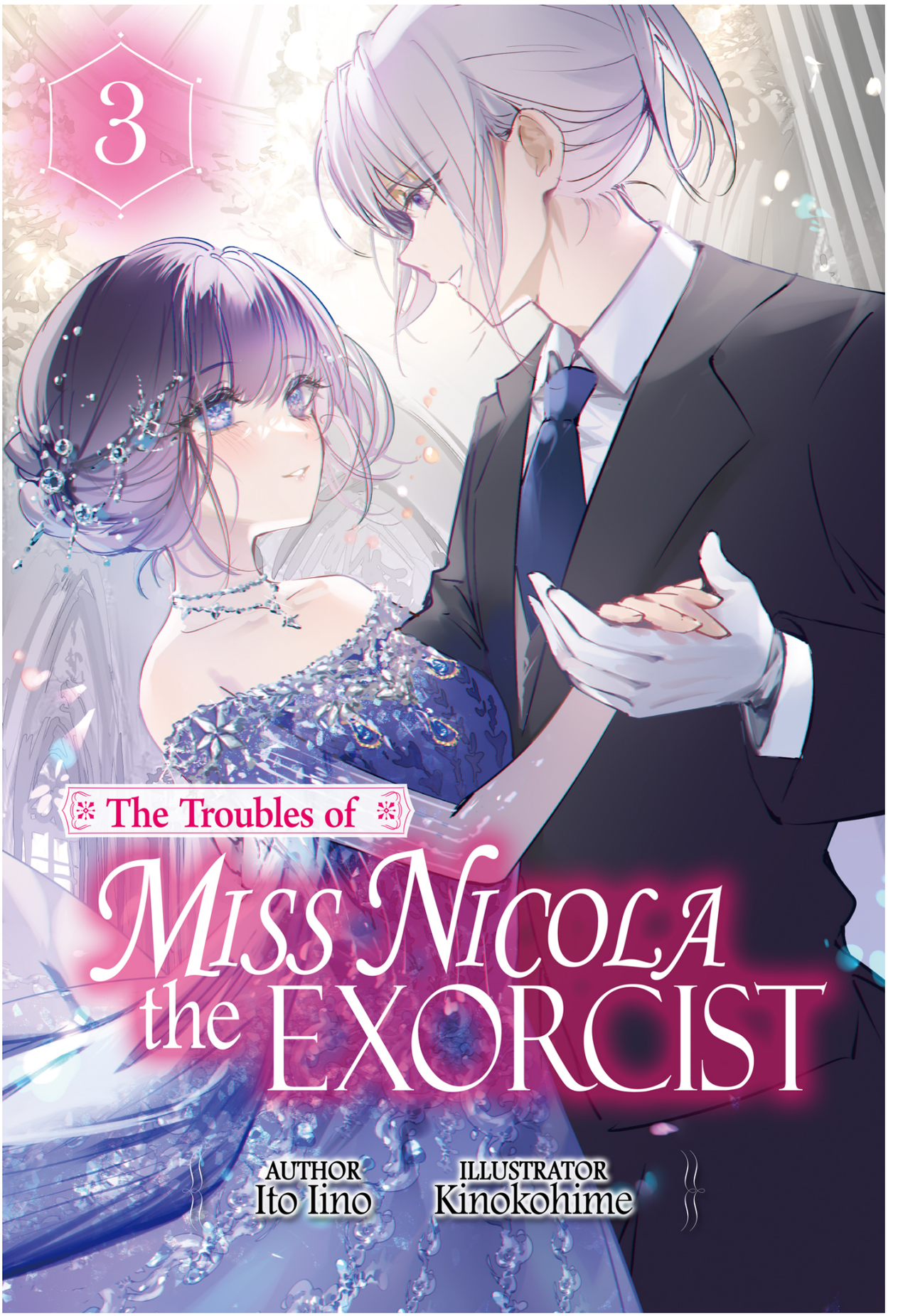
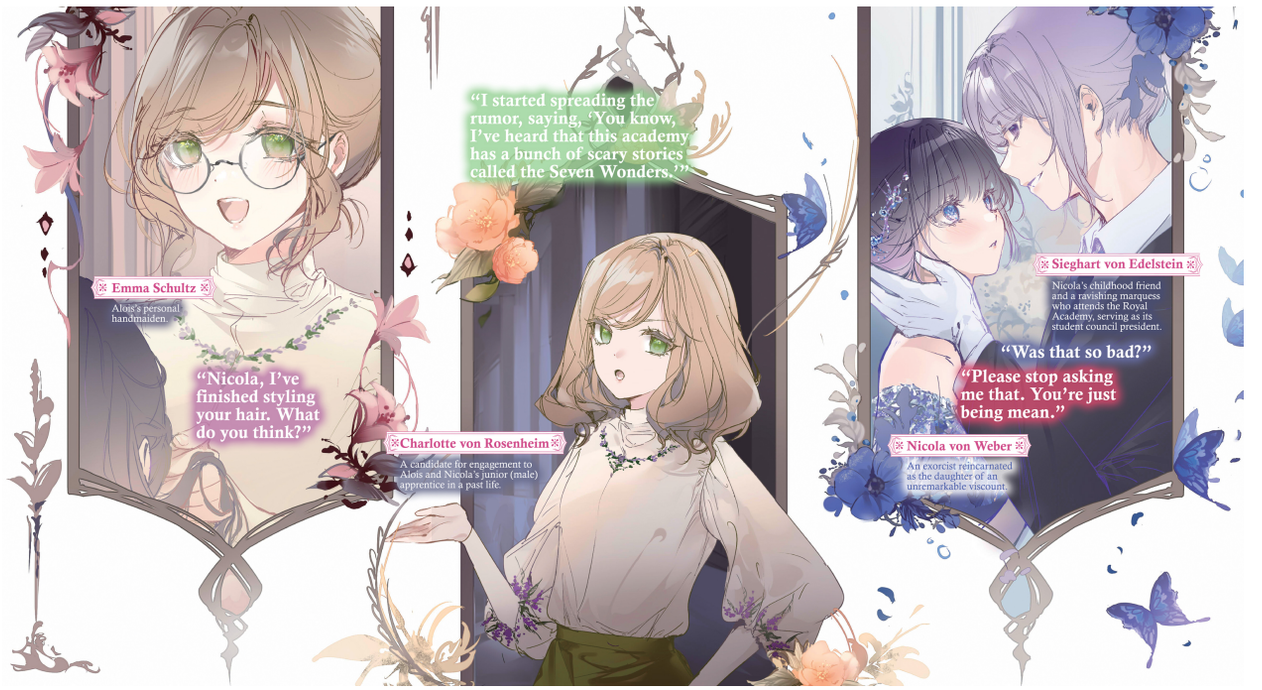

3
The Troubles of
MISS NICOLA
the EXORCIST
AUTHOR
Ito Iino
ILLUSTRATOR
Kinokohime


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Emma Schultz
Alois's personal handmaiden.
"Nicola, I've finished styling your hair. What do you think?"
"I started spreading the rumor, saying, 'You know, I've heard that this academy has a bunch of scary stories called the Seven Wonders.'"
Charlotte von Rosenheim
A candidate for engagement to Alois and Nicola's junior (male) apprentice in a past life.
Sieghart von Edelstein
Nicola's childhood friend and a ravishing marquess who attends the Royal Academy, serving as its student council president.
"Was that so bad?"
"Please stop asking me that. You're just being mean."
Nicola von Weber
An exorcist reincarnated as the daughter of an unremarkable viscount.



“Still warm... We can conclude that not much time has passed yet.”

Ah, is it because there's still some body heat remaining that the smell of blood is so intense? thought Alois, almost as if this was happening to someone else, while he looked down at Lucas's corpse.

The look of shock in his still open eyes; his arms and legs, which he had flung out wildly; the dagger sticking out of his chest—all these details somehow felt artificial to Alois, lacking any sense of reality.

The sight of vivid scarlet shining on top of silver seemed unreal and beautiful. In addition, viscous red fluid and the gleaming silver reflected the light brilliantly.

After he had considered that much, he realized something was amiss.

No, it would be correct to say that he had already known but had simply averted his eyes. But he could no longer look the other way.

Neither Alois nor Ernst had lit a candle before coming here. Either way, how could they make out the color of Lucas's blood or the condition of his body? The trembling exchange students and the council vice president had turned white without making a sound. In the corner of his eye, Alois reluctantly turned to see what was behind him.

“Sieg...?” His voice became so strained, so dry that he barely recognized it as his own.

But Alois turned around and saw where the light was coming from. There stood Sieghart, looking down at Lucas with a stiff expression. In his hand was a candle—the only light source in the room—whose flame was the only thing that moved, flickering unpredictably.

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Prologue

Ever since he was five or maybe six years old, Sieghart had always known his appearance was somehow different.

At the very least, he was definitely young enough that his memories of that time were vague. He recalled his young mind dimly understood that he was unique compared to others.

Of course, he did not appreciate his beauty and could not have put it into words as well as he could now. As he faced numerous failed attempts at kidnappings and false imprisonment, he grasped that his appearance sparked people's obsessions.

There was no end to the noblewomen who abandoned their senses, and each day brought enough perverts to warrant a clean sweep of them. Upon such encounters, Sieghart's surroundings would turn tumultuous, even reaching the point where blood was spilled.

With a wretched boyhood as his, one would shudder at the hardships he'd suffer later on in life. Concerned for her son's future, Sieghart's mother taught him the necessary skills to survive.

"You must be sure to never make enemies. Rather, make yourself mild-mannered and personable," she said.

His excessively refined looks would attract the affection of the opposite sex, but at the same time, would also attract jealousy from the same sex. She additionally advised him not to be the kind of person anyone could dislike.

"Also, you mustn't be too curt with the admirers who come your way."

The line between affection and hatred was thin. Ironically, the hatred that followed love was often many times greater, as his mother indicated.

"But you mustn't invite their expectations. So no one gets the wrong idea and thinks 'I'm special,' always treat each girl impartially," she said. He would act with such painstaking fairness that he would never lead someone astray. "This way, you are to retain the image of an unattainable peak that girls may desire but

never reach.”

Sieghart understood his mother’s words when he was still just a boy. Although young, he did this for his sake and tried to conduct himself just as she had taught.

Even so, presenting oneself in such a manner that everyone liked you (but not too much) was a task too difficult for anyone to learn to manage overnight.

There were times when, by absentmindedly failing to adjust the extent of his smile, he multiplied the number of perverts around him. After Sieghart behaved too kindly, matters escalated to that of bloodshed. It was this process of trial and error to observe repeatedly, making him who he was today.

In the end, people’s general appraisal of Sieghart—that he was mild-mannered and treated everyone with equal kindness—had been planned to a surprising extent. One might even say he was steeped in calculation.

The relationships he had built up in this way stretched far and wide but were shallow. Though he could count the people he felt truly close to on the fingers of one hand, his knowledge had produced definite results. Perhaps its effectiveness was well worth it, save for one exception.

Sieghart’s knowledge also functioned like a filter, selecting a certain kind of person and uncovering their true nature. For instance, said knowledge was almost meaningless to individuals whose distorted perception of reality caused them to see themselves positively.

As for why this was the case, Sieghart’s kindness—practiced universally, regardless of whom he addressed—was twisted entirely at the whim of the other party, understood to be “a special type of kindness, meant only for me.”

And so, should he have regarded it as tragic? Sieghart knew from experience just where people of that sort would end. He recognized how far someone could deviate from reality when they interpreted everything to suit their delusions.

When the delusions of these individuals became unbearable, they could step over the line all too easily, seeking to eliminate the primary cause of their distress.

“Sorry…but I can’t dance with you,” said Sieghart before

releasing himself from the female student's grasp, consciously smiling to ease the objection. "Ah, I don't want you getting the wrong idea. That's not because I've already agreed to dance with someone else. Even if I had no one to dance with, I doubt I would choose you."

Unfortunately, this was not the first time Sieghart had been the object of obsession for an especially needy person. Nor was this the first time his evenhanded rejection of them had earned him a grudge.

Moreover, Sieghart was not always the target of such malice associated with those grudges. If he were, he might consider that to be quite fortunate. But he had to be ready to avert the possibility this resentment would be turned upon a certain girl who sometimes regarded him with indifference. He had to be sure it was aimed correctly at him.

Sieghart quietly regarded the student in front of him. "I have no interest in getting engaged to you."

Though he knew he'd already put his foot in his mouth, he deliberately chose his words so as to sound coldhearted.

◆◆◆

Anything I wanted in the end was mine.
After all, anything I can't have is broken and goes away.
So, you see? Anything I wanted in the end was mine.
Hooray.
Hooray.

Chapter 1: Finding the Fallacies in the Seven Wonders

1

"So cold..." *Really, why do stone buildings always have to get this cold?*

Nicola ducked her head as her whole body shivered during lunchtime in the middle of January, and she was chilled to the bone. Students crammed themselves along the long dining table in the stone-built great hall, enjoying their food. At a corner of that dining table, Nicola glared resentfully at her white condensed breath.

Falling powdery snow was visible outside the window. The new year had arrived, and it was not long since their winter break had ended.

At the Royal Academy, an institution attended by the sons and daughters of nobles and merchants, the season when snow piled upon the ground had finally arrived.

"Is it really that cold?"

"It's still much warmer inside, right?"

So said Nicola's friends, Karin and Elsa, before sharing a glance. Given that Nicola failed to elicit their compassion, she could only shrug slightly.

"The things you can get away with when you're young..." grumbled Nicola.

"I don't know what you're getting at," said Elsa with an exasperated look. "*You're* just sensitive to the cold."

Even so, cold things are cold. Nicola had to admit she was extremely sensitive to the cold, but it was not as if she had chosen to be that way. She pouted despondently, which finally provoked Karin to give in and lend Nicola her scarf. *What one really needs is kind friends.*

"Look, look. You'll feel even more cold if you keep thinking about it. Let's distract ourselves with something else, shall we?" remarked Elsa.

“Ta-da!” exclaimed Karin, taking out what looked at first glance like a deck of playing cards, apparently out of thin air. Once she fanned out the cards, she thrust them right underneath Nicola’s nose.

“Huh, what…?” Nicola blinked in surprise at the cards in front of her.

“Don’t worry, go ahead! C’mon, choose whichever card you like!” said Karin, still smiling as she forced the cards upon Nicola.

From the sidelines, a disgruntled Elsa butted in. “You’d better give in and pick one. She won’t stop until you do.”

Judging by her reaction, Elsa had already received this baptism from Karin.

Karin was always prone to jump on the latest bandwagon. This display must have been the latest card game or something. Soon after Nicola emitted a sigh of resignation, she reached out for one of the cards Karin held out for her.

Once she arbitrarily selected a card and pulled it out of the deck, she suddenly realized something. The shape of these cards was longer and narrower than typical playing cards.

Obscured by Karin’s hands, Nicola had mistaken these for normal playing cards, only to notice they were clearly different. These were something else entirely.

When Nicola recognized she’d seen cards of this shape before, she involuntarily groaned.

“Ugh, wait a minute, aren’t these tarot ca—” But it was already too late for her to snatch her hand away from the card.

“The card you chose…is this one!” cried Karin, sliding the card out of the deck herself and placing it face-down on the table. “That’s right! These are tarot cards, which have been in fashion lately!”

While leaning forward excitedly in her chair, Karin continued with unprecedented enthusiasm.

“You see, you see, tarot readings tell us the answer that is already in your subconscious! Apparently, the conscious part of the human mind only makes up about ten percent, and the remaining ninety percent is subconscious. Thanks to our subconscious intuition, a tarot reading can tell us about the future you unconsciously feel is coming and help us put it into words!”

Karin’s explanation was certainly fluid, like a fish in water. As she

proudly rattled this off, Nicola's eyes glazed over, and she let this information go in one ear and out the other.

As for why she did so, Nicola already knew all this and didn't need it explained to her.

Tarot had twenty-two Major Arcana, each featuring an archetypal illustration. Then there were the fifty-six Minor Arcana, separated into four suits—wands, pentacles, swords, and cups. In total, these seventy-eight cards made up a deck of tarot cards.

Given their property of drawing out the future one anticipated in one's subconscious, they provided divination specialized for predicting the near future.

"So, what does the card Nicola drew mean?" Elsa turned over the card on the table and glanced at Karin from the corner of her eye.

"Um, hang on a minute... This is the Two of Cups, reversed, which means...?" Karin took a thick book of interpretations from her backpack and began flipping through the pages.

Before Karin got to the corresponding page, Nicola wearily muttered, "That's okay. I know what it means. 'Your relationship with a beloved member of the opposite sex will worsen, and you will grow apart.' Right?"

It looked like Nicola's mutterings were correct.

Karin's green-flecked, gray eyes instantly opened wide. With visible amazement, she whirled around to look Nicola in the eyes.

"You're right, that's amazing! Ah, but it's not a very fortunate reading. So I guess I shouldn't celebrate. Sorry." The honest Karin suddenly displayed her melancholy with her slumped shoulders.

Elsa let out an exasperated sigh, then comforted Karin by patting her gently on the back.

"Well then, let's keep drawing cards until we get a good reading. All's well that ends well, right?" said Elsa, with a slight shrug of her shoulders. Elsa. Always the realist, Elsa likely had no fundamental belief in fortune-telling. Nicola chuckled wryly at this characteristic response from her friend, nodding her assent.

While Karin tended to jump on every bandwagon, she was not a mean-spirited girl. Nicola wouldn't be able to sleep that night if she left her friend looking so unhappy.

"C'mon, Karin, let me draw another card," said Nicola.

"O-Okay..." replied Karin with a nod, snapping out of her daze

until she timidly presented the deck to Nicola once more.

Nicola pulled another random card out of the deck before flipping it over to reveal the drawing and speaking up.

“Ah, right, maybe I’ll just draw one more card…”

Although she wore an ambiguous expression, Nicola placed the second card face down on the table. Next, she drew her third card. But her face stiffened upon reading this one as well.

“N-Next one…”

Even as she defiantly drew another card and yet another, the furrows in her forehead only deepened. A picture with a positive meaning just would not come out. Once Nicola had drawn five cards in all, she finally gave up and cast her eyes heavenward.

“Hold on, can a reading even be this ominous…?”

Two of Cups, reversed: Your relationship with a beloved member of the opposite sex will worsen, and you will grow apart.

The Moon, upright: Without perceiving the feelings of those around you, you will worry more than is necessary.

Eight of Swords, reversed: An unforeseen problem, difficulty, or obstacle will ensnare you.

Five of Wands, reversed: Regardless of your concerns, you will encounter increasingly complex situations and struggle to find a resolution.

The Chariot, reversed: Things will not proceed according to plan. You will be unsure as to how you should proceed and likely descend into confusion.

Why couldn’t just one of these pictures be a little better? wondered Nicola. *What kind of future do you call this?* Her face contorted as if she had just tasted something very bitter. Nicola weakly threw the cards back onto the table.

“I’m sorry, Nicola! This is all my fault for suggesting a reading! I know, I’ll give you these cards! That’s right, if you try drawing cards again tomorrow, you might get a different result! Right?” said Karin.

After this long procession of inauspicious outcomes, Karin was on the verge of tears. Even Elsa, who didn’t believe in divination, averted her eyes sympathetically and left Nicola feeling so awkward that she could hardly bear it.

“H-Hey… I mean, fortune-telling is just superstition. This is just a coincidence. Don’t you think?” said Elsa, trying to comfort Nicola.

“Yeah, coincidence. Ha ha…” But Nicola could only laugh dryly while looking off into the distance. Fortunes might or might not come true. If only Nicola could believe that, how much better would she feel?

To Nicola—an exorcist in her past life—her singular checkered history of fortune-telling carried more immediate significance.

As far as Nicola was concerned, fortune-telling was not the sort of activity she might take part in to ease her mind. Even if she conducted another reading the next day, she knew well enough that the results would be more or less the same. Thus, she went on through the day with a headache.

Long ago, Nicola’s mentor had once given her a piece of advice.

“Did ya know this? According to Einstein, humans have only unlocked ten percent of their subconscious abilities. I bet psychics like us use just a *teeny* bit more of our brains than regular folks.”

Simply put, a tarot reading that relied on one’s subconscious abilities to reveal the near future was too compatible with exorcists. Faced with this turbulent future Nicola had unconsciously anticipated, she slumped over the table beside her and sighed.

◇

Nicola von Weber, daughter of an unremarkable viscount, possessed the intact memories of her past life. Back then, she was Rikka Kurokawa from a small island nation called Japan and was born able to *see more* than other people.

Seeing did not mean simply having a good pair of eyes but rather being able to perceive beings from beyond the human realm. As a young girl attending elementary school, she came to realize that she perceived her surroundings differently from others, her ability made blending in with regular people hard.

She could not knowingly step on the blood-soaked woman who fell in front of her on the pedestrian crossing at her young age. When that same woman suddenly leaped right at her, she could not help but flinch. Strange things chasing her forced her to run away.

Those reactions and behaviors inevitably made her stand out.

Even her parents found her to be a creepy kid, so she felt like she didn't belong anywhere.

One day, Nicola ended up on the doorstep of a man in his thirties who could see the same things as her. The encounter made her see him as a father figure.

The man who took her in had trademark features of a stubbly beard and sickly eyes, always holding a cigarette. But his trade seemed awfully suspicious to most because he dealt with apparitions, ghosts, urban legends, curses, and other things. Any phenomena that obeyed unknown principles that mere reason could not explain fell under this umbrella.

He was a specialist who had acquired the knowledge and skills to resolve any problems caused by those beings from beyond the human realm, an exorcist. That was how the man made his living.

Nicola's skills as an exorcist, which at first she had been taught for self-defense, at some point became a source of pride. Before she knew it, she had made it her profession.

Then, by chance, she lost that life. Fifteen years had gone by since she was born again in another world.

As a group of male students walked behind her, Nicola could not help but overhear this conversation:

"Hey, have you heard? Someone saw both a will-'o-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color and a poltergeist in the girls' first-floor bathroom."

"I heard. One of the boys witnessed them both from a distance when he went to the bathroom at night."

"Yeah, those are the third and fourth entries in the Seven Wonders."

She could not say whether it was her hard-won experience that forced her to listen to talks of this sort or if she should call this an occupational hazard. Feeling her ears twitch, Nicola lifted her head sluggishly from the table she slumped over.

"Everyone here is obsessed with the occult. Fortune-telling this, Seven Wonders that. They can't get enough of it."

Unlike Nicola's strong reaction to these rumors, Elsa shrugged her shoulders annoyingly.

"The Seven Wonders have gone in and out of fashion irregularly

for a long time… But it's easy to understand why fortune-telling is popular right now. After all, the academy's student ball is soon."

Said ball Elsa referred to was fast approaching and was a dance party for all students that would take place in about a month.

The event was an important rite of passage within this academy. It provided an invaluable opportunity for the sons and daughters of nobles to find marriage partners and patrons. This ball, which also gave students their societal debut, appeared to be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for them to shine.

As for Nicola, who was useless at sports and dancing, it promised to be an event more bothersome than any other. Tragically, attendance was mandatory.

"Look, you can only dance with your betrothed, right? So, the simple act of inviting someone to join you in the first dance is effectively a marriage proposal."

Students whose enrollment at the school overlapped with those of their betrothed had to dance with their future spouses to announce their engagement to the world.

Those who were not already so arranged could invite a potential partner to join them in the first dance, whereby accepting was tantamount to approving their offer of marriage.

On the other hand, students from merchant families who dealt in dresses and accessories took a business-minded approach, peddling their family wares.

Throughout this academy, where a vortex of great many expectations gathered, it somehow seemed there was tension in the air. All the students acted restless. Each of them pondered whether their intended partner would invite them or if they should accept the expected invitation. They even mused whether their business negotiations would go well or if they could snag themselves a big-time patron.

The current popularity of fortune-telling was due to this, an attempt to relieve the anxiety the students all felt. Psychologically, they were probably looking for a source of encouragement to propel them forward. Because Nicola found this all tiresome, she sighed.

"Say, Elsa, you already have a fiancé, don't you?" asked Karin.

How fickle feelings can be, thought Nicola. Karin, who had been on the verge of tears after producing such inauspicious results

with her tarot reading, had regained her composure. She now looked to Elsa as her eyes sparkled with curiosity.

Seemingly, Karin could not contain her interest concerning other people's love affairs. For better or worse, this was typical behavior for a girl.

"Well, with my sister having passed away, I'm now the eldest child in my family... To be sure, my family decided my marriage quite some time ago."

"Well, well, well! Has that fiancé invited you to the dance yet?"

But Elsa sighed slightly and stared at Karin with a suspicious glint in her eye.

"He did, but... It wasn't as romantic a conversation as you might expect. With an arranged marriage like this, both the invitation and the acceptance thereof are just a ritual that is planned and coordinated in advance. 'Please dance with me.' 'Yes I'd love to.' The exchange was over in a minute."

As the daughter of a count, Elsa already had her marriage and other matters decided for her.

I see. If your time at the school overlaps with that of your predetermined fiancé, of course you wouldn't have any other choice or the right to refuse, thought Nicola.

"Huh, that's so practical..." said Karin, pursing her lips in dissatisfaction.

"Having said all that, what about your partner, Karin?" inquired Elsa. Since Karin was the daughter of a merchant, surely she would not already be betrothed.

If Karin received an invitation, carrying with it the presumption of an engagement, she belonged to a social stratum where she could trouble herself with indecision.

After Elsa pointed out this disparity, Karin just blinked in surprise.

"Eh? Me? I intend to just wait and see while I'm a first-year or second-year student. Whether I marry the son of another merchant family or the second or third son of a noble, I can't just ignore my family's success or their business. I'll wait until my third year to settle on a fiancé."

Well, this was a surprise. Despite Karin's habitual bandwagon mood, she could think in such sound terms. Nicola, feeling just a little shocked, exchanged a glance with Elsa.

Between merchant families and noble houses, where succession of the family and its estate was the foremost consideration, they had fundamentally different ways of thinking.

“So, I’ll be a wallflower at the first dance this year and the next.”

“Is that right?”

“Just for the duration of the first dance, though. Although people might call me a wallflower, I’ll actually be very busy.”

A wallflower—such behavior at a ball or any public setting would have received a most dishonorable designation. But Karin said the student ball, at least for the duration of the first dance, was not always like that.

“Assuming I had a fiancé and our enrollment at the school didn’t happen to overlap, it’s not like I could dance with someone else. For the first dance, there’s really no shame in being a wallflower. Some people have no choice in the matter.”

Karin briefly paused, then continued speaking with sparkling eyes.

“The question is what to do after the second dance begins. From the start of the second dance, you could pair with anyone. So, remaining a wallflower would be embarrassing. Even those engaged and taking part in the first dance spend the duration desperately searching for a partner for the second dance… As a wallflower, it’s not like I can take it easy.”

Elsa nodded in agreement and added, “A long time ago, my older sister told me about that. According to her, the space along the wall turns into quite the battleground. Both boys and girls will make their rounds between those who are free and match their requirements, all scrambling to find someone to replace their partner.”

“H-Huh…” murmured Nicola.

Despite their reputation as wallflowers, those students were more like carnivorous flora, desperately snatching whatever prey they could.

Her expression suddenly drawn, Nicola vowed never to end up by the side of the wall.

After finding another direction to face while she made this new resolution, she turned back to notice her two friends fixing her with a penetrating stare. Curious eyes brimmed with interest.

“Say, how about you, Nicola? Have you received your invitation

yet?”

Nicola felt her whole body stiffen. As she turned away again, her eyes wavering, she continued to feel all eyes trained on her. It was no longer only Karin and Elsa but all the surrounding students who had pricked up their ears to listen in. Cold sweat ran down her neck, and she curled up defensively.

“Say, just who was it who invited you? Or have you yet to receive one? Go on, tell us!”

“E-Erm… Well… The thing about that is…” Nicola felt cornered with Karin leaning toward her. Flustered, she could only hem and haw.

Seeking salvation, Nicola turned to look at Elsa. Once Elsa gave Nicola a meaningful sideways glance, she said, “Quit it, Karin. Think how poor Nicola feels being asked about every little thing. She has to consider her *intended partner’s* status, so there may be some things she can’t talk about even if she wants to. Isn’t that correct?”

When Karin picked up on the implication behind Elsa’s words, she exclaimed, “You’re right!”

Based on this reaction, Nicola finally understood both girls had reached an unacceptable misunderstanding. Hastily, she spoke up.

“No, you’ve got the wrong—”

But she could not finish her refutation. A hand extended from behind her and clasped her mouth shut. Nicola arched her eyebrows in alarm and stared up at the person who held a hand over her mouth.

A cheerful, carefree voice rang out from above Nicola’s head. “Hey there, young ladies. Apologies for interrupting your lively chat, but might I borrow Miss Nicola?”

This person still holding his hand over Nicola’s mouth raised a shapely eyebrow and smiled at her friends. His honey-colored hair and emerald eyes attributed to his sweet good luck, identifying him as the first-born prince of this kingdom.

He waved to her friends with the hand he hadn’t clasped over her mouth.

This suddenness left Elsa and Karin gawking in disbelief. Said person, Alois, cocked his head skeptically and continued showing his charming smile at the two girls.

“C’mon, just for a little while. Can’t I borrow her?”

Like hell you can, thought Nicola. She wanted to protest in those terms, but the hand covering her mouth would not allow it.

Meanwhile Elsa and Karin turned as red as beets before nodding furiously in response to the prince’s request. Nicola seemed to have no right of refusal.

“Thanks,” said Alois. “Well then, I’ll just borrow her for a minute.”

Having obtained Elsa and Karin’s agreement, he finally removed his hand from Nicola’s mouth. After Alois spun Nicola around to face the other way, he pushed her ahead as he exited the dining hall.

In the hall, Nicola overheard the students mutter among themselves and wonder what was going on. Nicola screwed up her face in as dramatic a fashion as she could do so.

2

The schoolhouse, with its old, solid walls, had the slightest signature scent of stone and sandy dust.

As she hurried after Alois, Nicola cast her eyes at her surroundings. Despite this world’s civilization being about as advanced as Europe in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, the school was coeducational, had a student council, and several other school regulations that seemed Japanese. The dress code also did not keep with the period.

The reason for the *hodgepodge* nature of this world, which Nicola had vaguely felt ever since being born into it, had finally been revealed just a few months prior in a manner that no one would have hoped for.

It was a parallel world that came about from the fusion of elements from fiction and reality. Everything was the consequence of a certain woman’s dream.

Some time ago, there was a young girl in Japan. Thanks to her ability to perceive beings beyond the human realm, those around her found her creepy, leaving her to dwell in solitude.

Her background did not differ much from Rikka’s life, acting as a mirror to each other.

The difference in the ultimate fates of Rikka and this girl were

due to whether they found people who could see the same world they did so that they could escape solitude. That was probably it.

Rikka had her easygoing mentor and her irresponsible and frivolous junior apprentice.

Conversely, this woman had become a shut-in who cut off all ties to the outside world and cursed the society that had failed to understand her. And so, one day, she offered a sacrifice to a demon and made a wish.

“Let me reincarnate in the world of my favorite dating sim.”

The demon entrusted with the creation of this world must have been baffled at first. Recreating a space with only the information available in a dating sim could hardly be called a *world*.

With only the information revealed to the player—a subjective viewpoint that could not extend outside the bounds of the game—there would be an overwhelming lack of elements to construct a world. Nicola supposed that must be why this architect had chosen to start with the real world Europe, close to the game’s setting, as a basis for this world.

Regardless, Olivia—the girl who had struck a deal with the devil to reincarnate there—was no longer a part of this world. The tragedy was another reason to see the world as the *consequence* of her dream.

Since it truly was a *world*, it continued to turn even without Olivia. A world is an aggregate of objective reality and numerous subjective viewpoints.

The objective reality of Olivia’s death would quickly fill the space left by that event, just one of many subjective viewpoints observed by others. That made a world, and her wish would continue regardless of her status.

Nicola looked back at the honey-colored head bobbing in front of her, thinking, *How very ironic is all this*.

As far as Olivia had been concerned, Alois, Sieghart, and Ernst were all romanceable characters from a dating sim. While their identities, backgrounds, and appearances came from the setting of a game, they did not merely follow rails laid out for them; instead they made their own decisions. They were living human beings by having their own wills as well as thoughts and emotions.

Knowing this all too well left Nicola with a strange, inescapable feeling.

“Um, how much farther will we be going?” asked Nicola, directing this at Alois’s back as he continued to lead her down a long corridor.

Alois immediately looked back at Nicola, replying over his shoulder, “Somewhere with no one else around.” He winked at her before picking up his pace again.

Nicola assumed a glum expression, then groaned in a low voice to the ground, “That reminds me… Something much scarier than the lousy ghost stories is the rumor that I’m engaged to you, Your Highness.”

“Worse than lousy ghost stories, you say, ha ha ha. Harsh as ever, I see. I feel so put down.”

“If you’re really depressed, come and see me again when you can show it in your face and voice.” *This jerk*, thought Nicola, narrowing her eyes and glaring at the back of Alois’s head.

Nicola didn’t care that she was dealing with a prince or if she was being disrespectful. She knew Alois wouldn’t reproach her if she stopped concealing her distaste and tutted in annoyance.

With his shoulders shaking from his amusement, Alois started to climb the stairs at the end of the corridor.

Just how much farther is he planning on going? As she wondered about this, Nicola sighed.

It was just as Nicola had complained a moment ago—a rumor was currently circulating the academy that couldn’t be less to her liking. All this came about due to Alois’s recent habit of calling out to Nicola while other students surrounded her.

Her status was about to change from that of the daughter of a viscount to that of a marquess. Because Nicola was one of the few daughters of higher nobles not betrothed, she was now considered to marry Alois. This made her a prime candidate for spurious speculation.

If she had to describe the state of this rumor, she would say it had sprouted fins caudal, pectoral, and dorsal. Now, it swam around the school freely like a migratory fish.

“Really, what a fun rumor… Though, I couldn’t recommend denying it at the present juncture,” said Alois.

“I know… But this misunderstanding is so far from something I’d ever like to hear that denying it feels like a conditioned reflex.” Unintentionally, Nicola made a face like she had just tasted

something bitter, then thought, *I bet he'll think even this is funny*.

Amused, Alois's shoulders shook as he snickered to himself.



“I get it, I mean, Sieg is your real fiancé, and you wouldn’t want people to think otherwise. Finally, at last, at long, long last! It also seems you’ve finally become aware of your love for him, right? As long as my best friend receives his just reward, I have no complaints.”

“Have you ever heard the words, ‘mind your own business’?”

“Of course I have. Clumsy girls who can’t be honest and accept others’ kindness often say that,” teased Alois. He shrugged cheerfully and continued, “On the day of the ball, you shall dance with Sieg, and I shall dance with Miss Charlotte. Our respective engagements will be on open display.”

“I…suppose so.”

Sieghart von Edelstein was years older than Nicola and her childhood friend. She had just realized a few months ago that they shared a mutual love for one another. But he faced constant troubling circumstances, causing Nicola much dismay.

Overall, Sieghart possessed an incomparable visage. To top that off, he was needlessly blessed with keen intellect and athletic talent. He really was the kind of perfect person that the gods would create on a good day.

However, one could be too beautiful and attract the attention of all manner of *beings*. The tricky part for Nicola was that this attraction was true for humans and nonhumans. Liking beautiful things was by no means just limited to humans.

As such, Nicola had to protect her childhood friend from such beings for the past ten years.

Nicola could only exorcise the nonhuman, so she frowned bitterly and clenched her fists slightly. A cold wind began to blow above the passageway.

Alois spun around to face Nicola once more.

“Although… For the time being, it would be better for you not to mention your engagement to Sieg.”

“I…understand that.” The reverse Two of Cups she had drawn earlier flashed in Nicola’s mind.

Upon releasing a long sigh, she drew her mouth into a thin line to disguise her impatience. From time to time, Sieghart’s appearance attracted some troublesome people.

In modern Japan, these were the kind of people known as stalkers. Once again, contrary to Sieghart’s wishes, he had gotten

caught up with such a menace. Regrettably, Nicola could do nothing about that as it concerned humans.

Besides Nicola not being capable in this area, she was also far inferior to average people with physical activity and could become a burden. If Sieghart ever ended up a hostage, she wouldn't know what to do.

Though that notion wasn't about to go to her head, Nicola believed she was precious to Sieghart.

She knew that was why she was her childhood friend's Achilles heel. In such cases, the best solution was for Nicola to keep quiet and try not to stand out.

If only the stalker would send a vengeful spirit his way, this would be in my wheelhouse, thought Nicola, knowing she could not change the facts. She cursed internally, then shivered slightly at the wind blowing through the open-air corridor.

Outside that corridor, Nicola could see snow piling up in a courtyard from the side. There, she spied Sieghart walking with someone else and stopped in her tracks.

Alois seemed to notice as well and also stopped.

"Does that worry you?" asked Alois as he followed Nicola's eyeline, his lips curling up teasingly. "You know, she's the new student council vice president and is a year above you and one below Sieg, Ernst, and me. Managing the plan for the annual ball is the student council's job, so it looks like they've been working together a lot recently."

"Ah... Wait, you said *she's* been working with him?" muttered Nicola.

"Well, yeah..." replied Alois, a bitter expression falling over his face as if there was something he couldn't admit.

Simply put, this person seemed to be following in the footsteps of the late Olivia.

Alois looked down at the student and curled his lips, then said, "You won't be getting jealous, will you?"

"Of course not," said Nicola with a snort of laughter. "I would never get jealous."

No matter how one's relationship occurred in a shojo or in a romantic drama broadcast at prime time on Monday, neglecting communication always led to trouble. On this point, Sieghart was meticulous.

Nicola had already heard that he was busy with his student council duties. Hence, she didn't have time to waste feeling jealous about something so small.

Yet, Alois blinked a few times at Nicola's answer and said, "That's the reaction I'd expect from someone who was married for years and years." He kept smiling as he poked fun at her. But Nicola did not restrain from looking at him as if he were a worm.

"How about we put that to one side and get on with what you wanted to talk about? There's no one else around here, right?"

Nicola looked away from the courtyard below and peered at Alois with a side glance.

They were still on their lunch break. Most students had gone to the dining hall or wherever they wanted to eat. Without any particular reason, there was no chance of anyone coming somewhere as removed as this breezeway.

Nicola had drawn Alois back to the point.

"Yes, yes, of course," he said, slowly nodding. He then carefully withdrew a letter from his pocket and handed it to Nicola. "Here you go. It's from Sieg."

"Yep, thanks again… You're a hardworking carrier pigeon."

"Well, I did volunteer."

As much as Nicola verbally sparred with Alois, using open sarcasm, he never showed the slightest hint of being offended.

After Nicola tutted softly, she took the letter.

"That's to communicate the time and place of your next rendezvous, yeah?" asked Alois, interrupting Nicola as she read.

"I wouldn't call it a rendezvous, rather essential maintenance to preserve his life."

Despite the stalkers, the nonhumans always clustered around Sieghart.

As long as Sieghart and Nicola avoided contact during school hours, they would have to find somewhere else to meet so she could exorcise those spirits. Other than that, all they would share was a bit of tea.

Alois's expression seemed to say, "Isn't that what you'd call a rendezvous?" But Nicola ignored him with all her might.

For their discreet meetings, they deliberately chose locations outside the academy itself. Both arrived and returned to their dorms at different times to thoroughly feign that their journeys

were unrelated. In the end, they communicated exclusively through Alois.

“Say, is it all right if I sit in on your next rendezvous?”

“Huh? Wait, why exactly?” Nicola could not help but frown at Alois’s sudden suggestion. Consequently, Alois half-closed his eyes and smiled like a mischievous child.

“I mean, I haven’t had my share of animal therapy recently,” declared Alois.

Nicola no longer understood what Alois was referring to and gave him an incredulous stare.

“You see, I’m talking about a certain big, playful dog and a cat who goes along with whatever he wants, a vacant look on her face. She claims to do anything, ‘Because it’s cold, and sacrifices are necessary.’ The kitty permits the puppy to commit his crimes of conscience! Just watching that sort of thing from the sidelines warms my heart, you know? So I’d like to sit in and watch.”

Nicola froze up instantly.

The moment the short spell elapsed, she furrowed her brow dramatically and glared at Alois.

“By that ‘cat,’ I hope you don’t mean me…”

“Um, who else is there? Wasn’t that well put?” added Alois, a proud smile on his face.

The wrinkles on Nicola’s brow extended to her nose as she groaned and remarked, “If I’m supposed to be a cat… Perhaps I’ll give your needlessly well-proportioned baby face of yours a good scratching and leave some marks on it. After all, cats have to sharpen their claws. Come on then, please stick your neck out in this direction. Hurry up now.”

Even with Nicola’s attempt at intimidation, Alois only pretended to show terror. “Ah, you’re scaring me.” He chuckled joyfully as her attempt was fruitless.

You know, if it’s animal therapy you want, you have an obedient hound to play with.

The young man Nicola thought about had a hot-blooded passion with a tendency to be stubborn. Those features reminded Nicola of a slightly clever German Shepherd, yet she snapped bitterly at Alois under her breath.

Once Nicola stowed Sieghart’s letter in her bag, she boldly folded her arms.

“So, will that be all for today?”

“That’s Sieg’s message taken care of… This one’s from me,” said Alois, retrieving another piece of paper from the pocket of his uniform jacket and handing it to Nicola.

Rather than a letter, it was probably more accurate to describe this as a simple memo.

“What’s this?”

“That’s what you requested of me. My investigation of the rumors known as the Seven Wonders.”

“Ah…” murmured Nicola absentmindedly. Now that Alois mentioned it, she remembered asking him to look into that.

Dropping her gaze to read the memo, she saw legible but somehow uninhibited handwriting that leaped from letter to letter. She only read through the brief, boldly written bullet points she was interested in.

Severed hands seen crawling around the music room

A doppelgänger spotted lurking in the halls

A will-o’-the-wisp that bathes the walls around it in color

A poltergeist

A female student who repeatedly throws herself from the top of the western tower

A full-length mirror that drags students inside

Red paper, blue paper

Nicola smiled as she traced her finger along the line, “A female student who repeatedly throws herself from the top of the western tower.” She finally realized why Elsa had worn such a conflicted expression.

Once upon a time, Elsa’s older sister had indeed thrown herself off the western tower. The reason was her breakup with a boy at the school, but the very man who drove her to her death had remained at the school as a teacher.

Elsa once had the opportunity to discover that the man felt no remorse, so she had deliberately spread the rumors about her sister’s ghost to scare him. Finding the rumor she had intentionally spread counted among the Seven Wonders must have left her with some complicated feelings.

Looking up at Alois, Nicola said, “That was quick.”

Alois shrugged and said, “With Sieg so busy with the student council, I’ve had a lot of time on my hands. I wonder if it wouldn’t

be better for people like Sieg and me to, when possible, avoid going near the spots associated with these Seven Wonders."

Nicola nodded affirmatively at this.

Scary stories started with rumors. Tell enough rumors, and they will cast a shadow. Once the shadow took shape, the tale became a reality.

That was how apparitions were nurtured.

"Quite," said Nicola. "I will exorcise them in due course, but I think it would be better for you to steer clear of them until then."

Nicola's brief answer and hint of a sight made Alois open his eyes wide in shock. "Eh?! Someone as reluctant as you is going to take the initiative and do something about it?!" effused Alois before bending back in a grandiose manner.

Wearing a grimace, Nicola glared steadily at Alois again. "How rude... And is that any way to show you're feeling shocked?"

"Well, your policy is never to help anyone 'who sticks their nose into trouble out of curiosity,' right? You got pretty angry when I ended up at those ruins as a test of my nerves."

Ah, I suppose that did happen, thought Nicola, a far-off look in her eyes.

Everything had happened soon after Nicola began her studies at the academy when she hardly knew Alois.

If she remembered correctly, the third-born prince of a neighboring kingdom, and the exchange students he dragged with him wherever he went, had ignored Alois's protests and made him come along as well. Thus, Alois spirited away for that time.

"So I naturally thought that you'd once again say, 'Blame ghost stories on the ones who spread them around,' and remain on the sidelines," explained Alois, sounding deflated.

"In that case, why did you think I went to the trouble of having you investigate the Seven Wonders?" Nicola snapped back with a suspicious look in her eye.

"I took it as a warning not to stick my own neck out," said Alois, lowering his eyebrows in a rare display of concern.

Nicola let out one last sigh. "Not really... If some annoying little flies started buzzing around where I live, I'd be bothered as anyone else would. This situation is no different. Even I act proactively from time to time, you know."

She shrugged, turned her back to Alois, and started to walk

away.

“Ah, just one more thing. Thank you for looking into that for me,” said Nicola in parting, thinking she heard a wry chuckle from Alois behind her as she departed.

3

All that said, thought Nicola, *I said I would exorcise these Seven Wonders, but how do I go about it?* Nicola further pondered this with a sigh on her way to the first class of the afternoon.

For starters, she would have to try visiting the places where each of the Seven Wonders had manifested, or she wouldn’t get anywhere.

If asked whether she wanted to walk between all these points scattered throughout the school, her answer would obviously be “no.” She might even say it was a pain in the neck.

“Yeah, let’s drag my junior apprentice into this. That would be best.”

Such a task would be ideal as the first lesson of the afternoon was always an optional subject. Nicola and he—“*she,”* rather—had the same class today.

When she thought about it, there was no reason she should have to clean up the school herself, given they shared this living space. After she had convinced herself, she headed for the art room with a spring in her step. However...

“Hey, senior apprentice. You were saying something about me?”

The voice rang out as Nicola headed to the art room on the fourth floor, interrupting her progress. Just as she ascended the stairs, two arms stretched out from behind and wrapped around her neck. At the same time, she experienced the sensation of a soft chest pressing against her back.

Nicola allowed a note of irritation to enter her voice at the culprit who had dared to throttle her.

“Char...”

She saw gentle waves of soft hair the color of milky tea and olive green eyes with a mischievous twinkle.

This gorgeous girl, who rested her chin on Nicola’s shoulder, let out a delighted, deep chuckle beside his senior apprentice’s ear.

Charlotte von Rosenheim.

In a previous life, Charlotte had been a sacrifice in much the same way as Rikka had been. Thanks to the purest spite of a demon, he assumed the role of the female protagonist in the world of this game. But Nicola's poor junior apprentice had been like a younger brother.

Once Nicola mercilessly peeled Char's arms away from her neck, she elbowed him in the stomach.

"You're the daughter of a marquess now, tenuous though that fact may be... Can you really get away with such boorish behavior?" snapped Nicola.

"Oh, so what? You'd rather see me cross my arms?"

"That's not what I'm saying."

With Char, Nicola's words went in one ear and out the other.

Displaying a shrill, taunting laugh, he smoothly wound his slender arms around Nicola again. Suddenly, the sensation of something soft again greeted Nicola, pressing even more roughly against her than earlier. Thinking that Char meant to be disagreeable, Nicola openly scowled at him.

"Stop it... Besides..." *This behavior isn't like you*, almost continued Nicola but forced herself to swallow the words.

Despite Nicola's protests, Char showed no sign of being deterred.

"It's fine," he said. "It's no big deal."

Char started walking with a light step ahead of Nicola. Accompanied with a sigh, Nicola reluctantly scaled the stairs alongside her friend.

Recently, Char had wrapped his arms around Nicola at whim throughout moments each day more often. For instance, whenever they bumped into each other around the school.

Though Nicola would blush at the thought of calling him family, it felt right to call Char her kin. Even now, there was no shred of bashfulness or reservation between them. Nicola had enough faith in Char and believed in him enough to trust him to have her back. Still...

You never had your arms around me in our past life together. Nicola couldn't help but think of this behavior as unlike her junior apprentice.

If someone had told her this new feeling of closeness was down to the fact that they now both belonged to the female sex, Nicola

might have felt convinced. With this doubt lingering in her mind, Nicola stilled her trembling lips, drawing her mouth into a tight line.

"Come to think of it, why did you choose art class? I would've been fine with anything," said Charlotte, approaching the art room as if the question had just occurred to him.

Following the end of winter break, optional classes were beginning. Today's lesson would be their first on the subject.

Since their classes usually differed, they had surprisingly few opportunities to interact at the academy. And so they had weighed their options and settled on taking the same art class, though Nicola recalled Char having left the choice of subject to her.

"Say, did you always like drawing?" quizzed Char, puzzlingly looking at Nicola.

Nicola shrugged slightly and said, "I just asked Sieghart what subject he would recommend."

"Ah, that transcendent pretty boy," said Char with a nod, apparently satisfied by Nicola's answer. Nicola could not help but notice that a certain amount of warmth in his eyes during this exchange. But she tried to pretend that she hadn't seen it.

"It seems for the first year, art class is nothing but lectures. As we advance through each school year, there will be more practical work. If you don't feel like drawing pictures, you can always change to another subject later."

"Ah, that's a point in the subject's favor. I don't mean to brag, but I'm a brilliant artist." Char's approach to everything had been rough and without flair so far.

"I bet," said Nicola, nodding.

Besides, Sieghart had told her, "I bet you'll enjoy art class, Nicola."

When she asked him why, he explained the instructor had partly funded furnishing the more specialized classrooms like those used for art and music classes. That allowed them to renovate the classrooms quite freely.

The current art teacher, who got cold quite easily, had installed double-glazed windows in the classroom to insulate against the cold. From Nicola's perspective, it went without saying this was a bonus for the class. On top of that, the instructor had transformed

the decor for the art classroom in many other ways to suit her preferences.

When Nicola told Char how Sieghart had sold her on the idea of taking this class, he seemed genuinely interested, exclaiming in surprise as they chatted.

The specialty classrooms lined up in a corner of the schoolhouse's fourth floor, where the art classroom stood. Once they finished climbing the stairs, they emerged into a corridor with the art room at the end of it.

Finally arriving in front of the classroom, Nicola pushed against the heavy oak door. The distinct odor of the painter's oil immediately tickled her nostril as she did so.

But the scene that leaped into Nicola's vision caused her to gasp despite herself. The art room had walls that shared a pale but vivid green color.

When Char saw Nicola take one or two steps back with the door still open, he peered into the classroom with a look of suspicion. He then blinked in surprise.

"What, what, what's the deal… Wait, whoa, it's super green. Someone has crazy taste in decor. Seriously, people who get into the arts are pretty out there."

This reaction from Char had veered off in a slightly different direction from the one Nicola had.

Despite the inquisitive look in his eyes, Nicola's junior apprentice started to step casually into the room. Yet Nicola grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him back out.

"You idiot! Haven't you heard of the deadly *Scheele's green*?"

Said green pigment had unmatched notoriety and was even said to have caused the death of Napoleon. As Nicola stood outside the door to the art room, she quietly went over things that made Scheele's green so terrifying.

Early pigments used naturally occurring minerals, but these were expensive. In pursuit of a greater range of hues, chemical reactions created a series of much cheaper synthetic compounds.

In 1775, a beautiful new green unlike anything before it was invented. In the blink of an eye, it gained explosive popularity and spread throughout Europe.

Of all things, the chief ingredient was copper arsenite, or copper acetoarsenite, produced by the reaction between cupric

acetate and diarsenic trioxide. Ignorance could be a terrifying thing. Vitally, these both contained arsenic—a deadly toxin.

From its inception, a few scientists warned of its dangers. Given its low price and vivid color, their efforts did not suffice to slow down its adoption.

Should the world Nicola inhabited trace to eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe, there was more than enough reason to suppose that a pigment containing arsenic might be used in the wallpaper here.

“Eh? Yikes…” Realizing just how scary the pigment was, Char turned pale and took a step back from the art room.

Nicola, who stood half a step behind Char, collided with his back at full force.

She could not help but stumble into something else and somehow maintained her footing. With a gasp, she whirled around anxiously to find herself standing face-to-face with a woman who was presumably their art instructor.

The woman wore her hair in a tight bun and a dress firmly fastened at the collar at her neck. She wore glasses with sharp silver frames. This schoolmistress, who gave the impression of being terribly strict, looked to be nearly or barely past forty.

As the art instructor opened the door to her classroom, she shot Nicola and Char a suspicious stare before speaking up.

“What’s the matter with you two? The lesson is about to begin. Get inside at once.”

“Well, um, the thing is… Would it be too late to change our selection now…?” said Char hesitantly.

At this, the schoolmistress narrowed her blue-gray eyes suspiciously. Just as she noticed her two students glance toward the green wallpaper, she sighed and finally understood.

After her expression softened minutely, she said, “I’m glad to see you’re so knowledgeable. However, you can relax. This wallpaper uses natural minerals. It’s not the green you’re thinking of. Now get in. The lesson’s about to start.”

Nicola and Char were relieved to hear this. Once the two exchanged a glance, they timidly stepped into the art room. They sat at the back of the classroom to distance themselves and the schoolmistress.

Shortly after the art instructor cast her gaze across the students

seated in her classroom, she smoothly got the ball rolling.

"Now then. For the first year, our art course consists of lectures in the basics, centered on art history, but… First, I'd like to address the decor in this room, which likely shocked many of you."

The schoolmistress looked around the art room one more time. Nicola also took this opportunity to do the same. All the windows in the room were double-glazed, just as she had been informed beforehand, and the walls all had the same pale green wallpaper.

Sitting on a bookshelf on one side of the chalkboard were several volumes of compiled illustrations and specialized books on art history, looking quite cramped. The shelves against the walls held plasters, busts, and urns. Except for the color of the walls, it looked like a perfectly normal art room.

"Recent years have seen an increase in the availability of vivid synthetic pigments," continued the art instructor. "One particular vivid, inexpensive green has seen widespread use in wallpapers and dyes for clothing, but… A certain scientist has alerted everyone to the toxic properties of this green pigment."

The word *toxic*, a direct and unsettling descriptor, caused the other students to spin around and gaze at the green walls in shock.

"You can relax," said the instructor. "Given that I am aware of the possibility that synthetic pigment is toxic, I wouldn't even think to use it. However, if I had been ignorant of those findings, you might have breathed in toxic particles just now."

When the art instructor paused, a heavy silence descended over the classroom.

"To take another example, there is a pigment known as lead white. Its bright hue resembles a human ideal of clear, fair skin, which many find beautiful. People once used it extensively to paint women's skin. Yet, it produces side effects such as headaches, dizziness, difficulty walking, vomiting, and spasms. That also includes paralysis and even blindness… Some argue the occupational affliction known as painter's colic is a potential effect of lead white."

The art instructor took a moment before resuming.

"In every era, people use whatever is cutting edge at the time. But do you know what pigments are in the wallpaper in your rooms or the paintings adorning the walls of your family's homes?

Can you be absolutely sure that they're safe? It is vital to possess a degree of doubt in not only art but in all things. In history, we can find hints as to what we should suspect of being harmful. So, we will begin our lectures with a history of pigments. Let us start the lesson."

Upon wrapping up this introduction, the schoolmistress faced the chalkboard and started to write on it, the chalk tapping as she worked.

Now I see, thought Nicola. *With a word as impactful as* toxic *thrown in, a boring lecture in art history suddenly feels more personal*. *What a perfect way to grab the students' attention*.

"Art's not bad, huh?" Char whispered in Nicola's ear, who nodded slightly in agreement.

Though the art instructor came off as a little severe, she also seemed to be a capable teacher.

Because of its double-glazed windows, this classroom was warmer than any other, which Nicola was thankful for due to her sensitivity to the cold. Her fingertips still felt a bit too numb to copy what was written on the chalkboard.

Deciding to warm them up at least once during the lesson, she thrust her hands into her pockets. She became suddenly aware of a rectangular object she could not remember putting there. Though Nicola was immediately suspicious of this object, she pulled it right out. Regardless, she chuckled wryly as she identified it.

"Oh, Karin..."

It was the deck of tarot cards she drew from in the dining hall. Nicola believed she had been told, "If you try drawing cards again tomorrow, you might get a different result!"

But Nicola hadn't expected Karin to sneak the deck into her pocket. There was no getting past her.

She sighed, then slid the deck over to Char, sitting beside her.

"See these...? You can have them."

"Tarot cards? Nah, don't want 'em. It's not like I use them in my work."

"I don't want them either."

Nicola felt guilty on Karin's behalf since they were useless to her.

At any rate, the cards Nicola reflected an unavoidable future she was already aware of, even if only subconsciously. It was better not to know about it if it was impossible to avoid.

The cards were reliable enough that, in her past life, she had even used them occasionally in her work as an exorcist. A negative reading would only make one feel deflated when reading one's fortune, causing it to be pointless.

"Come on, take them."

"'Kay, 'kay." Char acquiesced as Nicola steadily pushed the cards closer to him, finally accepting them. He stuffed the deck casually into his pocket.

Once the art instructor finished writing all the lines for the class on the chalkboard, she assumed a stance that showed she was about to launch into an explanation. Seeing that Nicola and Char sat at the back of the classroom, the schoolmistress had not noticed them bickering under their breath.

"So, you wanna fill me in?" asked Char.

"Huh?"

"You were saying something about me when we met near the staircase, right?"

"Ah..."

Char had apparently overheard Nicola's earlier declaration about him.

"Say, Char-taro, look at this," said Nicola, taking out the note Alois had written for her about his investigation before leaning over to show it to her junior apprentice.

Char chuckled, the sound reverberating deep in his throat again.

"Hilarious. You're really comparing me to a damn rat who always scrams as soon as he can? What's up?"

"Wrong, I'm afraid. That hamster called Taro actually scampers. Wait, that's not the point. What I want to show you is this. I want us to get kitted out and hunt the Seven Wonders," explained Nicola before sliding the note across the desk for Char to read.

He scanned the note's contents instantly and brashly leaned over the desk. Once he did so, he propped his head up with his elbows, saying, "Eh, no way."

His refusal was so blunt that it briefly took Nicola aback.

She hadn't imagined that he would reject her request so swiftly.

Despite herself, she openly furrowed her brow in annoyance.

“You insolent brat… I don’t recall raising you to behave this way.”

“Oh, well, I don’t remember you raising me at all.”

“Right, I just said I didn’t recall doing that.”

After this bit of banter, which both were used to, Char predictably gave one of his hoarse chuckles.

Nicola raised her eyebrows before letting out a groan, openly displaying her discontent.

“You know… You go to this school, so you have to live with whatever problems arise. Why should I clean up a space we share all by myself? Help me out.”

Unfortunately, Char remained undaunted by Nicola’s reproach. Her objections fell on deaf ears as Char theatrically shrugged his shoulders.

“Forget it. I’m busy these days. So I’ll pass. I’ll leave it to you—Ah, but don’t exorcise this one just yet.” Char pointed to an item on Alois’s note with a foolish grin.

It was the first bullet point he indicated with a finger tap. On that line, danced the word *doppelgänger*.

“You see, I’m raising this one at the moment. So don’t exorcise it just yet. I’d like you to let it run free for a while.”

Nicola blinked in surprise at Char’s request and sighed deeply. Once she massaged her aching temples, she glared steadily at Char.

“You mean to say… You’re the one who spread the rumor about a doppelgänger?”

“Well, that’s how it is. Seeing you with your familiar, I couldn’t help but want a doppelgänger of my very own. But I’m still nurturing it for the time being,” explained Char, smiling complacently and not showing the slightest hint of remorse. “Seriously, please let this one go for now. The rest I leave up to you.”

“You really are an insolent one…”

Not only was Char unwilling to help, but he was also asking her for a favor. He had a lot of nerve. Deep furrows formed on Nicola’s brow as she fixated on her junior apprentice with an icy glare.

“You don’t mind, right?” continued Char. “If you leave my doppelgänger alone, I’ll do your hair when it’s time for the ball.

How ’bout that? Then we’ll be square. Or have you already found someone to handle that for you?”

“I…haven’t just yet.”

Though some girls summoned their handmaidens from home to style their hair for the annual student ball, friends typically did each other’s hair. With only one month left until the ball, Nicola had yet to determine who would perform this duty. Honestly, Char’s offer sounded like a godsend.

Although, thought Nicola, knitting her eyebrows together. “Is that…something you can handle? Really?” Nicola glanced down at Char’s notes from the lesson, a scrawl that resembled nothing so much as an earthworm’s trail.

As far as Nicola knew, her junior apprentice was the type to do everything exceptionally roughly and carelessly. So she could not help but find this offer suspicious. Even though she had a look of disbelief, Char chuckled nonchalantly.

“Of course, I can handle it. I learned how to do it from my big sis the other day.”

“Hmm… I see, so Emma taught you.” Nicola decided to believe him, for now. She murmured, “In that case, I accept your offer.”

“All right, you can count on me,” said Char with an easy grin. Like always, Nicola couldn’t really read past his smile to determine his true intentions.

Still not feeling quite at ease, Nicola gave her junior apprentice another steady stare. She whispered to him again, with an accusatory tone she could not suppress, “Hey… You’re keeping something from me, aren’t you? Whenever you hold something back, you always look up and to the left.”

“Huh, really?”

“No. That was a lie.”

“I thought so. I mean, I’m not hiding anything at all.”

“You’re a crafty fellow…”

This typical Char attitude must have caused Nicola to draw the upright Moon from the tarot deck. Nicola swallowed her irritation before she clicked at Char, instead letting out a deep, deep sigh.

In any case, I should deal with any nuisance as quickly as possible rather than count on any help from my junior apprentice.

Having decided what she would do after school, she composed herself and faced the chalkboard again.

4

Scary stories started with rumors. Tell enough rumors, and they would cast a shadow. Once the shadow took shape, the tale became true.

As ironic as it might have seemed, what people considered apparitions or only urban legends always stemmed their imaginations. Their thoughts were at their source.

Recognition sustained an apparition's existence. The more widely known they were, the more stable their existence. People's tendency to recognize and fear common objects eventually granted them a form.

From what Nicola knew, the rumors of the Seven Wonders combined several existing ghost stories from the school, making it nothing less than a hotbed of trouble.

After Nicola's lessons were over for the day, though the weather was still grimly cold, the evening sun shone through the windows of the schoolhouse.

During this time, sunlight was still very bright, and shadows were at their darkest. Thus, it became difficult for people to distinguish what was real and what was not. A twilight zone.

Nicola exhaled, partly sighing, and saw her breath turn white.

When lessons ended for the day, not many students stuck around the schoolhouse just for fun. Reaching the landing of an empty staircase, Nicola looked up at the familiar resting on her shoulder out of the corner of her eye.

"Seriously... I can't believe how much trouble he's stirred up. Don't you agree, Gemini?" Nicola muttered absentmindedly. The pitch-black orb on her shoulder pressed itself against her cheek.

That squishy sensation was best compared to a water balloon. Along with its smooth surface, it brought an astonishing amount of warmth. Gemini had likely adopted this property out of chivalrous consideration for Nicola's sensitivities.

"Thanks," mumbled Nicola.

Gemini nuzzled up to her again, apparently pleased.

"Let's get this over with quickly and head back to the dorm, shall we?" She looked down at the scrap of paper in her hand. The writing of it was legible, yet the letters leaped across the page uninhibitedly, displaying the personality of the person who had

created it.

Reportedly, there was once an incident in the music room where the lid to the piano's keyboard slammed shut during a performance, severing the hands of the student who was playing it. Apparently, the severed hands continued to crawl around the music room.

Somewhere in the halls of this academy, you might find another you who isn't really you. Should you ever encounter the being that has assumed your appearance, the doppelgänger will take over your life.

A will-'o-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color roams the first-floor girls' bathroom. Each night one can hear a poltergeist break something in there. One student even saw this happening, and so on.

It seems there was once a female student who threw herself off the western tower and audibly sobbed before throwing herself again and again.

There are reports of a staircase with a large, full-length mirror on its landing, right at the back of the eastern wing of the schoolhouse. If you see your reflection move in some way that you did not, the mirror will immediately drag you inside.

Another case in the girls' bathroom on the fourth floor, where the classrooms for specialty subjects are all lined up together. If you do your business in the cubicle at the very back of the bathroom, you will hear a voice from the third cubicle, the one in front of the rear cubicle. It will say, "Red paper or blue paper, which would you like?"

Answering "red paper" will lead you to profusely bleed and die, your whole body turning red. Whereas, answering "blue paper" will make the being whisk away your blood, or you will suffocate and die as your face turns blue.

Nicola looked back up from Alois's note and exhaled heavily through her nose.

Though she still had some slight misgivings about the Seven Wonders, they were all quite orthodox as school ghost stories went. She thought they were quite proper on the whole.

When Nicola determined the music room would be her first objective, she walked rapidly in that direction.

The speciality classrooms—which included the music, art, and audiovisual rooms—frequently appeared in ghost stories in schools in Japan.

That said, most students used these classrooms sparingly, unlike those for standard subjects. Said locations also had special learning equipment, presenting a more unusual setting.

No student would think of spreading ghost stories set in the standard classrooms, which were part of every student's everyday life.

The bathrooms were also a location inseparable from ghost stories. Toilet cubicles did not entirely have partitioned areas, which gave them a certain amount of ambiguity that set them apart from other spaces.

Exposing one's lower body in such a place left one feeling vulnerable on a biological level. Even if only experienced subconsciously, physically, and psychologically, one could not help but have unease.

With all these mental processes at work, it was only logical that places like specialty classrooms and bathrooms would frequently set the stage for ghost stories.

Apart from these examples, the large mirror on the staircase that pulled students inside was at the far end of the east wing. In other words, it was somewhat hard to get to and removed from the space one experienced in everyday life. This location fairly made logical sense as well.

Besides, incidents that took place in the past usually rose to the status of ghost stories.

Anyhow, a female student had thrown herself off the western tower. Just as Nicola remembered Elsa's now-departed sister, she had already arrived at the music room. She was on the schoolhouse's fourth floor, where the specialty classrooms were arranged in a row.

Unlike the art room, the music room was where anyone could reach it immediately after climbing the stairs.

Nicola carefully opened the creaky door, confirming that no one was inside. Then, she entered the room and closed the door behind her. After slowly looking around the room, she could see it was dim inside, with a grand piano and music stands barely visible.

A moment later, she realized something else. Just at the edge of her field of vision, she most definitely glimpsed something. Soon after, there was a sound. *Thud, thud*. A dull, heavy object was

hitting the floor.

With some reluctance, Nicola peered in the direction the sound had come from. Having done so, she confirmed the presence of two disembodied human hands, lying feebly beneath the piano's keyboard, whose color was darker than the gloom in the room.

"Ahh..." This groan that escaped Nicola's lips resounded clearly throughout the silent music room.

Feeling fed up, Nicola looked down at the hands that refused to move a muscle.

Their skin had the color of dirt, not giving the slightest impression of life. Watching those *things* that stuck out from the messy cross sections where they were once attached to arms would leave anyone uneasy.

If Nicola was being honest, the hands had more or less the appearance she had expected. Still, she could not help but feel hatred.

"Say, for the sake of argument, that they don't move..." muttered Nicola, scowling. She scrunched up the scrap of paper in her hand into a ball before tossing it in the general direction of the severed hands.

No sooner had she done so than the hands each began vigorously flexing all five of their digits as they crawled wildly across the floor.

Yep, I knew they would, thought Nicola, the words echoing in her head, even as she was creeped out. An audible cry left her, "Urk."

After all, the shape of the hands reminded her of the massive spiders that sometimes popped up in the countryside. The way they scuttled was reminiscent of a certain dark, glossy insect she would rather not name.

Without waiting a second, Nicola stepped back and turned about-face, ready to flee. She was prepared to trot away, swiftly leaving the music room behind.

"Nope, nope, physically can't do it. I'll come back for you another day!" commented Nicola. The hands were grotesque in stasis, and the way they moved was definitely cheating. "At this point...I might beg Ernst to return with me and get him to stomp furiously around the room."

She was referring to Ernst con Müller, Alois's attendant and bodyguard. He had a ridiculously powerful guardian spirit that

could blast away more marginal apparitions by getting close to them. If he completed enough laps of the music room, stomping around, he would probably take care of those nasty hands in a snap.

“Next… Let’s move on to the next one.” Nicola nodded before going to the location where the following ghost story had come from.

Considering Nicola would skip over the doppelgänger, her next objective was in the girls’ bathroom on the first floor of the schoolhouse.

In her heart of hearts, Nicola would have preferred to deal with the seventh of the Wonders at the fourth-floor toilets, on the same floor as the specialty classrooms. Already in tears from the sight of those hands, she walked right by the toilets. She’d dealt with apparitions that sometimes emerged, so following the established list was the safest option.

A will-’o-the-wisp and a poltergeist that kept breaking things sounded easier to dispense with than those crawling hands.

Resolving to deal with her next target handily, Nicola psyched herself up as she descended the stairs to the first floor and walked straight into the girls’ bathroom. But then…

“Oh?” Nicola could not help but exclaim foolishly. She tilted her head to one side, perplexed.

In the girls’ bathroom, sunlight dimly shone through the windows, and a dead silence accompanied the humid air. The setting sun’s red blended with a deep navy blue, a fascinating time of day at twilight.

Nicola had aimed for the time of day when apparitions were most likely to manifest. Looking at her surroundings, she saw a faint haze, floating vaguely around the bathroom that preceded a form.

“It’s still a little shady…”

The term shady—which Nicola realized was not far from “shade,” another word for spirit—helped describe the partial shadow around the edges of a figure. She continued observing the entity before her, whose form remained impenetrable.

It was still far from having a solid shape, prior to the stage where an apparition fully coalesced.

“If I scatter it around in this state… There’ll be no end to it.”

Rather than disposing of it when it was still so vague, it would be easier to deal with once it had pulled itself together more, like a ball of lint.

Nicola nodded to herself once more.

“I’ll leave this one a little longer as well. Next spot,” she declared and turned on her heel.

But the remaining apparitions—the ghost in the western tower and the big mirror that dragged students inside—would tragically also have to be sidestepped for now. Unsurprisingly, both of them remained too loosely defined to undergo exorcism.

The seventh of the Seven Wonders had not progressed as far as that; there was not even a haze drifting through the air.

After she peered into the rearmost cubicle and the third one right before it, Nicola muttered under her breath, “Besides, ‘red paper, blue paper’ is just a bit too archaic. And calling them ‘The Seven Wonders of the School’ also seems out of place. Really, just what is he plotting?”

Nicola folded her arms in contemplation, having only partially fathomed her junior apprentice’s intentions.

Once she gently petted Gemini, who gazed intently at her with an air of confusion, she sighed and shrugged.

“Let’s head home for today…”

While she had truly failed to purify the school today, there was nothing more to be done about it.

Nicola spun swiftly on her heel and set a course home to her dormitory.

◆◆◆

The cute little kitty went *mew, mew*.

I said, “I want that one.”

But Elma said, “That wouldn’t be fair to the mother cat, so you can’t.”

“Why?”

I didn’t understand what she meant or why she cared about what was fair to the mother cat.

Elma looked at me with that creepy face of hers.

The cute little kitty went *mew, mew*.

The mother cat went *hiss*.
She didn’t hiss again.
She’ll never hiss again.

Some things I have no need for.

I mean, I just wanted the cute little kitty.

Nicola’s Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 9

Tarot cards

From The Fool, considered zero, to The World, numbered twenty-one, there are the Major Arcana.

The four suits—wands, coins, swords, and cups—each contain the numbers 1 through 10, as well as the page, knight, queen, and king. These represent the Minor Arcana.

Together, these seventy-eight cards are known as a deck of tarot cards.

A tarot reading involves the instinctive selection of cards based on information acquired subconsciously.

Those already quite proud of their “sharp instincts” might find tarot interesting.

Chapter 2: Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall

1

Through the window, the falling snow made a barely audible sound as it piled up on the ground. Clouds hung heavy in the sky, making it dark outside.

With that view from the side, Nicola picked up the bag she had prepared earlier with her dress and makeup box, then left her dormitory room behind.

After she went out to the dormitory corridor, she spied on all the women who were clearly not pupils, as they wore servant uniforms. These were most likely the handmaidens summoned to the academy to style and decorate their young mistresses' hair. Nicola was very impressed by such dedication.

Aside from the servants, Nicola occasionally heard the excited laughter unique to young girls through the doors she passed in the hallway. Those must have been the groups of friends who styled one another's hair and chatted. Feeling the atmosphere of their youthful jubilance all over, Nicola knocked on the door to Char's room.

"Char, I'm coming in," said Nicola through the door. But as she placed her hand on the brass doorknob, it suddenly opened inward before she even pushed on the door.

Nicola looked up in surprise when she saw a girl who looked very much like Char. The only difference was that the girl wore glasses with very thick lenses.

"Emma, right...?"

"It's so good to see you again, Nicola!" Though Emma had a friendly smile, she narrowed her eyes playfully behind her glasses.

With Emma's long braid—the same milky tea color as Char's hair—swinging behind her, she beckoned Nicola into the room. Nicola gazed around the room to find that Char had finished styling his hair.

Once Char looked back at Nicola, he mischievously smiled and

said, “I got my big sis to bring my dress over, you see.”

“With Char attending a boarding school, I don’t get too many chances to see him anymore. So I took full advantage!” Emma smiled gently with her olive green eyes half closed.

Emma Schultz was Char’s half-sister, whom he viewed as his savior and someone he owed his life to. Furthermore, she was also Alois’s personal handmaiden and the object of his love despite her much lower social status. She was someone whose place in this world was unique and quite complicated.

“Allow me also to lay your dress out, Nicola,” said Emma with a big grin, setting out the contents of the bag Nicola had brought on Char’s bed.

“‘Kay, ’kay, you come over here. Hurry up and sit in front of the mirror so I can do your hair,” said Char, grabbing Nicola by the arm and sitting her down on the chair. Nicola let herself settle and looked at Char in the mirror. All of that had happened quite a while ago.

◇

“If I do this here… Umm, or maybe this?”

“Wait, no, no, no, you’re too close!” shrieked Nicola when Char’s face was much too close to hers.

Char had brought his face down to peer at her hair at such point-blank range that she could feel his breath on her ear. As he did this, he muttered, “No, that’s not right. Neither is this…”

His warm breath blew against Nicola’s nape until she could no longer tolerate it and squirmed in her seat. Half screaming, she expressed a certain *conjecture*.

“Emma, that’s enough. Put your glasses on already! And move back a bit. I’m ticklish!”

Nicola’s eyes met those of the young woman in the mirror, whom she had initially mistaken for Char at first, and Emma blinked in surprise.

Then, Emma withdrew her hands from Nicola’s hair, and shrugged like a child caught playing a prank. “My, we’ve been found out already?”

“Well, I mean… In all honesty, I couldn’t be certain. So, I was hoping to trip you up,” answered Nicola somewhat irritably.

The young woman who had been putting Nicola's hair up playfully chuckled as she put her glasses on.

"Aren't Emma and Char both so good at acting?" asked Emma.

"Took you long enough to notice," said Char. After this taunt, Nicola felt a pair of elbows rest heavily on her shoulders. Looking down at Nicola with a grin, Char was wearing fake glasses.

Still, Nicola roughly shook away the arms resting on her shoulders and sighed deeply.

"I might have known... Knowing that you're the living personification of sloppy work, I didn't think you'd be able to manage a feat as delicate as styling someone's hair just because Emma taught you a bit. Not before hell freezes over."

"Whoa, so mean. How could you? Your words went straight through my chest and pierced my heart. I won't be dropping the ensuing lawsuit."

"Yeah, yeah, let's just settle."

Nicola roughly rejoined this banter, then glanced up at Char, still wearing Emma's clothes.

"Besides, Emma supposedly teaching you means that she must also be able to style hair. Even after seeing how badly things were going, the so-called Emma I see before me did not attempt to help."

"Unfortunately, the fact is that Char couldn't have helped," said Char, or rather Emma wearing Char's clothes, with a slight giggle.

Now wearing her glasses, Emma could finally work on Nicola's hair from a suitable distance, allowing the other to breathe a sigh of relief.

"Though, it's actually surprisingly hard to tell, huh? I mean, we've been swapping places around the school pretty often lately, you know?" stated Char, already having undone his braid and pulling a smug face as he folded his arms. "See, we decided to experiment to judge if our plan would work."

That plan of ours. "Ah, *that* plan," murmured Nicola.

The plan in question—which might seem quite reckless at first glance—was to have Emma and Char switch places.

Even though Char had the inner personality of a man, he would always be Charlotte as long as he inhabited the body of a marquess's daughter. He would be unable to avoid being married to a man indefinitely.

Conversely, Emma's love for Prince Alois would never come to fruition because she was born to servant-class parents. Emma and Char had devised this outrageous plan to solve their problems simultaneously.

At the present stage, the only ones who knew of this plan were the other participants of a journey they had taken together a few months prior. That included the three gathered in the room, along with Alois, Sieghart, and Ernst, for a total of six people.

Thus, the two siblings decided to test whether Nicola and the others, who actually knew about this strategy, would notice if they switched places.

"That prince knew it was Emma when he laid eyes on her. I guess that's love for you. The other guy, his bodyguard, was hopeless. He never realized."

"So, the reason you've been locking arms with me so often of late…" Nicola began to say softly.

Emma, appearing troubled behind her glasses, said, "Well, you see, I was a bit too scared to walk alone without my glasses on…" She smirked.

"And so, given that you might figure out what was up if only sis did that with you, I made sure to put my arm around yours when we met too," explained Char.

That makes sense, thought Nicola, finally understanding. Thinking back on it now, Char had often put his arm in Nicola's when climbing stairs. Char's desire to have a doppelgänger was to add to the rotation of stand-ins for Emma, making life a little easier for him.

But one other point didn't quite fit with the rest. Nicola was careful not to move her head, turning only her gaze to rest on her junior apprentice.

"In that case, what about the last of the Seven Wonders, 'red paper, blue paper'? That was another one of the rumors you started, wasn't it?"

"Red Paper or Blue Paper" was a popular ghost story in schools that anyone from Japan would be familiar with.

Depending on the region and the era, people sometimes added the colors white and yellow, or the items offered could vary from paper to cloaks or padded kimono jackets, leading to many variations. But that was just a reflection of how popular the tale

was.

This bit of folklore was old. At the very least, it had existed since the beginning of the Showa era.

But the problem with the tale was that its roots connected to those of the kainade, a yokai—or fey creature—from Kyoto. This yokai was said to come and stroke your bottom if you should visit the privy on the night of Setsubun, the last day of winter.

Folklore says that if you recite the words, “Will it be red paper or blue paper?” you could evade this apparition. This story eventually spread across the entire country.

All this morphed into a tale about a voice coming from another cubicle to surprise you by offering red or blue paper, to put it frankly, while one was doing their business. Upon being rearranged multiple times, it rose to the status of a familiar ghost story.

In simple terms, the ghost story “Red Paper, Blue Paper” could not reasonably be expected to emerge naturally in a world that did not already have the concept of the yokai kainade. Because of this, Nicola felt partially convinced that her junior apprentice had started the rumor for this reason.

“So… Was that you?” asked Nicola while folding her arms.

“Correct,” replied Char, as the corners of his mouth turned up in a grin. “Right. We always swapped places at the very back of the fourth floor bathrooms, using the cubicle at the back and the one in front of that. So, I spread that rumor partly to keep people away from those cubicles.”

In the first place, the fourth floor toilets weren’t close to anything besides the specialty classrooms, which weren’t encountered on an everyday basis. Should one spread around a scary story on top of that, very few students would choose to go near it.

Indeed, this might be the perfect way to keep people away.

I see, thought Nicola, nodding her head. “That makes sense. I thought it was strange that two of the Seven Wonders took place in the bathrooms.”

“Well, one of them is a rumor I spread intentionally. Partly meant as a hint for you,” Char admitted nonchalantly.

It made sense that Nicola had not found so much as a haze in the fourth-floor bathrooms.

Char would find it bothersome if some little flies started buzzing around the spaces he regularly used and would tidy them up. Nicola recalled using the exact words in her conversation with Alois.

Her junior apprentice had shrewdly elected to perform exorcisms only in the areas he frequently used, keeping them spotless. Realizing how simple the explanation was now the cat was out of the bag, Nicola could not help but feel listless.

“Nicola, I’ve finished styling your hair. What do you think?” Emma gave Nicola a nod of satisfaction before handing her a hand mirror.

When Nicola stared into the mirror, she let out a genuine gasp of wonderment. The style Emma had achieved, with several complicated braids all gathered into a chignon, was not something she would have ever been able to do.

“It’s amazing! Thank you so much.”

Emma beamed brightly at these heartfelt words of thanks.

“Now let’s get you changed and do your makeup,” said Emma, taking Nicola’s hand and helping her to her feet.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll leave,” said Char before rapidly exiting the room.

Now only Nicola and Emma were left inside.

Just as Nicola had anticipated, Emma would play the part of Char, who would dance with Alois tonight.

Char was giving up a great deal for his sister, although it was not as if he had any interest in dancing with Alois. Perhaps it was more a matter of the right person in the right place.

“Now, let’s get changed, shall we?” said Nicola.

“Yes, I suppose we should,” replied Emma. They nodded to one another before each changed into their evening dresses.

After taking off their uniforms, they put on corsets before quickly passing their arms through the sleeves of their dresses. They must have finished changing at very nearly the same time. Nicola looked up to see Emma with a dress of deep green fabric adorning her body.

“It’s so unfair when pretty girls have style as well...” muttered Nicola. These involuntary words of praise left Emma smiling awkwardly.

Emma’s dress had no ribbons or intricate embroidery for

decoration; instead, it had an extremely simple design. This design, however, had a most bold décolletage that was quite revealing but not flashy, making it alluring in a grown-up way. The simplicity of it also did not make it come off as vulgar, showing off her style to the fullest.

“Your dress is pretty too, Nicola. I could fall in love with that delicate color,” said Emma.

Nicola wore a dress that gradually became more muted in color, almost gray the farther down the hem extended, becoming translucent at the bottom. She had fallen in love with the dress at first sight, so it didn’t feel bad to hear it praised. Yet Emma adopted a confused expression and stared at Nicola in wonder.

“How should I describe the color near the hem? Maybe purple with a strong splash of blue, or perhaps a very faint, muted purple…?” she muttered.

At this, Nicola suddenly looked sheepish and said, “This is called, erm… *Dusty blue*.”

At a minimum, the colors could fall among the blues. Depending on how the light would hit the dress, it might sometimes look purple, but the name should still have blue as its suffix.

While Nicola was trying to explain away the color, Emma chuckled graciously and responded, “Yes, yes, it is a dusty blue, isn’t it. Now then, shall we do your makeup?”

“Yes… I suppose we should.”

Just then, Nicola took the makeup box Emma offered her and turned to face herself in the mirror. She felt as if she should cry. But she knew she needed to look like another person in order for someone with such an ordinary face to walk next to a man as ravishing as Sieghart.

Compared to Emma, who already looked just about ready after applying some vividly colored lipstick, Nicola’s face was going to need a lot more finessing.

“I actually think you look perfectly adorable without any makeup, Nicola.”

“Looking acceptable by normal standards isn’t enough for me to stand next to him without feeling out of place…”

Nicola stood up straight and pulled back her chin.

Fortunately, Nicola’s face had some features that were not so

unsightly that she could not appear attractive with a bit of contrivance.

Besides, her skin appeared clean without needing any foundation because she was young again. She reduced her base makeup to a suitable degree to avoid giving the impression of having it slathered on.

As she worked, she muttered, “Given the choice... In order to live peacefully from tomorrow onward, I might need to be a bit crafty after all...”

What Nicola needed to put her effort into was making a good impression with her face. Tonight, her engagement to Sieghart would finally become public.

So Nicola could avoid any trouble in the future, she painted her face heavily, while still striving to make it look natural, elevating it far beyond her everyday look.

She swept a different shade along the contours of her face, even shading her nose to change the impression of the bone structure around it, then blended it all. Once she decided to try a particular method in applying blush to her cheeks, she found she had succeeded quite well in transforming her round face to look much longer than it was.

Afterward, she would bet her life on applying her eye makeup. The lightening of the dark, pandalike circles around her eyes suddenly made her look like a completely different person. That showed how far the eyes went in determining the overall impression of a face.

All she needed to do was pluck her eyebrows and apply a shade of lipstick that matched her overall complexion, and she had finished. Nicola finally had a face she didn’t mind being seen, if she did say so herself. Satisfied with her acceptable work, she nodded approvingly.

“Wow, Nicola, you really are great at doing makeup,” said Emma, blinking as she peered into the mirror and sounding genuinely impressed.

But Nicola had worn makeup every day in her previous life. Since she began to use makeup, much more time had passed for her than the young ladies around her.

“Hey, are you two done getting ready yet?” asked Char, popping his head back into the room past the door. “Whoa, I wondered who

you were for a second. Actually, is it really you? Is this some kinda scam?”

As Char made a stupid noise of surprise, Nicola responded by looking quite proud of herself.

Having put in this much effort, I should be able to stay out of sight by taking suitable precautions once I go back to no makeup, thought Nicola.

People who knew Nicola well, like Elsa and Karin, might realize who she was, but that didn’t matter. Nicola’s other classmates could hardly pick her out of a crowd without makeup, so she might fool the masses.

“Wait, more importantly than that! All students and their associates must clear the dorms. The vice president of the student council or somebody is patrolling the building.”

Char pointed fervently outside the building with his thumb as if dragging Nicola away from her thoughts.

I see, thought Nicola. *It certainly sounded quite hectic in the hallways just now. Most likely, the students in the dormitory and their servants have filed out.*

Looking up at the clock on the wall, Nicola saw that it was half past five in the evening. In just thirty more minutes, the ball would begin.

“Well then, shall we go?”

“I suppose we should.”

Nicola and Emma looked at one another, then nodded in agreement. After slipping into their heels and donning their coats, Char took the lead as they stepped out of the building. The cool air brushed against Nicola’s cheek before the sunset. Braziers blazing in the distance illuminated the snow piled up on the ground.

2

Dressed in all their finery, the female students all left their dormitory and walked in their own direction. They all likely headed to predetermined locations to meet with their partners.

Nicola had heard that the schoolhouse doors were already locked, so the boys and girls would have to meet each other outside. They had Nicola’s condolences.

Flinching as the cold air made its way through a gap in her coat,

Nicola turned to look at Char.

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Hm, me? I’m going to hide myself with a spell of concealment and be on hand to help. Big Sis isn’t wearing her glasses right now, after all.”

Exorcists could employ a spell of concealment to slightly shift out of phase relative to human perception and blend into their surroundings. Because of Emma’s poor eyesight, Char meant to assist Emma while remaining out of view.

“For starters, I’ll escort my big sis to where she’s meeting the prince. Then I might help myself to some of the catering in the dance hall, something like that?”

“Hmm…”

“Emma and Alois will meet up under the pavilion in the courtyard. Where will you and Sieghart be meeting, Nicola?” asked Emma, staring intently.

“Ah…” murmured Nicola before continuing in a low voice. “In his private room, in the boys’ dormitory.”

Hearing this answer, Char pouted and said, “You’re meeting inside? That’s so unfair.”

This was unavoidable, given the circumstances.

As student council president, Sieghart was responsible for locking up the schoolhouse while the other students were getting ready for the ball. Simply put, Sieghart could finally dress after all the other students had received instructions to leave their dormitories.

He could hardly have left Nicola outside in the cold while he performed his duties. But now all the other students had exited the building. As long as he discreetly invited Nicola inside the dormitory, they wouldn’t have to worry about repercussions. With all that in mind, they had chosen Sieghart’s room as their meeting place.

“Well, I suppose we’ll be parting ways here for the moment,” said Emma.

“Yes…” said Nicola. “See you later.”

After Emma and Char left, Nicola briefly ducked into a shaded spot near a building and cast a spell of concealment on herself to be safe. Once she did that, she headed toward the boys’ dormitory, where Sieghart’s room was.

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Nicola walked some distance through the boys' dormitory, which had fallen silent, then she ascended the stairs without a shred of hesitation in her pace.

Once she arrived at the third floor, the topmost floor, she stood in front of the door to the room she had come to visit. Then, she took a deep breath and knocked.

"I'm coming in," she called out. Upon removing her spell of concealment, she took off her coat. Sieghart must not have locked his door as it opened smoothly.

When Nicola popped her head inside, she saw a figure from behind wearing black trousers and a wing-collar shirt. Naturally, Sieghart turned to look at her as he fastened his cuffs onto his shirt.

As always, his marble-white, gorgeous visage appeared as though the goddess of that art form had sculpted it with considerable effort.

The silver strands of his hair, the amethysts of his eyes, his refined nose, and his thin lips were absolutely flawless. He was too perfect, to the point that Nicola felt she was looking at an exhibit in an art museum. As she stared at Sieghart, he furrowed his shapely eyebrows in bewilderment.

"Is there something stuck to my face?" asked Sieghart.

"Indeed there is..." replied Nicola. "Your eyes, your nose, and your mouth."

Each of these features seemed perfectly positioned, and no one could produce any criticism of them.

As long as he remained expressionless, he looked like an intricate sculpture or painting for the whole world. His visage was such a thing of beauty that one could not help but see it as something intentionally made that way.

However, that same beautiful visage possessed an unexpected wealth of different expressions. Nicola knew the one he was wearing right now all too well. After she slipped quietly into the room, her dress seemed to catch his eye as he gazed at her in shock.

His expression softened, a kind of innocence showing in the corners of his eyes.

“The color of the hem of your dress…” Sieghart’s always composed face broke into a sweet smile in an instant. The effect was almost too much for Nicola’s heart to bear.

Nicola’s face also crumpled as she grimaced and replied in a monotone, “Dusty…blue…is what it’s called.”

And so Sieghart blinked at Nicola’s insistence that the color she had chosen belonged among the blues, then smiled and giggled. Feeling sheepish, Nicola quickly turned her face away from him.

That said… As Sieghart’s childhood friend, Nicola had the unique privilege of getting a glimpse of what lay behind the flawless mask that the young man presented to the outside world. She could not deny feeling a dim sense of superiority when she considered that fact, which left her all the more conflicted.

The beating in her chest slowly became audible throughout her entire body. As if responding to her pulse, she felt a fleeting flame flicker into life deep inside her heart before pouring out of it. Nicola drew her mouth into a thin line.

Ah, I know already. I have to acknowledge it. I can no longer doubt that I’m in love with this man. And tonight, once I dance with Sieghart, our engagement will be public knowledge, thought Nicola. *It will no longer be a mere verbal contract, and I’ll no longer be able to back out. I wouldn’t be able to answer should someone ask me if I wanted to back out. It’s really a question of my mental state*.

Sieghart must have apprehended Nicola’s nervous feelings. He seemed to be smiling after he breathed softly, so Nicola turned her gaze upward to look at him.

“I must be dreaming,” said Sieghart, his voice filled with delight and sweet warmth.

“You exaggerate…” said Nicola with a wooden expression, then averted her eyes again. And yet her cheeks still burned hotly as she desperately wanted to retreat.

Though Nicola might display little emotion, it was not as if she had no deep feelings for Sieghart. Frankly, she had a lot of them.

She could not help but feel a little embarrassed when faced with someone several times more openly emotive than her. Due to that, her following words were quite ungracious.

“Why… Why me?”

Just as Nicola said this, she knew she had chosen them poorly and was just being tedious. But Nicola could do nothing about it,

as it was in her nature. If it had been so easy to fix, she would not be struggling at that moment.

"Why choose me of all people...?"

Nicola understood that her appearance was decidedly average. She was short, skinny, and not exceptionally stylish. In addition, she had a sharp tongue and had nothing endearing about her personality.

Even so, the man standing before her did not seize upon her curt words, but a smile slowly spread across his lips. His shapely lips parted, tumbling into a simple phrase.

"Because you're you, Nicola."

This frank, direct response caused Nicola to gulp voluntarily. It was such a stupid justification. There was no way Nicola could accept it. She glared back at Sieghart almost resentfully.

"There are surely millions of girls prettier than me, with better personalities than me. Why not choose one of them?"

"Well, none of them is Nicola. I have no other reason to give."

Oh, come on, thought Nicola, overcome by an urge to turn her eyes upward. *No matter what I do, I just can't win against this childhood friend of mine.*

Sieghart could always step over Nicola's hesitation and conflicted feelings, meaning she could do nothing about him. With a look of bitter taste in her mouth, she finally raised the white flag of surrender.

"Really... There is a limit to how eccentric a person can be."

This curse against Sieghart, which one could not dispense as irony, could be considered a declaration of surrender from Nicola.

But Sieghart smiled gracefully and said, "I can't allow that to slip by unchallenged. I'm not eccentric in the slightest."

As if handling a fragile object, Sieghart gently placed his hand on Nicola's cheek.

"I mean, you're cute. With makeup on you're a beauty. Besides that, your attitude toward life and conviction in protecting those close to you no matter what, that shows integrity and is really cool. For that very reason, you do tend to drift toward danger, meaning I can't let you out of my sight."

He explained that this was because Nicola was all too willing to put her life in danger for the sake of people close to her.

After Sieghart briefly fell silent, he slowly rested his forehead

against that of Nicola. He was literally right before her eyes and under her nose. Their eyes met at this point-blank distance, and their breath threatened to blend.

"Even so, you'll do everything possible to make it back safe as long as you have someone to protect. So, you see. I want you to make me the place you come home to."

The overwhelming sincerity in Sieghart's voice and eyes caused Nicola to gulp again and press her lips together. Following a short spell, with a voice that sounded like a mosquito whining, she finally spoke up.

"Just so you know... You won't be able to send me back."

Nicola had only needed to say yes and nod. Her proclivity to always say something unnecessary was not too endearing. Anyhow, Sieghart seemed more than satisfied with her response.

With a smile forming on his face, Sieghart pulled Nicola closer and held her in his arms.

Sieghart always had a buggy notion of what was an appropriate distance. Although Nicola had grown used to this distance for a long time, that was not all.

"Nicola."

Hearing her name, Nicola looked up to find Sieghart descending upon her with kisses, which he dispensed without a second thought. She knew this was partly her fault for raising her head when she knew what was coming, but she reflected on how long Sieghart waited and decided to put up with the display of his love. After they exchanged a few kisses, Sieghart slowly drew his lips away.

Then he bumped his forehead against Nicola's once more.

"Was that so bad?" inquired Sieghart with a mischievous air.

Nicola sulked. "Please stop asking me that. You're just being mean."

Truthfully, Sieghart had never done anything to genuinely upset her. Indeed, there was no need to ask anymore since he knew that she did not dislike this sensation. In this respect, he really was a wicked man.

Nicola tried glaring at Sieghart with her eyes narrowed.

He simply laughed and said, "Yep, looks like you didn't hate it."

After she wriggled out of Sieghart's arms, she put a hand on his shoulder and firmly pushed him away.

“Look, rather than wasting time on such things, please get dressed.”

“Ah, that’s right. I was just making the finishing touches.” Sieghart nodded as if he really had forgotten, then swiftly donned his vest and jacket.

He retrieved the boutonniere he had placed in a vase on his writing desk and inserted it into his jacket’s lapel hole.

Engaged boys and girls were required to display fresh flowers on their person as a mark of their status to prevent other students from approaching them during the ball.

Sieghart’s boutonniere featured a blue rose as its keynote.

“Come here, Nicola.”

Despite feeling like she was being called the way someone might call a dog or cat, Nicola reluctantly sat in Sieghart’s chair.

He now held a blue rose. This item was a bud no larger than a thumbnail and a relatively modest piece of fashion design. Still, it was less assertive than Sieghart’s boutonniere.

Once Sieghart had adjusted the stalk’s length to make it shorter, he inserted a few of these miniature roses into one of Nicola’s braids.

So Nicola could disguise how ticklish she was feeling, she looked up at her childhood friend and muttered, “You went to the trouble of dying a white flower blue, didn’t you? You got it to absorb some blue water.”

This phenomenon was known as capillary action. If one partly submerged a white flower in colored water, the color of its petals would change.

Blue roses did not exist in the natural world because they contained no such pigments. A person could not create it through selective breeding either.

From ancient times, a blue rose symbolized “something that cannot exist in this world.” In the language of flowers it meant “impossible”—at least, in this historical period.

Sieghart chuckled slightly, then stroked the blue rose in his boutonniere.

“A long time ago, you once told me this, ‘If civilization advances for about two hundred more years, we will be able to grow blue roses. At that point, their place in flower language will also change.’”

“You really have an excellent memory…”

In the twenty-first century, when biotechnology developments allowed rearrangements, blue roses indicated the meaning of “dreams come true.”

Nicola could remember telling Sieghart that. But that was in the distant past, when they could count their ages in single digits. She sighed as she once again faced Sieghart’s needlessly superb memory.

When Sieghart helped Nicola to her feet, he took her hand in his as if to escort her. He remarked, “I thought it would be fun for us to enjoy the flower language that only we two know in this world.”

If we were talking about that junior apprentice of mine, he’d know nothing about the language of flowers. That being the case, we’re the only two people who know about that. Nicola looked up at the outline of her childhood friend’s face with suspicious eyes as he chuckled. Yet she gently squeezed Sieghart’s hand in return. *But this isn’t so bad.*

3

The room’s walls and pillars displayed delicate decorations. An opulent chandelier hung from the high ceiling, accompanied by a minutely detailed fresco. All this comprised the academy’s assembly hall, officially converted into the venue for the student ball.

When Nicola arrived for the welcome ceremony, she thought, *Well, this is unnecessarily flashy.* She could accept its elaborate decor, seeing that it also had this purpose. The curtains opened on the first dance of the ball, followed by elegant music.

Even a dance hall as vast as this one seemed smaller thanks to the body of female students’ dresses, which billowed outward each time they turned. Nicola took a good look around the hall as she performed a turn.

Students without fiancés were still standing by the wall. Those next to the wall would participate in the second dance, so Nicola anticipated that the density of the dance floor’s population would grow even more excessive. The thought of stepping on another young lady’s dress frightened her.

Nicola glanced at the balcony, which jutted inward from the second floor and had a vaulted ceiling, where she saw an orchestra assembled from all of the academy's teachers. Here and there, she could hear the live performance of a languid waltz that echoed throughout the hall.

Some affinity for musical instruments must be a prerequisite for teachers to join the academy, thought Nicola. Each teacher played their instrument so elegantly that she could not help but come to this realization.

In all honesty, she believed the teachers ought to have handled the locking up of the schoolhouse, not the students. Considering that the teachers had to rehearse, perhaps there was no alternative.

"Truly surprising… You have a lot of chores to do in the student council," murmured Nicola, surrendering herself as Sieghart flawlessly led their waltz.

He glanced down at her with a smile. "Well, it's all behind the scenes. Few people were willing to head up the council."

Few people were willing. Since he used the past tense, that must have meant this was no longer the case.

Needing no help to figure out why, Nicola sighed slightly.

"So what? You're saying that you still wanted to lead the council despite that?" Nicola was one who avoided dealing with trouble wherever possible. She hardly thought taking the initiative to accept bothersome tasks was sane. As such, she could not help but look up at Sieghart suspiciously.

A very slightly troubled smile crept across Sieghart's lips, and a far-off look appeared in his eyes.

"I only did it in order to get through the annual student ball. My only two options beginning with the second dance would be to dance with no one or anyone wanting to dance."

"Ah… Now I see."

Nicola remembered that Sieghart's fundamental stance in life was to be moderate in his conduct to avoid making enemies. He also had to avoid giving someone preferential treatment to avoid giving them the wrong idea.

That was awfully crafty of you, thought Nicola, knowing very well that this was just part of the know-how he employed to survive in this world.

Truthfully, Sieghart had spent the last two years at the academy officially without a fiancée and had not participated in the first dance. Even after the outset of the second dance and his management role in the student council, he had rejected every other invitation.

Certainly, accepting a girl's invitation one time would have doomed him to dance with an endless series of admirers. Although not the first time, Nicola reflected on how Sieghart was a personage beset by much hardship.

Invitations for Sieghart to take part in the second dance continued unabated at this very moment. Each time they drew closer to another pair in the dance, he received one more invitation. Regardless, he always gave the same polite words of refusal.

"From the second dance onward, like every year, I will devote myself to working with the student council behind the scenes."

This thorough refusal was so devoid of affability that it impressed Nicola. As for the young ladies he rejected, their reactions were well within expectations. Though their eyebrows had lowered dejectedly initially, they each withdrew lightly in the end.

"Honestly... I'm surprised," blurted Nicola as they continued to dance.

Sieghart did not miss this, and inclined his head to one side in bemusement, saying, "No... This is nothing."

He had expected more glares of jealousy, as this dance was always like a bed of nails. But most eyes trained on Sieghart seemed more curious, wondering just what kind of woman had joined a man so far out of their league. Such reactions were surely all due to Sieghart's finesse.

Jealousy, after all, can only manifest when one thought it was possible to reach some goal. An unreachable peak like Sieghart could only be the object of admiration instead.

Nicola noted that Sieghart's discretion, efforts, and wits were so exacting as to allow him to put himself in this position. Thanks to these qualities, she could rub shoulders with Sieghart without attracting so many prying eyes that she might struggle to breathe.

While she felt slightly proud of this fact, she also wanted to bow her head in deference to Sieghart. Yet she hesitated to offer

Sieghart such honest words of praise and thanks, instead electing to hide her complicated feelings by averting her eyes.

No sooner had she done so had Sieghart, alert as ever, noticed this and chuckled. He asked, “Tired?”

“Quite,” replied Nicola. “Rather, isn’t the first dance much too long? How many minutes does it go for?”

Nicola’s response partly concealed her true feelings while showing that she really meant it. After she muttered these words to express that she was fed up, Sieghart smiled coyly and answered.



“It’s longer than a prelude but slightly shorter than a concerto. About twenty minutes in length.”

“*That’s so long*.” Upon learning that the dance was even longer than she had anticipated, Nicola could not help but scowl and groan. Kicking off from the floor again with this peeved expression, she exchanged positions with Sieghart instantly.

As he followed the predetermined dance steps without skipping a beat, Sieghart glanced sideways at the students waiting by the wall and gave Nicola a little shrug.

“The first dance is really intended more as an opportunity for those standing by the wall to socialize than for students who are already engaged. It has to be long.”

“Ah… Now that you mention it…” mused Nicola, recalling her conversation with Karin and Elsa, “I’ve heard someone else say the same thing.”

Nicola was quite sure she had been told that since it was embarrassing to remain a wallflower until the second dance, where one could dance with anyone. Those relegated to the sidelines during the first dance spent their time searching desperately for a partner.

As Sieghart commented, the students by the wall seemed bloodthirsty from the very beginning.

Even in the first half of the first dance, the wall had a crowd of students concentrated in a few places around its perimeter. But this might have been the beginning of a bitter struggle for the attention of students who were eligible and unattached.

For the second half of the first dance, students who were still left out bustled all the more in their search for partners, their expressions becoming desperate.

I see, thought Nicola. *So, the area near the wall is the scene of a bloodthirsty conflict from beginning to end, both in the first and second halves of the battle.*

As things were, the students standing by the wall had to be so desperate that they had no time to spare worrying about who Sieghart had for a fiancée.

Nicola was confident that once she removed her makeup, she could continue life in peace from the next day onward. While she dimly considered this, she suddenly grimaced as she had another thought.

“Huh, what am I going to do for the second dance?”

Naturally, Nicola had not arranged a partner with whom she could share the second dance. She was most likely supposed to have invited someone to dance with her, just as so many had done with Sieghart. Otherwise, she’d have accepted someone else’s invitation.

To her utmost regret, she had not received one invitation until that point in the ball. She did not have any acquaintance she could casually invite to dance with her.

While she groaned and wondered what to do about this problem, Sieghart giggled and whispered, “You can just partner with Alois for the second dance. I’ve already spoken to him about it.”

Then, Nicola twisted her mouth into a most disapproving expression.

Anticipating the end of the waltz, Sieghart had somehow beckoned the dancing Alois and Emma—officially Charlotte—right beside them.

Nicola’s neck creaked as she turned to look at Alois, who smiled and waved cheerfully back at her. Seemingly, Sieghart really had laid the groundwork for their dance.

And so, he chuckled when he saw Nicola with a look a hundred times more bitter and said, “I know you don’t want to stand out, but don’t pull that face. Besides, everyone at school has seen how friendly you and Alois have been for the past month… The other male students probably feel reluctant, and no one else will likely to invite you to dance.”

“Ugh…”

When Sieghart put it that way, Nicola could only respond with a grunt. He followed with a low whisper and words too serious for Nicola to attempt to ridicule.

“I’ll be leaving the hall for just a little while… Just to be safe, please find a place where Alois or Ernst can keep an eye on you.”

Nicola was left speechless. She had no choice but to nod, albeit very reluctantly. Once Sieghart confirmed this, he changed places with Alois before getting lost among the crowd of dancers as he departed.

At that moment, she could only watch Sieghart leave as a clearly different melody replaced the music from the first dance.

The second dance would begin shortly.

In Sieghart's place, Alois took Nicola's hand. With a mischievous smile, he then said, "Now then, Miss Nicola. Kindly lend me your hand."

Yet Nicola looked past to see that Emma, who had let go of Alois's hand, seemed ready to share this dance with Ernst. All she could do was sigh, resigning herself to her fate. She had no choice but to grip the prince's hand in return.

"I don't mean to brag, but I will step on your feet a whole lot."

The only reason Nicola danced normally with Sieghart, despite her total lack of coordination, was that he knew her limitations very well and what points in the dance would likely trip her up.

From Nicola's perspective, she had always practiced dancing with her childhood friend since a very young age. So, she was at least used to partnering with Sieghart. In other words, any success in ballroom dancing was because Nicola *heavily predicated* on having a competent leader.

Had she danced with someone she was not used to, she would have immediately stepped on her partner. She was wearing high heels tonight, so it would probably hurt significantly. Though she was not being malicious, there were just some things she was terrible at.

Nicola glared at the boutonniere Alois wore on his chest, which featured white sasanqua and baby's breath flowers as its centerpiece.

She then said, "You won't be able to say I didn't warn you…"

"Well, I'm used to leading and know how uncoordinated you are. I've made my peace with that fact, so don't worry!"

Unfortunately, it was not long before a wince of pain replaced Alois's composed expression.

The students relegated to the sidelines during the first dance had joined in, and the dance hall had become more densely populated. Nicola would rather step on the feet of someone she knew than the hem of a dress whose price she did not even know, so she could not help it.

From the second dance onward, each piece of music was only around five minutes long. The students changed partners again and again with the end of each piece. Once Nicola had finished

dancing with Alois, she was handed over to Ernst and would have to dance with him.

After staring steadily—and quite rudely—at Nicola's face, the stubborn knight had an utterly serious expression and asked, "Who...are you?"

Not offering a warning this time, Nicola stepped on his foot as hard as she could. When she saw Ernst's fierce features contort in agony, she felt like she had lifted a huge weight off her chest. Some things were better left unsaid, regardless of whether one could help thinking about them.

"You... You look too different with makeup on."

He still needs to learn his lesson, thought Nicola, lifting her foot once again to strike. But he evaded her easily this time. She gritted her teeth in frustration as Ernst snorted at her with derision.

The dance between Nicola and Ernst must have looked quite bizarre to everyone around them. She had taken each chance to stomp on his feet, and he dodged every attempt. Feeling utterly exhausted, she resolved to withdraw to the sidelines when the music ended.

4

"Really, what do those two think they're doing?"

The girl who had been dancing with Alois just a short while ago was now following some mysterious dance steps with Ernst.

The way they kept sidestepping like crabs amused Alois, whose shoulders shook as he snickered. Though they might have appeared confrontational, Alois thought they went together surprisingly well.

Now I need to find a partner, thought Alois. An unexpected voice called him from behind, making him turn to see who it was.

Several exchange students from a neighboring kingdom stood behind him, with a female student of the academy mixed in with their group. She turned out to be the student council vice president one year below Alois.

As Alois gazed perplexedly at this strange combination of visitors, one of the exchange students stepped forward and spoke to him.

"Prince Alois. Please accept my humblest apologies for

disturbing you while you were enjoying yourself, Your Highness."

"That's okay, don't worry about it. What's the matter?" Alois waved his hand magnanimously, urging the exchange student to continue.

The exchange student lowered his voice and quickly asked, "Would you happen to know the whereabouts of our kingdom's prince?"

Alois froze and looked around at the exchange students in disbelief. "Huh? You're saying Lucas isn't with you?"

Lucas was the third-born prince of the neighboring kingdom who had brought these students with him on his exchange. He was an exceptionally free spirit, and even Alois had experienced getting dragged around after him. Admittedly, Alois found him something of a bother.

The student ball was an event that all the academy's students attended. No particular reason existed to exclude only the exchange students, so the third-born prince of the neighboring kingdom and the others should not have been missing.

According to the exchange students, Lucas had not been seen since the ball started. His fellow exchange students had first assumed that this was one of his usual pranks, but thirty minutes had elapsed, and he had not appeared. They could hardly ignore his absence at this point, and so they started looking for him.

"Having heard what they had to say, I've been searching for the prince with them," said the council vice president, concluding the report. Alois nodded to indicate his comprehension, then furrowed his brow.

"Unfortunately, I have no idea where Lucas might be either," said Alois, shaking his head. The exchange students looked at one another in bewilderment. Still, he crossed his arms and pondered as he stared at the ceiling for about thirty seconds.

In any event, the exchange students were his kingdom's honored guests. To ensure their proper care, he ought to help them look.

"That settles it. I'll assist in searching as well," answered Alois.

All that happened around the time that Ernst and Nicola had finished dancing. Once Alois called Ernst to his side, he joined the search party for Lucas.

◇

The information from the exchange students led them to examine the interior of the building that housed the ballroom.

“In that case, he’s probably in the schoolhouse,” reasoned Alois. “But surely the student council has already locked up the school…?”

Alois tilted his head at this murmur, appearing puzzled. The student council’s female vice president nodded to confirm his suspicions. She stated there were only two sets of keys to the schoolhouse. The teachers held one set while the other was in the hands of the student council.

Because the teachers had to rehearse to play in the orchestra, they lent their set of keys to the council vice president. Sieghart had used the council’s set as they locked the doors to the schoolhouse before the ball took place.

“If he was somewhere in the schoolhouse at that time, to play a prank or for some other reason, we might have locked him in without realizing…” murmured the vice president with a note of concern.

“Do you have your keys?” inquired Alois briefly.

The vice president timidly took out her set of keys, which threaded on a large ring from which they could be freely detached. About a dozen lay on it and seemed to have been used for many years.

“I still have them with me,” said the vice president. “I haven’t yet had an opportunity to return them to the teachers…”

Even after handing the keys, the vice president held a glance, and Ernst turned his gaze to Alois to assess the look on his face.

“In that case, shall we expand our search to include the schoolhouse?”

“Yes, let’s do that,” said Alois.

That said, all the academy’s students were gathered in the dance hall. They could not discount the possibility that Lucas was still somewhere among them.

Alois elected to leave four of the six exchange students behind in the auditorium. The remaining two would join him, Ernst, and the council vice president to form a party of five. The party headed to the schoolhouse.

Fortunately, there was no door in the aperture that separated the auditorium's main hall from its entrance hall, so they could slip out fairly easily without attracting the attention of other students. When they sneaked out through that aperture, they quickly escaped the commotion of the ball far behind them and noticed the hall's temperature had plummeted.

"A light... Do we have any candles?" asked Alois.

"I think that even if we lit one now, it would only be a waste," said Ernst.

"Well, I guess it would," Alois trailed off. Yet he chuckled at the cold, rational point Ernst had shared.

A corridor on each building's first floor connected to the auditorium and the schoolhouse. Although it had a roof, there were no walls, so it was an open-air corridor. If they tried lighting candles now, the wind would surely blow them out before they had made it across.

"Let's light our candles once we've made it all the way across, shall we?" suggested Alois. Ultimately, the party borrowed a few candles and some matches from the cloakroom.

Upon opening the door to exit the auditorium, a cold gust of wind blew inside, pushing them back into the building. They fought against the wind and proceeded, regardless.

At six thirty in the evening, in the middle of winter, night had already extended its canopy across the sky. The snow that flitted in through the sides of the open corridor beat against their cheeks.

The five students huddled together to use their warmth best as they walked. All of a sudden, one of the exchange students stopped in his tracks.

"There's a light on..." stammered the student.

"Huh?" said Alois, stopping after hearing these absent-minded words.

He squinted as he peered through the blizzard and looked up at where the exchange student was pointing. Then, Alois saw a dim light shining through a window at the back of the fourth floor.

In spatial terms, given the room's height, the group was looking at a steep angle, and it was also far away. Though Alois did not feel confident about this, it looked like the curtains there were half open. The unvarnished wooden window frame reflected the color of the walls in the room inside as it took on a faint green tinge.

“Is that the art room…?” Ernst wondered aloud, his voice overlapping with Alois’s as they thought the same thing.

Everyone in the party looked up suspiciously at the fourth floor momentarily.

Crash!

Suddenly, a noise like pottery breaking came from one of the floors above.

As the search party reflexively recoiled, the *smash* of shattered glass followed. The precarious sound of something breaking persisted irregularly, with intermittent pauses.

Alois felt goose bumps standing on the back of his neck as he received a premonition that he could not express in words. Just what was going on in there?

With all this going on, Ernst was the first to take action. Once Alois scolded his heart for beating so quickly, he ran after Ernst toward the schoolhouse’s door. A few moments later, the two exchange students and the council vice president followed suit.

“Get the keys out, hurry!” Ernst sharply ordered the vice president as he ran to the door.

The female student gasped and took out her keyring before attempting to insert one of the keys into the lock. Perhaps because she was fretting or entirely unsettled, the key did not seem to want to go in.

Ernst soon impatiently snatched the keys from her before kicking the door in. The door, along with its hinges, snapped open. Like an avalanche, the search party barrelled into the schoolhouse.

Of course, it went without saying that there were no lights inside the schoolhouse. The interior was pitch black as well and entirely cold.

For Alois, he had attended this schoolhouse for the past three years. Even without the light of a candle, he remembered the positions of the staircases and classrooms by memory. But there was a staircase right in front of the door that had just toppled ahead of them. Without a moment’s hesitation, Alois ran up those stairs.

After passing swiftly through the first and second floors, he had just reached the landing of the third floor when the intermittent noise from upstairs suddenly ceased. Without even allowing himself a moment to breathe as he finished scaling the stairs, he

propelled forward into the fourth floor corridor.

"The art room...is at the very back...of the fourth floor..." muttered Alois in between gasps for air as he made one more dash to catch up with Ernst, who still ran ahead of him.

Without a single light in the corridor, it seemed foreboding and dark. This all contributed to an indescribable sense of unease blooming within Alois. But he brushed this feeling aside, focusing on recklessly propelling one foot in front of the other.

When they finally arrived at the classroom, Alois stopped to breathe heavily on one side of a dead end in the corridor. His shoulders heaved as he looked at the door in front of him.

Ernst did not even give himself time to slow his breathing as he fumbled for the key to the door and inserted it into the keyhole.

Click, went the lock as it unlatched. With due caution, Ernst carefully pushed the door open.

The sight that greeted them caused Alois and Ernst to gasp in unison.

Shards from white porcelain urns and shattered glass vases were strewn across the floor. Water, presumably the former contents of those vases, had formed a puddle. Vases might have toppled some barely dry canvases when they fell, leaving a haphazard impression on those who witnessed it.

In the middle of it all, Lucas lay like a marionette whose strings had been cut.

Ah, there's no doubt about it. We're too late, judged Alois after one glance at Lucas.

As Lucas lay on the floor, not moving a single muscle, a dagger was sticking out of his chest. If that had been the entire picture, the group might have taken this for one of Lucas's typical pranks.

Considering Lucas's personality, one could expect him to stand and abruptly open his eyes at any moment and say, "Hey, surprised?" Despite this, Alois eliminated this possibility due to the distinctive odor, like rusty iron, infiltrating his nostrils.

Had they been actors in an opera, this scene would surely have one of the characters who discovered the body scream in horror. But reality did not work this way. Alois could do anything more than feel quietly rattled by the unreal sight before him.

Ernst knelt and gently placed his fingers on Lucas's carotid artery. Once he confirmed there was no pulse, he shook his head

with his face still downturned.

"Still warm... We can conclude that not much time has passed yet."

Ah, is it because there's still some body heat remaining that the smell of blood is so intense? thought Alois, almost as if this was happening to someone else, while he looked down at Lucas's corpse.

The look of shock in his still open eyes; his arms and legs, which he had flung out wildly; the dagger sticking out of his chest—all these details somehow felt artificial to Alois, lacking any sense of reality.

The sight of vivid scarlet shining on top of silver seemed unreal and beautiful. In addition, viscous red fluid and the gleaming silver reflected the light brilliantly.

After he had considered that much, he realized something was amiss.

No, it would be correct to say that he had already known but had simply averted his eyes. But he could no longer look the other way.

Neither Alois nor Ernst had lit a candle before coming here. Either way, how could they make out the color of Lucas's blood or the condition of his body? The trembling exchange students and the council vice president had turned white without making a sound. In the corner of his eye, Alois reluctantly turned to see what was behind him.

"Sieg...?" His voice became so strained, so dry that he barely recognized it as his own.

But Alois turned around and saw where the light was coming from. There stood Sieghart, looking down at Lucas with a stiff expression. In his hand was a candle—the only light source in the room—whose flame was the only thing that moved, flickering unpredictably.

◆◆◆

I want to keep the kitty, I said.

But Elma made a scary face, then she shook her head.

"But, my lady. When your grandmother is around cats, she can't stop coughing and sneezing. So we can't keep any cats in the

manor.”

“Hmm?” was all I said.

“Off you go.”

The ground stood up straight, right up to the sky, all topsy turvy.

Down she fell, then she went splat, like a strawberry.

Some people, I can do without.

I mean, I really wanted the little kitty.

And now the little kitty was mine.

Chapter 3: “Who Killed Cock Robin? It Was Him,” Said the Sparrow.

1

The moment Ernst finished his dance with Nicola, his master called for him so they could go off somewhere. Having persisted in her meaningless struggle with Ernst during the dance, Nicola felt like she had expended all of her stamina.

Soon after she moved next to the wall, she exhaled and rested her back against it. Thirty minutes had passed since the ball started. Some rest was finally allowed, and she saw a few other students doing the same as she had done.

Beside them, many tables were set up next to the wall with drinks and snacks. While some peckish students took this opportunity to satisfy their cravings, others continued dancing.

With nothing better to do, Nicola surveyed her surroundings when she suddenly felt someone tug on the hem of her dress. As she looked to see whose hand it was, she found it belonged to her junior apprentice.

The spell of concealment exorcists used diverted the attention of onlookers and allowed one to blend into the surroundings. If one took some action that another person could not help but notice, one would become visible to that person.

“What…?” inquired Nicola.

“Now that you’re done with that bizarre dance of yours, you can guard me,” said Char, thrusting both hands toward a plate piled with food.

Upon glancing at the table, Nicola did not attempt to hide her exasperation.

“What are you, one of the hungry ghosts?” she muttered, referring expressly to the spirits identified by Buddhist tradition.

After deftly giving Nicola a shrug even as he continued grabbing food, Char casually responded, “Though I may be nobility now, I got my start here in a slum. I picked up a habit of stuffing my face whenever I got to eat.”

“Ooh, it’s hard to know what to do with an answer like that…” said Nicola.

“Well, of course, that was on purpose,” said Char, who then laughed heartily.

Nicola awkwardly scratched the side of her face before sighing.

If she remembered correctly, Char’s mother had been an indentured servant in a marquess’s household when the lord had put his hands on her, resulting in her becoming pregnant with Char. Once this became known to the lady of the house, Char’s mother was literally kicked out of the house.

“Well, thanks to my big sis going to work so quickly, my life in the slums didn’t last that long, and I think that was a valuable life experience. More importantly, my arms are getting tired. Would you hurry up and guard me?”

With this spell of concealment, anything one wore or picked up would at least blend into one’s surroundings. Thus someone invisible might also find their clothes also turned invisible.

But if one happened to bump into a person while eating, one would naturally become visible to that person. That was why Char had come to hide behind Nicola.

Nicola sighed again, only to point to a far corner of the table and moved to that location.

“Look, look, Charlotte is super popular,” said Char, gesturing with his chin at Emma dressed as him. Various male students had formed a crowd around her.

Come to think of it, mused Nicola, *this ball also serves as the announcement of Alois’s engagement. Of course his partner would attract a fair amount of attention*.

Emma ever so slightly cringed at this attention and spotted Nicola shrugging slightly.

“That was quite some bloodthirsty battle by the wall during the first dance… Near the end, some girls were almost jogging, even though they were in heels. It really looked like they were having a hard time…”

Char, who had been blending into the sidelines during the first dance, must have had a tough time trying not to bump into any of the girls. When Nicola mentioned this, Char suddenly gave her a dumbfounded look.

“You talk like it’s someone else’s problem, but you’ll join that

battle by the wall next year, right? Your fiancé will be graduating in less than six months."

Nicola was suddenly at a loss for words.

This semester began in the fall. Just as Char said, Sieghart would graduate in only a few months. Basically, Nicola would not have a fiancé at the academy next year and the year after that. She would automatically start each ball on the sidelines.

To make matters worse, her acquaintances whose feet she could get away with stepping on—Alois and Ernst—would also no longer be there the following year. Her head already hurt just thinking about what was to come.

"Well that sucks… I guess I'll have Gemini turn into an arbitrary male student, and we can dance together…" muttered Nicola with a far-off look in her eyes. Hearing its name, Nicola's familiar popped out of its hiding place.

On top of the table, Gemini rolled left and right as if to say, "Master, you called? You called?"

As Nicola watched this gallant display, she became aware of a cold, piercing glare coming beside her.

"So, you mean you'll trample all over your familiar's feet instead? What a horrible master…"

"Oof…" Char had hit Nicola where it hurt, and she could not help but shift her gaze away from him.

Meanwhile, Nicola saw Gemini protrude something that looked like a hand from its spongy body and write some letters on the table. When Nicola peered down, she could make out the words, "Let's practice?"

Nicola opened her eyes wide in surprise and gazed intently at her familiar.

"Really? That's so kind… You're really offering?" said Nicola. In response, her familiar affirmed its offer by bouncing up and down. "Ah, my baby is just so cute…"

Moved beyond words, Nicola started petting Gemini all over. At that point, Gemini nuzzled against her hand as if begging to be stroked more. It was such a lovable gesture that Nicola could not stop smiling.

While she continued to stroke Gemini absentmindedly, Char sighed theatrically.

"Hey, show some restraint, will you? Anyone looking on will just

see someone petting thin air and think, ‘What a weirdo.’”

Suddenly snapping back to reality, Nicola hurriedly drew her hand back. Fortunately, no one seemed wise enough to pay any attention to this corner of the hall. Nicola breathed a sigh of relief after confirming that no one had been watching.

The children of noble and merchant houses were busy making connections to avoid failing their roles in society. Those who abandoned society to stand in a secluded corner like this did not merit any attention.

“More importantly, haven’t you noticed?” said Char. “A few of the teachers have been coming and going in a hurry for a while.”

“Ah, yeah. That bothered me too. Has there been some trouble, I wonder?”

Nicola had also noticed that some teachers had left their seats in the orchestra. From this corner, she could see very well into the second-floor balcony that jutted into the ballroom. Even without looking up, the sight of several teachers rushing in and out still registered at the edge of her vision.

As the musical performance continued, even without a few of the teachers, they did not want the students to suspect anything was the matter.

Looking up at the expressions on the teachers’ faces, Nicola could tell that it was no small matter. She then exchanged a glance with her junior apprentice.



“I wonder what’s up,” said Char.

“Me too,” agreed Nicola.

They whispered to each other in hushed tones. At that moment, Nicola felt someone pull hard on her shoulder, hard enough that she stumbled. Behind her, she saw Ernst standing with his face pale.

“Sorry, but I need you to come with me. I’ll explain why on the way.” Ernst’s tone made it clear that there was to be no argument. Without waiting for Nicola’s response, he grabbed her by the arm and started walking.

Ernst’s expression did not even hint at complacency, meaning something was out of the ordinary. Although Nicola stared in confusion at first, she still obediently followed him.

Next to Nicola, Char quietly whispered, “I’ll stay cloaked and come along too.”

If Char had come along, Emma would have been left all alone. Nicola recalled that Emma had poor vision, especially without her glasses. Hence, she shot a glance at Emma as she asked Char whether she would be fine without assistance.

“Well, then I’ll cloak my sis as well and bring her along,” replied Char carelessly.

Just as Nicola watched Char walk briskly toward his sister, Ernst half-dragged her out of the dance hall.

◇

It immediately felt a lot colder after slipping out of the dance hall into the entrance hall.

Having become used to the warmth of the fireplace’s flames and the body heat of the people crowded around her, Nicola shivered slightly at the sudden temperature change. She took another good look at Ernst as she donned her coat in the cloakroom.

Ernst must have noticed her staring. With his demeanor in profile still clearly impatient, he spoke up somberly.

“Just calm down and listen, all right? Inside the previously locked art room, we found the third-born prince of the neighboring kingdom stabbed to death. The cause of death was a dagger thrust directly into his heart, so he likely died almost

instantly."

Nicola turned ever so slightly pale, with almost the first words from Ernst being unsettling. That said, it was not as if she even knew what the prince in question looked like. They were far from being acquainted.

"So, why have I been called?" Nicola asked directly.

With a stiff expression, Ernst continued, "As we headed to the art room, we heard some noise from inside that sounded like a struggle… The moment we stepped inside the room… We found His Highness Prince Lucas, already expired—and His Grace."

Just then, Ernst suddenly fell silent as if searching for the right words. After he clenched his back teeth, he prepared to squeeze words from the pit of his stomach in a low voice.

"In other words, because His Grace was the first person to discover the body, he is a suspect."

"Huh…?"

Nicola could not take in what Ernst had just announced to her all at once.

Who was it again that this man always calls "His Grace"? mused Nicola initially in her astonishment. *Ah, that's right—Sieghart.*

Recently, Sieghart had inherited his family's estate and was presently a marquess. While he and Ernst were on friendly terms, there was a significant gap in their social status. As such, Ernst always called Sieghart "His Grace."

Once Nicola had finally figured that much out, she could finally focus on the real problem for the group. In what sounded like a groan, Nicola forced out a response.

"Was he…covered in blood, holding the murder weapon, anything of that sort…?" she asked in a parched voice.

Ernst briefly denied this assumption as Sieghart was not caught in the act, leaving nothing conclusive. This news allowed Nicola to relax momentarily, but Ernst's brow remained furrowed as he went on.

"Unfortunately, the knife used as the murder weapon was never pulled out, so the culprit probably wasn't showered in blood. As long as you don't pull it out, a knife can plug up the wound it caused. Therefore, His Grace's lack of blood does little to prove his innocence."

"I-In that case… Might the prince have perished much earlier…

Or something…” muttered Nicola, still clinging to a tiny glimmer of hope. Yet Ernst shook his head slowly.

“Due to my line of work, I know a bit about this… Normally, rigor mortis first sets in around the jaw, but his jaw had not yet gone stiff… No, even before that, the body was still warm. Not much time could have passed since his death.”

“What is Sieghart’s testimony? What does he say?” asked Nicola.

Ernst bit down hard on his lip and went silent.

His eyes darted here and there as if in hesitation. With a look that suggested he had a bitter taste, he said, “According to His Grace, he was in the storage room, an adjoining room connected to the art room by an interior door. After a while, he heard something breaking in the art room. He says that he entered after waiting for the sound to stop. It was only moments later that we ran inside.”

The art room’s storage room also had a door facing the corridor, which Sieghart used to enter. He had unlocked it with his key before passing through the interior door. But when Sieghart stepped into the art room, he only found the already expired Lucas, with no sign of the murderer anywhere.

“It wasn’t only His Grace who heard the sounds of a struggle. We heard them too. Given that the body also had some warmth, we should assume that Prince Lucas was still alive then.” He paused to think. “When we arrived at the art room, the door was locked. If His Grace’s testimony that he was in the storage room before we entered is correct… That means the culprit vanished from the art room, as if into thin air.”

Then, for a moment, Ernst clammed up as if hesitating again. Even though Nicola did not want to, she understood what he would say even before he faltered.

Following Ernst’s explanation, Nicola muttered, “In other words, you’re saying that it would be more realistic to suspect him of the murder rather than imagine that the culprit vanished from the art room.”

“Yeah… Just looking at the circumstances, there is no one to suspect besides His Grace.”

Clenching his teeth together, Ernst had said the most terrible words Nicola could imagine. The situation seemed hopeless. There was not a shred of evidence to prove Sieghart’s innocence. She

could identify no basis for refuting what he had concluded.

Even so, the anguish and impatience that engulfed Ernst's face in profile provided a glimpse at his emotions. Judging that Ernst felt much as she did, Nicola somehow forced her facial muscles into a smile.

"You're still doing your best to believe in Sieghart's innocence, aren't you, Ernst?"

"Of course I am. It's not just me. Prince Alois also believes in him... Unlike me, a meathead, His Grace is also blessed with a superb brain, is he not? If he did kill someone, he would definitely go about it better than this."

This somewhat out-of-left-field answer was probably a joke on Ernst's part to help soothe Nicola in her distress. While his choice of words seemed a bit brutal, considering his profession and his personality, he might have meant them to be charming. As if to reward Ernst for his consideration, she slightly raised the corners of her mouth in a smile.

Ernst also smiled awkwardly, complementing her own.

Despite poorly forcing their smiles, even if they were bluffing, it was much better than being unable to do so. Eventually, Ernst steeled his expression once more and looked steadily at Nicola. She looked right back at him and drew herself fully upright.

"If you've got your coat on, let's go. A blizzard is starting to blow outside," announced Ernst before pushing open the door to the breezeway outside.

Instantly, a chill strained against Nicola's face, feeling like a bowstring pressed against her cheeks. She hurried after Ernst, a few steps behind him.

With the door closed behind them, the breezeway descended into total darkness. The wind roared right past Nicola's ear, and the snow carried by the wind mercilessly obstructed her vision.

The visibility between the darkness and the snow was poor. But Nicola could make out a single window in the distance, with light shining out of it.

At that moment, Nicola thought about the several worthless tarot cards she had drawn just one month earlier. Though her destination was clear, her legs felt heavy as she approached it.

2

Even though Nicola had visited the art room several times, the classroom looked very different from the one she had known.

Firstly, the desks and chairs they had used when taking lectures here had all been moved out into the corridor, making the art room feel much larger. Instead of desks, there were many easels and canvases with barely dry paint leaned against the walls. Several of these had been upended, cluttering the floor. Around the toppled easels were the shards of vases and urns that had been smashed tragically against the floor.

Looking at the paintings on the canvases, one could deduce that the urns and vases had been used as the motifs in still-lifes, with one assigned to each student. But none of these subjects retained their original shape.

The tiny shards were all scattered beyond the white chalk outline that traced the outline of the body, a pitiless sight to behold. With the traces of the struggle still so vividly preserved, Nicola found herself struggling to breathe. In all honesty, she was at least thankful that the body of the deceased had already been carried away. With this in mind, Nicola was about to relax when she suddenly realized that something did not seem quite right.

Disregarding Nicola's minute expression of confusion and unease, all eyes in the room turned to look at her. She felt a sudden tension in the air and gulped.

Out of everyone, Nicola was familiar with Sieghart, Alois, and Ernst. The remaining three pupils must have been the same ones who had been with the latter two when they discovered the body —namely, the two exchange students and the student council vice president. In addition to the students, the others present were the academy's headmaster, whose name she could not recall, and a few male instructors, who had all withdrawn to one side.

With tension still hanging in the air, the white-bearded headmaster said to Nicola, "So you're his fiancée. Do you remember when you last saw him and where?"

Here we go, thought Nicola, breathing as quietly as possible. The headmaster's deep, hoarse voice resounded heavily throughout the room, overwhelming her. *I see.*

They had called her here to question her regarding Sieghart's

alibi. What would be the correct answer to give? She danced with Sieghart for the twenty minutes that comprised the first dance. From the second dance onward, Sieghart and Nicola had separated.

Although, thought Nicola, *what would happen if I were to testify that we continued dancing during the second dance?*

The academy had roughly three hundred students. Since the very first notes of the second dance, all those students started to dance. Even with the dance hall's size, it suddenly felt cramped and was ambiguous about who was doing what and where.

While many considered it a breach of etiquette to continue dancing with the same student from the prior dance, Nicola could testify she threw a tantrum and insisted on staying with Sieghart.

Alternatively…

Around the time Nicola had thought this far, her eyes suddenly locked with those of Sieghart. Her thinking was clear to him as he silently shook his head. Nicola felt her breathing become noticeably shakier.

But Nicola knew very well what was wrong with her idea.

Seeing that one could pair with anyone during the second dance, whether one had become engaged to their partner, every student saw it as the perfect opportunity to make some memories. Nicola had seen how many students had invited Sieghart to dance even when she had the first dance. She also knew that zillions in the ballroom must have wanted to dance with him.

As much as she hated it, she knew that many more would have called out to Sieghart if they had only had the chance.

Under the circumstances, most people would be ambiguous about who did what where. When it came to Sieghart, he always had the attention of the crowd. If the other students in the ballroom were questioned, Sieghart's absence would be obvious. That would expose Nicola's lie immediately.

Nicola knew all this and that even giving a false testimony would not fundamentally solve anything. She also reasoned this could prove disadvantageous to Sieghart.

When Sieghart saw she was still hesitating, he shook his head again. She felt her throat tighten and heard an unseemly whine escape.

"We were only together for the duration of the first dance…"

trailed off Nicola in a terribly hoarse and almost unbelievably quiet voice. But she also knew she could not count on the headmaster to miss what she had said.

She could see Ernst and Alois bite their lips and avert their eyes.

After all, Nicola's testimony had proved Sieghart's whereabouts were unknown between the beginning of the second dance and the time the body was discovered.

Nicola found it challenging to breathe. Though it almost felt like it was happening to someone else, she was aware that no oxygen reached her lungs, even if she inhaled and exhaled. The sensation in her fingertips started to drift away from her.

The exchange students, the student council vice president, and the group of teachers all focused their eyes on Sieghart.

Even with this, Sieghart displayed a mask of expressionless tranquility and spoke softly. "No matter how often you ask me the same thing, my answer will not change. When the sound of something breaking started in the art room, I was in the storage room. Prince Lucas was already deceased when I entered the art room through the interior door."

Having declared this, Sieghart glanced to his left at the chalkboard at the front of the classroom. As if drawn there, Nicola looked in the same direction and found she could see inside the storage room through the still-open interior door.

She had once been inside the storage room during a lesson. Unlike the art room proper, the wallpaper in the storage room was an unremarkable cream color and had miscellaneous supplies inside.

While Nicola was sure that the storage room also had double-glazed windows for the sake of insulation, its heavy curtains were drawn, so she could not confirm this from her position. On that same note, she noticed the art room's windows were all drawn except for one.

Past the half-opened solitary curtain, she glimpsed the double-glazed windows. The light everyone saw must have shined out of there.

"If I may be so bold, I have something to say as well. As we crossed the breezeway outside, we saw a light in the art room." The council vice president had broken the silence.

Following this, the two exchange students timidly nodded while

Alois and Ernst did so with looks of anguish.

The vice president continued, “But, well... At the moment Prince Alois and his retainer set foot in the art room, the flame on the candle in President Sieghart’s hand was indeed the only source of light in the room. If the president’s testimony is true, where did the light in the art room from before disappear?”

With their eyes filled with suspicion and condemnation, the teachers all stared steadily at Sieghart.

Even Alois and Ernst’s witness statements had helped to corner Sieghart. Faced with such unreal circumstances, Nicola found she could not think right.

No matter how many times she breathed in, she still felt like she was suffocating. It was almost as if she had forgotten how to breathe. Though her heart alone seemed hurried, beating so hard she could hear it, the tips of her toes and fingers felt cold. She felt dizzy. Clenching her hands into the tightest fists that she could, she used that pain to ground what senses remained to her surroundings. Nicola wanted that at least, or she might start to forget where she was.

“There’s nothing else you need to ask of Miss Nicola, right...? If not, I think we can release her now,” suggested Alois, unable to stand and watch Nicola in her distress.

After Alois made this unilateral decision, he pushed Nicola from behind, hurrying her out of the art room. Nicola finally recalled that her legs existed and managed to move them, although they felt tangled. She allowed herself to be pushed out of the art room, passing through the door and stepping into the chilly corridor.

Once he had pulled his hands away from where they had rested on her back, he gently patted her.

“Let’s meet up in the student council room later, okay? For now, we’ll all do what we can,” he softly whispered in Nicola’s ear.

Taken aback, Nicola turned around to find that the door to the art room was already closed. Without even having an opportunity to react to what Alois had said, Nicola was left alone in the corridor.

“Ah...”

The tense cords inside her snapped, and Nicola noticed that her arms, which had felt on the verge of collapsing in the room, suddenly supported her weight. As she slowly raised her head, she

saw a familiar face beside her.

"Char…" said Nicola. *Come to think of it, Char said he would cast a spell of concealment on Emma and come along*. Like a lost child who was completely bewildered, she forced her trembling voice to say, "What should I do… This might all be my fault…"

If the statements given by Sieghart and Alois's search party were true, the victim was killed in a perfectly sealed room, with the true culprit having vanished like a puff of smoke.

Had it been the work of an apparition, that would have changed things. With apparitions, who obeyed different principles than human beings, neither walls nor locks mattered.

"What should I do? What if this happened because I left the Seven Wonders alone? What if one of those rumors transformed into something else entirely without me knowing about it…?"

Nicola's face was pale, as she began blaming herself, the words rolling off her tongue almost hysterically. Her voice sank pitifully with the end of each utterance, her hoarse voice tumbling toward the floor of the dark corridor.

After she inhaled and exhaled, Char mercilessly slapped Nicola's cheeks with both hands.

"I get it, so calm down."

The shock of being slapped from both sides caused Nicola to see stars that twinkled at the back of her eyes. Shock and pain forcibly reset her confused thoughts, becoming steadily clearer from that point on.

Char still held Nicola's head firmly, so she had to look him in the eye. The junior apprentice's eyes pierced right through her.

"Snap out of it, senior apprentice. If that's true, what do we need to do now?"

"We need…to perform an exorcism…" stammered Nicola. *That's right, calm down*.



If it was true that a rumor had grown into an apparition capable of killing a person, the same apparition was running loose in the academy. One would have to exorcise it before there were any other deaths.

As Nicola deliberately released the tension she had held in her shoulders, she exhaled deeply. Feeling like she had pushed down her impatience and put a lid on it for now, her emotional state gradually leveled out.

“Sorry… I got flustered.”

“Well, that was a rare sight for me, so don’t worry,” said Char with a shrug followed by a little wave. After a brief pause, he vigorously slapped Nicola on the back, as if to shake her up a bit. “C’mon, my big sis has just gone to fetch us a change of clothes. You can start by changing out of that overly restrictive dress.”

Now that Char mentioned it, Nicola finally remembered that she was still wearing her ballgown. She really had been severely rattled but let out a deep sigh, gave a pained smile, and nodded.

3

The duo had to go to the girls’ bathroom on the fourth floor, where the specialized classrooms were all lined up in one corridor.

Nicola wriggled out of her ballgown in the cubicle at the very back, where the last of the Seven Wonders was located—“red paper, blue paper.” As she untied the laces that held her corset tight, she hurled a question at Char through the cubicle wall.

“Say… It was you who combined the school’s ghost stories together to make the Seven Wonders, wasn’t it, Char?”

Indeed, the tradition of counting Seven Wonders could be traced back to Honjo in Edo. These stories could manifest as urban legends or school ghost stories. In Japan, the term “Seven Wonders” referred to a form of supernatural tales.

When Japanese people talk of “wonders,” they did not put them in groups of four or six, but *seven*. They regarded the term as synonymous with ghost stories or phenomena that defied explanation.

Conversely, the concept of having Seven Wonders of the World also existed outside Japan. But the intended meaning was just a little different from what it was in Japan.

People always assumed it referred to seven colossal buildings from the ancient world, such as pyramids and temples. When this foreign concept of “wonders” was spoken of in Japan, it used a liberal translation of the concept that they were already familiar with. Yet it could have had a more direct translation like “stunning landscapes” or “things one should hold in awe.”

The Western concept of “wonders” differed from the Japanese concept of the Seven Wonders from the very beginning.

In other words, it wasn’t easy to imagine the schema Japan had in place of equating Seven Wonders with scary stories emerging all by themselves in a world based on the Western world.

For this reason Nicola thought someone versed in Japanese culture must have initiated a series of ghost stories called the Seven Wonders.

Char responded in the most casual manner imaginable.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, yeah. I started spreading the rumor, saying, ‘You know, I’ve heard that this academy has a bunch of scary stories called the Seven Wonders. I’ve only heard the second one about a doppelgänger and the seventh, the story about red paper and blue paper. I don’t know the others.’ Something like that.”

The reason for the doppelgänger story was told so Char could rear his own familiar from zero. But he spread the “red paper, blue paper” story to keep people away from the rear cubicles in the fourth-floor bathrooms, where Char and Emma changed clothes to swap places.

Think that’s right, thought Nicola.

“Now, the reason I made it Seven Wonders.” Char continued, “If a whole bunch of scary stories spread as a result of the rumors I made up, cleaning up after them would be a real pain in the butt. On that point, there wouldn’t be any more than the upper limit of seven I set from the start, would there?”

It seemed the number had been the result of Char showing consideration toward Nicola, in his own way. But the form his consideration had taken was not quite up to scratch, and she scowled dramatically.

“So, having sown the seeds yourself, you left all the cleanup to me, right?”

“I showed that consideration, setting a limit, exactly because I meant to leave all the cleanup to you. Really, you should thank me,

don’t you think…?”

“Why you…”

Char’s attitude was so condescending that Nicola was simply baffled. Soon, Emma giggled two cubicles away from Nicola as she also changed out of her ballgown.

“Beating Char in an argument is pretty difficult, Nicola.”

Seriously, that’s so true, thought Nicola. As she slipped her arms through the sleeves of her uniform, which was much easier to move around in, she let out a deep, lamented sigh. She said, “Really, he’s got a comeback for everything…”

With a sullen expression, Nicola finished getting dressed and donned her coat to open the door.

Nicola stood in front of the sink and opened the faucet, which gushed water against her fingertips. Already cold, as if her body had frozen, she started to quiver. But Nicola decisively scooped up a handful of icy water and splashed it against her face.

Once she had finished removing her makeup, she looked up at the mirror and slapped both hands against her cheeks. Her complexion had improved quite a bit compared to earlier.

Her cheeks and palms stung, but a warmth blossomed under her skin, and her brain seemed to become dimly stimulated.

Shortly after, Nicola undid the braids in her hair and shook her head around. When she combed her now messy hair with her fingers, it soon went back to normal, as it did not tend to curl.

She placed the miniature blue rose that had served as a hair decoration in the sink, which she had filled with water, letting it gently soak. Though she knew that if left there, absorbing clear water, the petals would probably soon return to their natural white color.

Still, she felt far worse about the idea of the rose withering, so this was how it should be.

Once Nicola regulated her breathing, she raised her hand again and thought, *Keep your cool. Getting flustered is just a waste of time. Stand up straight, hold your head high, and walk with confidence. Under the circumstances, what’s the point in getting frightened?* She lifted her spirits by saying, “Let’s go…”

First of all, they would confirm the whereabouts of the rumors she had left alone. Nicola cast a spell of concealment on herself, with Char following by casting one on himself and Emma. As the

final step, she picked up the candle she had set aside and quickly stepped back into the fourth-floor corridor.

◇

"Come to think of it, aren't all the doors in the dormitories still meant to be locked...? Didn't that make it difficult to fetch everyone a change of clothes?"

From the fourth-floor corridor, the specialized classrooms all stood in a row. They looked down at the auditorium, whose lights still shone brilliantly.

Even with the music still faintly playing, it seemed that the ball continued concealing any information about the murder from the student population for the time being. Naturally, the doors to the dormitories remained locked as well.

Char and Emma looked at one another and laughed before answering Nicola's question.

"I mean, well, you know. Your familiar is super clever."

"You're amazing, Gemini."

"Huh, what did Gemini do...?"

Nicola could not help but blink in surprise while a black lump leaped out of her pocket, thinking she had summoned it.

After she hurriedly held out both hands to catch her familiar, Gemini floated above her palms. It popped and changed shapes to resemble a set of antique keys, then it descended to rest in Nicola's hands.

"Wait, you can do this kind of thing too? Now that I really think about it, I guess it was always theoretically possible... Well, hmm, I guess it was possible. Yeah. That was just a blind spot for me..."

When Nicola really considered it, she realized that a doppelgänger could perfectly copy a human being, from their appearance to their personality. Thinking about it rationally, it was probably simpler to copy something inanimate than copying a living creature.

"I guess we were just too set in our preconceptions about what a doppelgänger is..." mused Char.

Doppelgänger. The word literally meant, "One that walks with exactly the same appearance." Just as Char said, Nicola may have been too caught up in the definition she understood, thus

overlooking this possibility.

“Could it be that Gemini was actually amazing this whole time, basically a familiar on god mode…?” murmured Nicola in astonishment.

“Not only that, but it’s such a sweet baby, always thinking of its master!” cried Emma, almost as if Gemini was her familiar.

According to the siblings, Gemini had desperately cuddled up to Nicola the whole time as she was panicking back in the art room. But she had been so out of sorts that she had not even noticed that Gemini was there.

So then Gemini had clung to Char and Emma instead before transforming itself into a set of keys.

“I think it tried thinking for itself about what it could do for you, Nicola.”

Emma’s gentle words caused Nicola’s to blush, turning her cheeks hot. That must have been because she also felt warmer in her chest.

“Thanks, Gemini… Sorry for not noticing you earlier,” whispered Nicola into her palm.

Gemini reassumed its usual shape of a black orb and bounced proudly. Then it puffed itself up and rose into the air before descending in its usual position—on Nicola’s shoulder.

“Mmkay, now that we’re feeling a bit more cheerful, let’s get going already. But where should we attack first of all?” asked Char.

Nicola recalled Alois’s handwritten note inside her mind. She was pretty sure that the bullet points had followed this order:

Severed hands seen crawling around the music room

A doppelgänger spotted lurking in the halls

A will-o’-the-wisp that bathes the walls around it in color

A poltergeist

A female student who repeatedly throws herself from the top of the western tower

A full-length mirror that drags students inside

Red paper, blue paper

Thanks to Gemini’s presence, they could freely enter any room they wished, which was huge.

Considering they were in the fourth floor corridor where the classrooms for specialty subjects were all located, it made sense to

approach these rumors in order.

"Let's start with the music room," said Nicola. "For personal reasons, I'd rather not leave that one alone much longer." She mused, *Reportedly, there was once an incident in the music room where the lid of a piano's keyboard slammed shut during a performance, severing the hands of the student playing it. The severed hands could appear, crawling around the music room.*

Recalling the rumor as Alois had reported it to her, Nicola pulled a disgusted face as she started walking.

Creak, went the hinges on the door.

Despite their spells of concealment, they still checked their surroundings before swiftly slipping inside, infiltrating the music room without much difficulty. The music room was quiet, lit by the three candles they held.

Looking around, Nicola saw a number of different instruments—a grand piano, violins, and percussion instruments—all sitting in the music room in silence.

There was not yet any sound of something crawling around. But when Nicola held her breath, she most definitely heard something. *Thud, thud*. The dull sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

Thinking of the stories that formed the origin of the Seven Wonders, it was natural to assume that the severed hands would fall just below the grand piano's keyboard. Nicola looked there and saw two hands, the color of dirt, not giving the slightest impression of life. With the cross sections at the wrists—looking like smashed pomegranates—exposed, the hands lay lifelessly on the floor.

Nicola heard Emma gasp next to her and could tell that she had recoiled. As Emma did this, the heel of her shoe rasped against the floor, and a hard *click* echoed throughout the room.

At that instant, the severed hands each began to flex their five fingers with a freedom of movement that seemed impossible for human bones, then crawled quickly across the floor. Even Nicola felt a jolt of fear.

Despite knowing that the hands would move, Nicola still let out an "Eeek!" But this was likely more a physiological reaction of revulsion than fear, so she really could not control it.

“Ha ha, gross. Unlike the ones in Japan, these have some grit, so I kinda like ’em. For me, it’s the ones that wind their hair around you that I just can’t stand,” said Char.

“In that case, I guess I’ll leave this to you!” shouted Nicola reflexively, her tone contrasting with her junior apprentice’s casual statement of his pet theory.

Incidentally, Nicola thought some hair would be absolutely preferable to this. Huddling up alongside Emma, Nicola kept her breathing quiet and said, “I’m begging you, don’t come any closer.”

As for Char, he gave one of the hands a mighty kick, sending it flying against a wall before stamping on it without mercy.

That first hand ruptured into a gooey mess, just like an overly ripe pomegranate. Eventually, it dissipated all too easily, leaving no pool of blood or spatter on the wall.

The remaining hand seemed to descend into a state of panic. Moving its fingers far too energetically, it crawled around the room at a wild pace. Even Char’s kicks started to miss their mark.

Looks like this’ll take a while, lamented Nicola as she leaned against a wall.

Still, the sight of the hand hopping to and fro to evade Char’s kicks made Nicola think of a fish pulled onto land. Each time her viewing angle offered her a sight of that dark red cross section and the white thing sticking out of it, probably bone, she felt disgusted.

Grotesque things, and anything that looks like a bug, I say no thank you.

“How wonderful it must be to not be able to see that…” murmured Emma, slightly smiling while comforting Gemini, who hissed at the hand while sitting on Nicola’s shoulder.

Filled with emotion herself, Nicola agreed with Emma, saying “It really must be…”

When one told enough rumors, they would cast a shadow. Once the shadow took shape, the tale became true.

If a rumor took a shape as well-defined as this, depending on the time of day and conditions or even the wavelengths, one might feel something brush against their ankle, even without a sixth sense. Conversely, one should not notice anything more than that.

In particular, the kinds of ghost stories shared at schools

typically remained within its confines, resulting in a minimal scope. Furthermore, only those associated with the school knew this, a very limited collection of people. So, this was more than enough to instill an existence.

Simply put, their preconditions meant they could manifest far more quickly than urban legends. On the other hand, they could exist only in the minds and words of the handful of people who occupied the school.

Although it was easy for them to assume a form, their existence was quite vulnerable. Therefore, the effect they could have on those who could not perceive them directly was predictable.

Nonetheless, their property of taking a form quite easily meant they were more likely to be aggressive toward people who could perceive them. The reason Nicola had stopped attending school in her previous life had something to do with that.

For example, suppose that some severed hands that could scurry around the floor at a wild pace made a nest in the music room. If one of those hands grasped Nicola's ankle, and started to crawl up her leg, she would stand out if she did not ignore it with a calm look.

She could not even raise an eyebrow at the sight of Kinjirō Ninomiya running madly through the schoolyard, an anatomical model of the human body sprinting after her at full speed, or the portrait of Beethoven that would not stop cackling.

Continuing to ignore these apparitions caused her a lot of stress. But if she failed to ignore them, the result would be that everyone would think she was weird and give her a wide berth. Since either outcome would cause her anxiety, it was much easier for her to continue her education by correspondence.

Now that she was a fully fledged exorcist, she had mastered concealing those things from regular people. Back when she was only half-baked, it demanded quite an effort from her.

Getting back to the story...

Thump! The sound of a foot hitting the floor resounded throughout the music room.

Coming back to her senses, Nicola saw a crushed hand under her junior apprentice's foot, beginning to fade into the surrounding gloom. It appeared that this exorcism was over.

While Nicola thought Char's method of execution was

unspeakably meatheaded, if it was going to run circles around them like that then it would probably be the best solution. In any event, the severed hands that crawled around the music room were on their deathbed.

In unison with Emma, Nicola relaxed her tensed facial muscles.

“Phew, that was way more tiring than it should have been! Well, onto the next one. Where are we headed?” Char looked back at Nicola while rotating his shoulders.

The cultivated doppelgänger would be the second target if they followed the given order. Still, the location it would be lurking in was not clearly defined.

Without much deliberation, Nicola said, “Next, we’ll deal with the will-o’-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color and the poltergeist… Let’s go check the girls’ bathroom on the first floor.”

Nicola took a moment until she started heading out.

Reportedly, a will-’o-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color roams the first-floor girls’ bathroom at night. During that time,a poltergeist is breaking something in there. Apparently, one student even saw this happening.

“Yeah, yeah, roger that.”

“Shall we go down stairs in front of the music room?” suggested Emma.

“Yes, let us,” said Nicola, nodding before narrowly opening the door. After confirming that there was no one in the corridor, the trio hurriedly left the music room.

4

Nicola took the candle Char was holding, then descended the stairs with a candle in each hand. Behind her, Char led Emma by the hand at a somewhat slower pace.

If Nicola remembered correctly, Emma’s poor vision resulted from an injury she had sustained protecting Alois rather than something she was born with. While slowing her pace to match that of the other two, Nicola glanced sideways at Emma and took notice of her appearance.

Emma had hair the color of a rich, milky tea and olive eyes. With this combination of coloration, her appearance was reminiscent of Alois.

Moreover, Nicola had heard that Emma entered service before she was even ten. Since the palace had intentionally employed a child from the slums, one could infer that they probably intended her to serve as a body double as well.

“Say Nicola… Why’d you decide to leave the Seven Wonders alone at first anyway?” Char hurled this question at her from behind, apparently only having just remembered.

Without turning around, Nicola shot back, “How to put it… They were still a bit shady.”

“Shady?” said Emma.

“You mean, like a shade, a kind of spirit?” asked Char.

Nicola heard the two siblings’ very similar voices almost perfectly overlaid.

One of them wondered what Nicola’s choice of words even meant, and the other understood in a way but still had a dubious expression. At any rate, both of them looked puzzled. With a wry chuckle, Nicola turned to face Emma.

“It’s like this. The edges of shadows are always a bit thin, a bit hazy, right? The other rumors in the Seven Wonders were still in that vague state of being. I could not physically deal with the hands in the music room and had to leave it for later. As for the others, they were still at the stage where they couldn’t even maintain their shape… So, I just left them alone.”

For the seventh wonder, “red paper, blue paper,” she had found something that had not even formed a haze. But with that location, her junior apprentice had performed regular exorcisms, meaning she did not need to supplement those efforts.

The being could become vulnerable even with the apparition that had taken on a solid shape, like the hands in the music room. Unless quite a few preconditions were all met, normal people would not even be able to sense it.

Nicola believed that anything that looked indistinct, even through her eyes, could be left alone without any issues.

“Huh… But, doesn’t that mean that the rumor about the hands in the music room grew way faster than all the others? Why?” wondered Char.

“I don’t know. But that’s where everything stood a month ago.”

As the trio carried out this conversation, they arrived at the first floor. The girls’ bathroom was smack-dab at the bottom of the

stairs. Even after straining their ears, they could not hear any suspicious noises.

The unique, faint odor always present in the bathroom greeted them as they slowly pushed the door open and peered inside. They each held up their candles and stepped inside before looking at one another with ambiguous expressions.

“Ah…” murmured Char. “I can definitely see why you wanted to leave this one alone…”

“I suppose it’s only a little smoky in here,” agreed Emma. “It doesn’t look like it could do much harm.”

“It really isn’t all that different than it was a month ago, huh?” noted Nicola.

Though the mist in the toilets was somewhat denser than it had been when Nicola had visited a month ago, it had indeed not come far enough to manifest a physical form yet. The being could neither bathe its surroundings in colored light nor make much noise. It was not in any condition to influence even those who could perceive it, much less on regular people.

“Huh, so what do we do? Even if we exorcise it in this state, there’ll be no end to it, right?” said Char.

Waving their hands at the darker clouds in this smoky atmosphere would only have a minimal effect.

Exorcising apparitions at this stage was surprisingly labor intensive. If they were going to purge the apparition, it would be simpler and quicker to do so once it had condensed into a discrete entity, like the hands in the music room.

“Shall we leave it…a little bit longer?”

In the end, Nicola made the same decision as she had a month earlier.

They went to the western tower—the site of the fifth wonder—where “a female student who repeatedly throws herself from the top of the western tower.” However, the result was the same again. Other than the mist having grown slightly more dense, it was not much different. It was a total swing and a miss, as one might say.

Even the sixth wonder, “A full-length mirror that drags students inside,” was in a similar state. Despite all her expertise, Nicola was left totally lost as to what to do next. The trio set off with heavy footfalls to meet with Alois and the others in the student council room.

Some time passed, with the trio simply walking in stony silence. At some point, a fourth person's subtle footsteps began to be audible among the trio's heavy ones.

Glancing over her shoulder, Nicola determined that a thin haze was approaching them, not yet having fully assumed a humanoid form. She guessed this was the second of the Seven Wonders, the doppelgänger still being cultivated.

Char dejectedly sighed after he glanced over his shoulder at the doppelgänger as if he had already lost all interest in it. Sounding disappointed, he mumbled, "Guess I won't be harvesting it for a long while yet."

Gemini seemed to take exception to Char's use of the word "harvest." An instant after it leaped on his shoulder, it sprouted countless spines—much like the shell of a sea urchin—turning Char's shoulder into a pin cushion.

Apparently, Gemini was protesting on behalf of its future junior doppelgänger.

"Ow, w-wait a minute, ouch, aah, look, I'm sorry!"

When Gemini heard Char's apology, it appeared satisfied and retracted its spines. It then floated lightly through the air before landing softly on Nicola's shoulder.

But when this farce had ended, their conversation faltered once more, and an awkward silence filled the hallway. Nicola somehow prevented her sinking feeling about what would come from showing in her expression.

Even so, try as she might to escape from reality, there was but one topic of conversation left.

Emma eventually broke the ice with a nervous smile and said, "So… Nicola, your theory was that when you left the rumors alone, they transformed into something completely different… Do I have that right?"

"Yes, that's right. While I wasn't looking, the details of the rumors might have changed or even mixed," responded Nicola. "At the very least, it looks like the location of each rumor hasn't changed, nor has any of them developed enough to cause any harm."

Although each apparition was vulnerable, Nicola wondered what might have happened if the elements of each rumor had mixed. This could have produced a wholly new apparition.

She had considered all that. But when Nicola observed them once more, each of the Seven Wonders still seemed independent of one another and were still at a stage where they had not yet attained physical forms. There was no way any of them could have killed a human. Regardless, there were no apparitions Nicola had left roaming around the academy besides these Seven Wonders.

If a separate apparition, vicious enough to kill a human being, had been lurking around the school, it would have been difficult for Nicola or her junior apprentice not to have noticed it.

What if whoever carried out the closed-room murder was not an apparition at all? How did Entity X manage to vanish from the room without a trace?

As Nicola pondered this in silence, Char pouted and tilted his head in contemplation, then said, “Just why is there such a clear difference in their rate of development, anyhow?”

Indeed, that was an excellent question. Compared to the other wonders, the hands in the music room had stood out as being far too developed.

“Yes, you’re right,” said Emma, nodding. “If the full-length mirror that drags people inside had been just as far along as the hands in the music room, I could have seen a reason for that. After all, the only rumors that go back a long way are the hands in the music room and the full-length mirror.”

“Huh…?” exclaimed Nicola and Char in unison.

Nicola blinked in surprise. As she looked sideways at Char, she saw him wearing much the same expression of perplexity. After Emma seemed lost for a while, she finally connected the dots and changed her expression to one of realization.

“Of course,” murmured Emma, understanding something in her mind. “You two wouldn’t know about any rumors that go back that far. Nicola. The truth is, Emma actually attended this academy until last year!”

“Oh, is that so?” replied Nicola.

“Yes. Unlike Char, Emma’s parents were both working class, so I wasn’t qualified to attend this academy… But during my duties taking care of Prince Alois, I also attended this school.”

Nicola’s eyes widened even more as this was the first she had heard about these events.

Considering Emma’s *wound sustained in the line of duty*, giving

her an education might have been an act of benevolence on behalf of the palace or some form of reward. With that in mind, Nicola accepted this news quite smoothly.

Emma continued, “After Emma’s eyes worsened, she could sense all kinds of *things*… While attending the school, I deliberately gathered all the scary stories to avoid going anywhere dangerous. So, I have a good grasp of all the rumors circulating until last year.”

I see, thought Nicola, with a nod. *That’s the connection between her attendance at the academy with the recollection that the hands in the music room and the full length mirror that drags people inside. They were only rumors back then. With the current context of the conversation, it’s almost as if…*

Before Nicola could even give a voice to the question on her mind, Char looked back at Emma and butted in first.

“Hold up. Then are you saying there were other ghost stories at the school when you were a student here?”

“Yes. Of course, people hadn’t grouped them as the Seven Wonders. There weren’t even seven of them; there were only a few. One of them had to do with the staircase we’re looking at right now.”

Emma wore a satisfied expression, then pointed to the stairs leading to the next floor ahead of them. These stairs were near the back of the schoolhouse, separated from the wing that contained the classrooms.

While Nicola was sure this landing had stained glass windows depicting motifs from this world’s mythology, it was nighttime, and a blizzard was blowing outside. Because all the colors in the windows appeared much darker, she could not easily make out any figures.

“The grand staircase where another step appears. Based on what I recall, if you ever put your foot on the thirteenth step, which should not even exist, you will meet with some misfortune.”

With a contemplative expression, Emma recited the rumor as she remembered it. The story was one often heard in Japan and the West. Many considered thirteen an inauspicious number.

According to different schools of thought, the superstition and phobia of thirteen either had religious roots or derived from its classification as a disharmonious number.

If its origins were indeed religious, one theory supposed that it

had something to do with Judas, the betrayer, who was the thirteenth person to take his seat at Jesus's Last Supper.

Should the theory that thirteen's disharmonious properties were responsible be correct, one might consider that many cultures historically made use of base 60 numeral systems. The twelve months of the year and the twelve hours around the face of a clock reflected this. With thirteen coming right after twelve and being a prime number, it immediately upset the harmony of twelve.

Though Nicola privately reflected that because this world had a unique polytheistic tradition, the latter explanation was more likely correct.

With a serious expression, Char encouraged Emma to continue. "Sis, what other ghost stories were there?"

"Apart from that… That's right—the forbidden room," responded Emma. "From what I remember, there was a waiting room with a broken lock in the auditorium building. If you opened that door, you'd end up shut inside and never be able to leave, I think that's how it went… Apart from that… There was an iron suit of armor in the headmaster's office. Even though it was empty inside, it could somehow move around."

Once more, Char asked, "What else?"

But Emma slowly shook her head. "The only scary stories Emma knows about that were still around last year were the hands in the music room, the full length mirror that drags people inside, the grand staircase with an extra step, the forbidden room in the auditorium building, and the iron suit of armor in the headmaster's office. Only those five. At any rate, the Seven Wonders format still didn't exist last year."

"Is… Is that so…" said Nicola, putting a finger to her chin as she pondered this.

For the first time ever, Char intentionally popularized the designation "wonders" and the number seven to the rumors this year. Since there had only been five ghost stories up until the previous year, it did not pose a problem.

Anyhow, Nicola turned to look at her junior apprentice and seek his opinion, saying, "So, what do you think?"

"What do I think? It's weird, right? I mean, that's exactly why I left the other wonders blank."

Char was only supposed to have spread two rumors, apparently having told others the following.

"I've heard this academy has a bunch of scary stories called the Seven Wonders. I've only heard the second one, about a doppelgänger, and the seventh, the story about red paper and blue paper. I don't know the others."

Then, Nicola mused, *Supposing for a moment that I would deliberately spread some ghost stories, like my junior apprentice did…*

Nicola believed she would have left some of the rumors blank. Accidentally starting an epidemic of ghost stories, letting them grow in number without limit, would cause her a lot of trouble.

One would expect ghost stories that already existed to fill in the missing information if they took into account the cleanup that one would later need and set a number as an upper limit. Despite this, a closer examination revealed that existing ghost stories had not filled most blank spaces. That was strange.

Seeing Nicola and Char looking at one another, a confused expression came over Emma's face.

"But aren't scary stories told at schools always like that? They change frequently."

"Surprisingly, that usually isn't the case," said Char.

Truly, new stories rarely replaced new ones. When Nicola saw Char scratch his head, she looked frustrated and nodded as if to flatter him.

Due to the lack of development of a mass media society, the parents and siblings of students passed stories like this through word of mouth. These stories would become exaggerated or only half-remembered, so some amount of error would occur. But the more a rumor was told, the more exchanges would happen.

"Really? I heard that story went like this."

"I heard it told that way too."

"Well, I guess I might have misremembered."

By quickly eliminating discrepancies, a story's details tended to converge somewhere not much different from its original telling, allowing the story to be passed on forever. At least, that was how it usually worked.

"It's definitely a bit strange that brand-new episodes are taking up three of the five missing wonders…" With one hand still holding a handle, Char skillfully crossed his arms and leaned his head in

contemplation.

As Emma kept her younger brother in the corner of one eye, she placed a hand on her cheek.

“Besides, that still leaves us without explaining why the rumors developed at such different speeds, right? If older rumors are supposed to be more developed than others… Why wasn’t the mirror that drags people inside more or less as developed as the hands in the music room?”

Emma made an excellent point. Regarding that explanation, Nicola had just thought of an explanation. She awkwardly scratched the side of her face. “The difference in how far developed the mirror and the hands was…probably my doing. Speaking of that mirror, I actually exorcised it about three months ago.”

The large mirror on the landing of a staircase had pulled Sieghart inside some time ago. That mirror.

Now that she thought about it, Nicola realized that the mirror had been a fully-fledged apparition, like the hands in the music room. Her intervention likely reset all the rumors stored in that apparition over the years. That must have been why it had only grown about as much as all the other new rumors.

While Nicola was at it, she realized that she had an idea of how to explain what had happened with the rumor of the female student who repeatedly threw herself off the western tower.

It was also evident where that rumor had come from—Elsa.

This story had also become popularized before being counted among Char’s Seven Wonders. Nicola could understand why it might have filled one of the missing spaces.

“Ah, now that you mention it, I had one too,” said Char, apparently having thought of yet another explanation. “That grand staircase, rather cheekily, tried to trip me up, y’know. I exorcised it soon after starting at this academy.”

Unknowingly, each had exorcised one of the older ghost stories—the full-length mirror that dragged people inside and the grand staircase with an extra step.

There were two remaining rumors from that time—the forbidden room in the auditorium building and the iron suit of armor in the headmaster’s office. But these had fallen outside the bounds of the Seven Wonders and would one day become

completely forgotten. Additionally, the ghost stories in parts of the school they did not visit frequently, so there was no way they would come to any real harm.

Regarding *those beings*, recognition was like food that sustained their existence. If people forgot about them, they would soon become unable to maintain their shape. Even more than the new Seven Wonders, these rumors could be left alone without any issues.

Just as Nicola delivered this conclusion, Char sighed and muttered, “So what…? We’ve worked out that this person probably didn’t die because of your negligence or mine. Doesn’t that mean we’re back to square one? What are we gonna do now?”

Char leaned against the staircase’s handrail with a look in his eyes, almost as if he was testing her. But as Char said, they had merely returned to square one under the current circumstances and made little progress.

“What to do, you ask… For starters, let’s meet up with His Highness and—”

“That’s not what I meant,” said Char, standing up from the handrail and scratching the back of his head. “I mean, if things go on like this, and your fiancé is executed, what are you gonna do?”

“Huh, wait a minute, *executed*…?” Nicola had not anticipated the last words that flew out of Char’s mouth and stared at him with her mouth hanging open. “No, no, no, no way would they seek capital punishment for just one murder. That’s way over…”

Nicola somehow contorted her facial muscles into a smile. After Emma and Char exchanged glances, they looked back at her with their brows furrowed. At this point, she finally noticed both were looking at her with troubled expressions.

After some time, Emma perhaps realized they were talking at cross-purposes and refuted Nicola’s words with a downcast look.

“Execution… Or else imprisonment, followed by a poisoned chalice… I think there is a possibility of one of those things happening,” stated Emma, seeming as if it really pained her to say so.

“Ah, right. You’ve been a noble from birth in this life. That’s why you don’t sense these things,” said Char, covering his face with one hand. “Back in the slums, children disappeared regularly. Either kidnapped or tempted by promises of excessively well-paid work,

they disappeared into the homes of nobles. But half of them came back in the end as ghosts."

With a far-off look in his eyes, Char continued to murmur in hushed tones.

"Well, no one made much of a fuss when brats from the slums disappeared. I also didn't hear too many cases of nobles lacking in humanity getting punished for it."

As Char spoke indifferently, Emma looked down as if these memories pained her.

Nicola just stared at them, feeling as if she were witnessing the events of another world entirely. None of what she heard meshed with her ingrained assumptions, so she could not understand it. Her mental processes had diminished to a superficial level, so the most she could do was take in each of her junior apprentice's words.

"The question you have to ask is, what was the social status of the person killed and the status of the one who killed them? That's how a class-based society works... You probably still don't get that on an innate level," explained Char. "Because you were born into the noble class with a certain degree of human rights guaranteed in this life, you've brought along some of your assumptions from your past life."

Just then, Char prodded the space between Nicola's eyebrows with his index finger.

"I'll say that one more time because it's important. What was the status of the person killed and the status of the person who killed them? Considering their upbringing, their motive, how many people they killed, or how they carried it out, these are all standards used in sentencing in modern Japan. You'd better accept that they won't fly here."

The matter was not so simple as one person having been killed. It looked as if a noble from this kingdom had murdered a member of a neighboring kingdom's royal family. That was the picture. In a society where lives were not weighed equally, which way would the scales tilt?

Finally having understood the situation, Nicola felt something sticking in her throat.

The blood seemed to drain right out of her body, the strength seeming escaping her limbs. After somehow stifling her shaky

breathing, Nicola forced words out of her parched throat.

“Is there really a chance that…he might be executed…?”

Nicola’s fear and anxiety circulated throughout her body faster than her blood. Her lips began to tremble, and her heart beat so hard that it hurt. Even her muscular tissue felt as though it had become burdened by rust, making her body seemingly creak when she moved it. Her mind was in tatters, and she perceived her equilibrium was about to desert her.

When Char saw Nicola so pitifully bewildered, he responded with laughter as if he could not believe what he saw.

“That’s why I’m asking you. What are you gonna do now? If you say that you’d like to take that man and run, I’ll help you.”

“Wh-Why would you…” Nicola murmured vacantly.

Under the current circumstances, Nicola could not present Char with any evidence of her childhood friend’s innocence. Yet, he had stated his intention to help so resolutely.

Char chuckled wryly.

“Well, there are many things about the case that bug me. Like, why did he slip out of the student ball, and what was he doing in the art room’s supply closet? Despite that, I can also unconditionally believe in any person you believe in. People generally believe whatever they want to believe, right?” Having said his piece, Char grinned at her and roughly tousled her hair.

“It’s all right, Nicola.”

A hand that was not Nicola’s came to rest gently on her shoulder, lending its warmth. Looking to one side, Nicola noticed Emma smiling ever so slightly.

“I know what we just said scared you, but he hasn’t received a death sentence just yet, has he? Besides, if we just gather enough information, we could overturn the suspicions against him. I think Prince Alois and Ern will continue to search tirelessly for a solution. First, let’s meet up with the others and start thinking of a plan.”

Emma’s voice was gentle, and her hand resting on Nicola’s shoulder emitted warmth.

“Okay?” added Emma in a tone that caused feelings of unease and concern to unravel inside Nicola’s heart.

Aware that order had now been restored in her mind, Nicola closed her eyes and breathed in. Once she formed her lips into a thin line and drew back her chin, she felt her brain kick into gear.

As Emma said, Sieghart had not received a sentence. Even if his death sentence went undecided, she need not let that be the end of it.

The pair could simply run away together if that occurred, as Char suggested. When Nicola considered all this, the fear and worry smoldering in Nicola's chest finally left.

"I'm okay now. Also... Thank you."

Nicola understood the present situation correctly. She knew what she wanted to do, including very clearly where her heart lay. The moment she walked forward, she no longer cowered.

◆◆◆

Elma's face was ashen.
As she gathered her things, she went to leave.
I asked why, but she wouldn't look me in the eyes.
Ah, but I liked Elma.
This really, really is a shame.
Bye-bye.
Bye-bye.

Farewell.

Nicola's Little Occult Lectures: Lesson 10

The Seven Wonders

The Seven Wonders of Honjo, Edo; urban legends; school ghost stories, et cetera...

In Japan, the phrase Seven Wonders arises when talking about peculiar phenomena with no explanation, a particular variety of stories about the supernatural. When one speaks of "wonders" in the country, they never speak of four or six but always of seven wonders. Speaking of a school's seven wonders, one imagines scary stories. However, only the Japanese have this occult impression of "seven wonders."

Oh, I've heard of the Seven Wonders of the World; some of you might be thinking.

True, the concept of the Seven Wonders of the World also exists abroad. It refers to a group of seven colossal structures named by

mathematicians in Ancient Greece.

Only in Greek does the word originally used directly translate as “something one should behold.” Coincidentally, there being seven of these led to the mistranslation of the “Seven (Strange) Wonders” finding a foothold in Japan.

Chapter 4: The Intricate Whodunit

1

“Huh? He was called there by a girl with a stalker vibe, and because he agreed to that, we ended up in this situation?!” Char’s hysterical shriek caused the flames of the candles on the table to flicker. In the meantime, they had come to the student council room.

Five people—Alois, Ernst, Nicola, Char, and Emma—sat around the long mahogany table. Unlike the dormitories, no one had expected people to use the schoolhouse at night. The only light sources were the fireplace and the candles they had been carrying now atop the table.

In this dimly lit room, the five students had complicated expressions, and only the orange glow of the flames illuminated their faces.

As if Nicola were coping with a headache, she hung her head and buried her face in her hands. Finally, almost groaning, she said, “I thought it might have been something like that…” Then, Char leaned over the table and stared at her.

“Wait, wait, what? Why do you sound like you almost understand why? Isn’t this weird? Wouldn’t you normally be a bit more cautious or worried about being stabbed or something if a stalker called you out somewhere?! Why did he go out to meet her all by himself?!”

Despite himself, Char was shouting at this point.

With a bitter expression, Nicola frowned and said, “No, on the contrary, I think that’s what he was aiming at. If he deliberately allowed her to wound him superficially, then overpowered her, he could hand her over to the authorities. That’s his method of last resort, which he uses occasionally.”

When one was beautiful, having a good personality meant one would appear twice as good, whereas having a bad personality meant one would seem ten times repugnant. This was all part of the know-how Sieghart relied on to survive, knowing that being

disliked could be deadly for him.

His demeanor required him to deal thoroughly and fairly with everyone he met. Sieghart had to spread goodwill equally in all directions, without distinction, and he never gave anyone special treatment.

While there were some exceptions, omitting those specific cases, he always maintained a certain distance between himself and others when being friendly. Sieghart skillfully avoided both being despised and being liked too much in this manner. However, not always.

The know-how Nicola's childhood friend relied on also had the unintended effect of drawing out a particular kind of person.

If a person was sound of mind, they had enough reason to assume an objective point of view. Therefore, one could compare oneself to others and conclude that the kindness received was just the same kindness shown universally to other people.

Unfortunately, some people could twist the facts to suit their own perspectives. Such people certainly existed and had always posed a problem for Sieghart.

Girls sometimes interpreted Sieghart's universal kindness as a unique form reserved for them. But their delusions, lacking all sense of objectivity, could not continue to expand *ad infinitum*. Such swollen delusions would eventually collide with the boundaries of reality. At that moment, they tended to react in one of two main ways. They would decide, "I shall kill him and then myself," or else, "I will pass judgment on the one who betrayed me."

In both cases, this resulted in them harming the object of their obsession. Nicola had seen people stray from the path of reason in this way several times before.

Sieghart's strategy was to lose one battle with such a woman—risking life and limb—to win the war. It was his last resort in dealing with someone of that ilk. To some extent, Nicola thought this was a rational response.

If Sieghart could send these girls behind bars by deliberately sustaining an injury, Nicola did not necessarily think this was a bad outcome. Regardless, no amount of argument would ever change their opinions.

Although Sieghart gave them an unambiguous "no," they would

still find other explanations. The girls might tell themselves, “He’s only hesitant,” or “Poor thing, someone’s definitely making him say that.” They would believe that without a shred of doubt.

Nonetheless, they would eventually turn to violence in the course of rejecting reality. There is no way to handle people of that kind except to isolate oneself from them physically. Sieghart’s approach was definitely not benevolent, but he frequently had to resort to such measures.

As for Nicola, she could comprehend the objective of Sieghart’s actions and how he came to think of taking them. In this case alone, she just could not shake the feeling that something was not right.

“This…isn’t like him.” She was sure that, under normal circumstances, Sieghart would have taken the time to analyze his adversary and act more carefully. That was the kind of man he was. Alois seemed to overhear Nicola muttering and reacted by knitting his brow and chuckling wryly.

“You’re right, maybe that wasn’t like Sieg. But I think I know how he felt.”

“Huh?”

Alois made that statement so casually, but Nicola could only blink in surprise.

Alois smiled minutely, his brow still knitted in consternation. “Look, we’ll be graduating in just a few more months. But you’re still only a first-year student. I think he did this because he wanted to resolve this problem before he graduated and got a little hasty.”

So, he prioritized Nicola’s safety above avoiding risks on his own.

You shouldn’t have done that, thought Nicola. Having heard Alois’s opinion, she contorted her face.

But as Nicola had once taken a similar course of action, she could not very well condemn Sieghart without hearing his side of the story. Right now, she felt dismal and frustrated.

“Excuse me…” said Emma timidly to break the silence, having listened silently to the conversation until that point.

Once all eyes focused on her, she hesitantly continued.

“The result of Sieghart answering her call was what we saw in the art room… So, isn’t it possible that the one who called him is the real culprit?”

“That’s right,” Char agreed. “It’s only natural to think that she framed him, right?”

Wearing a bitter expression, Ernst shook his head at this suggestion. “Unfortunately, things aren’t that simple. The one who called His Grace there was with us the whole time up until we discovered the body.”

“Huh…?” Nicola blinked in surprise, not anticipating what she had just heard. She looked at Ernst, almost as if to ask, “What are you talking about?”

Ernst sighed bitterly.

“The one who asked His Grace to meet her was one of the five who made up our search party that arrived at the art room. It was the vice president of the student council. At the very least, she was with His Highness and me since we left the dance hall until we discovered the body.”

Alois nodded with his expression also strained. He still frowned, then turned to Nicola as if to continue Ernst’s story for him.

“We knew beforehand that she had asked Sieg to meet with her. As soon as she spoke to us in the dance hall, we wondered what she was still doing there. I thought we were being suitably cautious, but…”

At the dance, Sieghart had left Nicola, saying, “I’ll be leaving the hall for just a little while… Just to be safe, please find a place where Alois or Ernst can monitor you.” Sieghart had left Nicola behind in the hall with these words. It only made sense to assume that he had already discussed his situation with Alois and Ernst. Nicola quietly lamented that she was the only one who hadn’t known.

“And then what?” Nicola asked, prompting them to continue.

Ernst briefly glanced in Alois’s direction. After he nodded slightly, Alois continued speaking.

“It all started when the student vice president and the exchange students told me that Luca was missing. According to the exchange students, they hadn’t seen him since the ball started. They spoke to me right after I had finished sharing the second dance with Miss Nicola… Which was just under thirty minutes after the start of the event.”

The first dance lasted about twenty minutes, with each piece of music from the second dance onward lasting about five minutes before changing. Shortly after Nicola danced with Alois, she also

danced with Ernst. Since he joined the search for Luca immediately after dancing with Nicola, that meant the search had begun not long after their interactions within said thirty minutes.

Out of the six exchange students who had approached him, Alois had left four in the dance hall to continue searching. He had taken the other two exchange students, the student vice president, and Ernst to conduct their search of the schoolhouse.

“We included the vice president in the search party because we had heard about what happened between her and Sieg. As such, we were on our guard around her. But the even bigger reason was that she carried the schoolhouse keys.”

Only two sets of keys existed in this school—those in the custody of the student council and those in the custody of the teachers.

For this occasion, Sieghart and the student council vice president were entrusted with locking up the school ahead of the dance. He held on to the student council’s set of keys while the vice president carried the teachers’ set.

And so the search party of five slipped out of the dance hall into the entrance hall to the auditorium before exiting into the open breezeway connecting that building to the schoolhouse. As they made their way across that breezeway, they suddenly noticed a light shining in one of the fourth-floor windows at the back of the building.

Perhaps because the light had reflected the color of the wallpaper in that classroom, the bare wood window frame and the snow piled around it appeared faintly green. The group must have immediately concluded that the light was coming from the art room.

After wondering with some suspicion why someone would be in the art room, they began to hear a cacophony of something being smashed upstairs.

It was not just one sound but an intermittent, irregular series of perilous-sounding crashes. As the noise persisted, the group realized something was out of the ordinary, and each student’s countenance changed. Once Ernst snatched the vice president’s keys, he sprinted up the stairs urgently, taking the lead.

When Alois’s group finally arrived at the art room and took their first steps inside, they found Sieghart and the deceased third-born

prince of the neighboring kingdom. The only light source in the room was the candle Sieghart was holding.

Upon the group's discovery of the body, the vice president suggested checking all the windows in the room to make sure they were locked. The party then split into groups to check the locks on each double-glazed window. But it appeared that all the windows had been firmly locked from the inside.

All the windows, including those in the supply room, had their blackout curtains drawn, with only one partially open.

"Though I wonder, did those noises that sounded like a struggle really come from the art room?" asked Emma.

Alois stared into empty space for a while as if lost in thought.

Placing his hand on his chin and inclining his head to one side, he pondered this before opening his mouth to respond.

"Hmmm. In all honesty, the noise had stopped by the time we made it to the door to the art room... But there was no sign of broken glass or porcelain in any other classrooms on that floor. There were even shards of a broken vase stuck to Lucas's clothes. I think the source of the noise probably was the art room."

Nicola reassessed her memory of what she had seen in the art room.

The vases must have been intended as motifs in still-life drawing class. She could remember seeing shards of broken porcelain urns and glass vases scattered all over the floor, with water probably once contained within them, based on the puddle.

Someone may have struck the vases and urns, causing several easels and barely dried paintings on canvas to topple over, where a white outline in the center of the mess was drawn to indicate where the body had been. She vaguely remembered the scattered debris outside that white outline.

Come to think of it... Nicola scowled. *Didn't something seem off as soon as I first saw that terrible crime scene? What was it that bothered me about it?*

She frowned deeply and fell silent. Beside her, Char looked confused but spoke up.

"If the struggle between the victim and the true culprit caused those noises... That means that the victim was still alive at that point, right? The vice president was with you when you heard that noise, so she couldn't have done it, huh? Does that mean she had

an accomplice?”

“But His Grace has attested that he stepped into the art room just as soon as the noise had stopped. In that case, even if she had an accomplice, then they still must have vanished from the room without a trace…” Ernst had a strained expression when he answered Char’s question. He looked to Alois for his opinion, yet his lord and master folded his arms and groaned.

“Yes, that is the problem,” Alois admitted. “The light we noticed in the window was there before the noise even started.”

Even as he hesitated for just a moment, he continued.

“Sieg says that he entered the art room after the noise started… This means the light we saw before the noise was undoubtedly something other than Sieg’s candle. Even if that light belonged to an accomplice, where did that accomplice disappear to…?”

Hearing these words caused Nicola to grit her teeth and avert her eyes. Then she said, “It is far more natural to think that Sieghart was in the art room, and it was the light of his candle that was visible through the window… That’s what people would think.”

Even if the true culprit had an accomplice, the circumstances left one more question unanswered.

In the first place, Sieghart and the vice president were the only two people with keys to the schoolhouse. Assuming that the accomplice had used the vice president’s keys to sneak into the art room, before returning them after the murder, that raised another question.

Ernst had said that, as they finished crossing the breezeway, he snatched the vice president’s keys from her and immediately ran up the stairs to the fourth floor. If that was the case, there had been no opportunity for the accomplice to exchange possession of the keys.

As frustrating as it might be, it was difficult for anyone else to assume that Sieghart was innocent and far easier to imagine that he was the culprit. If one thought that way, the available evidence just fit together.

“Ah, this probably sounds super unoriginal, but… Doesn’t that mean that if Sieghart came to the supply room to meet someone, the door from the room out into the corridor wasn’t locked? Just for the sake of argument, what if when Sieghart went through the interior door into the art room, the accomplice hid behind that

door—” Char began to suggest.

“You’re saying that, while the dead body distracted Sieg in the room, the accomplice left though the supply room? But none other than Sieghart has already refuted that possibility. He says that he checked behind the interior door before doing anything else,” responded Alois, shaking his head.

“Right,” said Ernst, conforming to Alois’s account. “After all, His Grace was there with the forewarning that someone might do him harm. He was likely cautious after hearing noise in the adjacent room, thinking it may have been intentional to draw him out.”

That was absolutely right. An attack from behind would deny Sieghart the chance to sustain a minor injury intentionally. On the contrary, he might have received a mortal wound if he hadn’t been careful. Sieghart was not so stupid as to conduct himself so carelessly.

This time was just an exception. Though he had lost the initiative, his personality meant that he typically took more precautions than anyone else. Nicola thought he would have been especially cautious when traversing an area where he might have a blind spot.

“Well, it must’ve been the vice president who committed the crime, yeah?” said Char.

“Supposing that she killed Lucas before the ball began, while she was still locking up the schoolhouse… I guess that would explain why the door was locked. Since the vice president had the keys, she could have just locked the door after committing the murder,” mused Emma.

“Yeah, you’re right. That girl was the one who called Sieghart to the supply room in the first place, right?” agreed Char.

The two siblings looked at one another, each seeming to accept the other’s line of thinking. Unsurprisingly, Ernst leaned across the table to deliver a rebuttal.

“No, that can’t be the case. When I checked Lucas’s body to confirm he was dead, his body was still warm. He hadn’t yet displayed any signs of rigor mortis or the bruising that appears a few hours after death.”

Ernst shook his head in irritation. His statement carried a certain amount of weight that could only come from direct contact with the body. They could all be certain that Ernst was not lying.

Nicola hesitantly voiced her doubts. “Even so… Can you really say for certain that you discovered the body right after Lucas died?”

After death, the body underwent rigor mortis, and purple spots appeared on the skin. These were indeed the more obvious phenomena that occurred. Nicola could also at least accept the fact that it was possible to estimate the time of death as long as one knew the external temperature.

However, she thought that it might be a little hasty to say with certainty that the body was discovered just after the prince died because its body temperature was still warm. Blood and the other bodily fluids were, after all, fluids. Given that blood is a liquid, one could not expect it to lose its heat in an instant. Rather, the temperature would surely decrease gradually.

Besides, each person’s average body temperature might differ from that of other people. One couldn’t imagine that Ernst already knew this about the victim. Even if the body still seemed warm to the touch when they found it, they could not easily claim that somebody had recently killed the prince.

“Y’know, I think I once saw something like this in a detective drama,” started Char. Everyone besides Nicola looked puzzled by the words “detective drama,” but Char paid them no mind. “We can determine the approximate time of death using a rectal thermometer… On average, the core temperature should drop by about one degree every hour. I thought that was surprisingly slow, so I remembered it.”

But with the body’s external temperature, that would likely decrease a little bit more quickly. Even so, the art room had double-glazed windows to keep out the cold, meaning it must have been warmer than most rooms in the school.

At this point, Nicola glanced at Ernst as if to ask, *How about that?*

Reluctantly, Ernst admitted, “Indeed, anything between thirty minutes and an hour after death is probably within the margin of error…”

Emma spoke up with an air of reservation, “So, just how did the vice president spend her time in the dance hall before she spoke to His Highness and Ern? I wonder…”

“I’ve heard that her fiancé already graduated, but… That fiancé

passed away in an accident about a month ago. She said she couldn't bring herself to dance with anyone during the first dance. In the second dance, she apparently danced for just one song, but right after that, it looks like she met up with the exchange students," said Alois. He added that he confirmed this information with the vice president's partner for the second dance.

Having said that much, Alois shrugged.

I see, thought Nicola, nodding along. Then, she recalled the state of the sidelines during the first dance.

The first half had been a veritable bloodbath in competition over the most eligible students. In the second half, the less desirable students had darted left and right to find someone to avoid remaining wallflowers. Nicola was sure hardly any students felt safe enough to pay attention to others leisurely.

"In other words, this girl, the vice president's alibi... At least for the duration of the first dance, it's pretty vague. Is that what you're saying?" murmured Nicola, seeking confirmation. Suddenly, all eyes in the room fixated on her. "What if she committed the murder during the twenty minutes of the first dance, then returned to the hall in time for the second...?"

Nicola leaned expectantly across the table.

Either way, the search for Lucas had only included Alois and Ernst when thirty minutes had already elapsed since the beginning of the ball. If one headed straight out of the hall into the connecting breezeway and ran up the stairs to the fourth floor at full speed, one could have arrived at the art room in about five minutes.

That meant that when Alois's party discovered the body, somewhere between thirty-five minutes and forty minutes had elapsed since the start of the ball. Any changes in the body's temperature, discovered approximately thirty minutes after death, would have to fall within the margin of error.

However, Alois quietly shook his head as if he had tasted something very bitter and spoke up.

"Just for the sake of argument, let us assume that the vice president did kill Lucas during the first dance. What were the sounds we heard? Vases were getting smashed, almost like Lucas had struggled with someone. What about the light we witnessed shining through the art room window?"

“Ah…” gasped Nicola.

“Unless you can explain that, we won’t have a convincing case for Sieg’s innocence…”

Nicola fell silent. Alois was absolutely right. She could not raise a single word in protest, so his argument was sound.

When Emma saw Nicola nod, she suggested, “Well then, could the noise and the light have been some kind of trick…? The vice president said to check the windows, right? Maybe she threw something out the window…”

With some effort, Ernst shook his head again.

“I will admit that Prince Lucas’s death quite shook His Highness and me. Though I can’t say for sure that we never took our eyes off the vice president, even for a moment… But there was a blizzard starting to blow. We would have heard some noise if she had opened the window to throw something outside.”

This was also an extremely good point. Alois also shook his head as if synchronized with Ernst.

When their discussion reached a lull, the hands turning on the clock in the room sounded louder than usual, emphasizing the silence between them even more boldly.

Despite their collective awareness that they needed to take action, their minds spun ineffectually. They found themselves unable to take any action, with their anxiety only growing, consuming more and more time as they sat idle.

The group felt as if only the silence and their sense of claustrophobia would continue to pile up without end.

2

Tick, tock. Between the sounds of the pendulum in the old-fashioned clock swinging back and forth, there was only the sound of the logs in the fireplace crackling.

Before they knew it, the clock had already struck 10 p.m. Even if the teachers continued to conceal current events from the general student population, it was nearly time for the annual ball to come to a close.

The other students had probably already returned to their respective dormitories. With another *tick* as the hands on the clock moved forward again, everyone in the room was keenly aware of

the finiteness of time. Nicola bit her lip slightly.

“Erm… How do you think they will treat Sieghart?” she asked.

Nicola could not help not wonder how he would be dealt with, now that he was considered the prime suspect in a murder. As she clenched her fists tightly, she directed this question at Alois with some hesitation to break the silence in the room.

Alois furrowed his brow, then frowned slightly. “They’re confining him to a locked room on the school grounds. Sieg has no intention of resisting or running away, and there’s also a blizzard outside… But they have decided to transfer him to the palace early in the morning.”

Having failed to force a positive expression, Alois averted his eyes from Nicola before continuing.

“I’m sorry, but even I don’t know what’ll happen after that. What happens next goes beyond our kingdom’s discretion.”

Ernst stood up and walked to the fireplace to set another log on the fire. With a hiss, embers burst and floated into the air, making the space brighter momentarily.

At that moment, Alois said, “Honestly, I don’t want to have to say this, but…”

He paused and dropped his gaze to his fingertips as he loosely entwined his fingers upon the table.

According to Alois, Lucas was the son of a dancer, one of the king’s many concubines. He received almost no backing within the kingdom. Despite the lack of backing, he was a boy born fairly early among his siblings. The truth was that Lucas’s birth kingdom had no idea what to do with him.

“Our two kingdoms were in a constant state of war until just a few generations ago. If Lucas had truly been considered an important individual within his own kingdom…they wouldn’t have let him leave for such a long time.”

Had one looked for a spare for the first-born prince, the second-born prince would suffice. The circumstances of Lucas’s birth made him both redundant and difficult to disregard entirely. Simultaneously, he had almost no backing as an heir. Nicola could sort of understand that someone in that position might have been considered a nuisance.

Alois looked grave, yet he continued, “Fortunately, a new war will not begin just because one of our kingdom’s subjects killed

Lucas. From the neighboring kingdom's point of view, they have been made to lose face... I think, for the sake of appearances, they will seek the death penalty for the culprit."

"I-Is that so..." said Nicola before finding she struggled to breathe.

She did not completely lose her composure because Char and Emma had already informed her of that possibility. And so she choked down her agitation, clenching her fists tightly again.

Once the group reviewed all the circumstantial evidence, the student council vice president appeared to be the most suspicious person. But they had no material to denounce her as the true culprit. Obviously, they still had no means of achieving a breakthrough under the current circumstances.

The flames in the fireplace continued to crackle as they wavered. An oppressive silence and a feeling of claustrophobia continued to fill the space between the five friends, such that they begrudged the occasional *pop* the fire made.

Outside the window, a blizzard continued to blow violently. Within the room's stifling atmosphere, Char finally muttered something after breathing out slowly.

"Y'know, we assume the vice president lady is the real killer. Just for the sake of argument, I can see that she might've killed someone for rejecting her... But normally, would anyone ever even think of killing an unrelated third party just to frame someone who rejected them?"

Char had just asked an excellent question and looked sideways at Nicola for support, but she just shook her head.

"Your opinion is completely reasonable. Though it pains me to say this, such a generalization won't work with people who have rejected common sense. People with antisocial personalities exist in this world at a set rate in the population."

A lack of decent remorse or empathy characterized such antisocial personalities. Those people would take any means necessary to achieve their objectives, with all the mercilessness that rationality provides.

In their pursuit of personal gain, an inflated sense of self worth and a belief that results outweighed everything else.

These people felt no guilt when they deceived others and could tell lies without a care in the world. Moreover, they were

knowledgeable and cunning, possessing a complicated personality that also includes a tendency toward aggression and impulsiveness. Research had shown that such people existed in all societies at a rate of between one and five percent of the population. Though, one could stress that not all people with this personality type engaged in criminal behavior.

Because of how close she was to Sieghart, Nicola had had several opportunities to see how stalkers behaved. Of course, she did not have direct contact with any of them, but she had several opportunities to observe them from a distance.

This was why Nicola had arrived at this line of thinking. There were some people who would turn to violence after initially stalking someone; the same could be said for some other people with personality disorders. And very rarely, these two groups might overlap.

"If that's not the case, things wouldn't have ended up like that," said Nicola.

"Now that you mention it... Yeah, I guess not?" replied Char.

Having correctly inferred the intention behind Nicola's words, he shrugged lightly and casually indicated his assent.

When Alois and Emma saw this discussion between Nicola and Char, they exchanged glances and a wry chuckle. Only Ernst could not comprehend this development in the talk. He looked at each of the other four in turn, bewildered.

The flames in the fireplace crackled again as silence descended once more.

Once Ernst finished staring, he finally seemed to have exhausted his patience. He said, "You know, it's been bothering me from the beginning that no one has mentioned *another* possibility."

He paused, clamming up as if unsure what to say. While he hesitated, he showed a conflicted expression and spoke up.

"That is to say... This may sound surprising coming from me, but suppose the vice president has psychic powers, like you two. She might have manipulated some monster that can pass through walls to commit the murder. Is that a possibility?" With a look that could not be more bitter, Ernst spat these words almost indistinctly.

One could tell from his expression that he would never wish to

lend recognition to the occult. Given that no one else had brought it up, he felt he had no choice but to raise the question—something like that.

When Nicola first met him, Ernst said things like “That’s awfully suspicious” and “I will never believe in anything I can’t see with my own eyes.” He missed no opportunity to snap at her. It turned out that people could change.

As Alois turned to Ernst, he looked as if he had just seen a cat barking, his mouth hanging open in shock.

“I never thought I’d see the day when Ern would say something like that, all on his own…” murmured Alois. “I am deeply moved, but putting that aside…”

Alois turned his eyes away from Ernst, looking at Nicola and Char before inclining his head to one side. “I’d like to check with you two, just to be sure. Is there any possibility that, as Ern suggests, she might have set some monster on the prince that normal people can’t even perceive?”

“No chance,” said Char.

“I don’t think there is,” said Nicola.

Nicola and Char firmly refuted the suggestion, without even needing to turn to each other for confirmation.

Sitting beside Char, Emma said, “I didn’t think so.”

All three of them nodded heavily among themselves.

Even Alois chuckled and said “Guess not, huh?”

Watching the other four, Ernst alone had an increasingly bewildered expression.

He must have wondered how they could be so sure and how everyone besides him had arrived at the same opinion. Nicola was sure that he must have had trouble understanding it. Seeing how puzzled Ernst seemed, Nicola felt she had no choice but to say something.

“Ernst, can you tell us what color hair the vice president has and what color dress she was wearing today?”

“What color, you ask? Surely, her hair is dark brown, and she wore a crimson dress. You must have seen her yourself. Why would you ask something like that?”

Though Ernst scowled again incomprehensibly, Nicola could only shake her head slowly. Finally, with all eyes focused on Ernst again, Nicola spoke to him gently.

“Out of everyone in this room right now, you, Ernst… You are probably the only one who could correctly identify her appearance or her attire.”

“Wha…?” Ernst could only respond to Nicola’s assertion with an idiotic grunt. He blinked at her several times as if he wanted to ask what on earth she was talking about. Nicola could not help but chuckle at his reaction.

Ernst immediately looked at everyone around him, then saw Alois, Emma, and Char with the same witty expressions as they nodded in unison. No one there sought to correct Nicola.

“The first time I saw her…I honestly couldn’t even tell whether she was a boy or a girl,” admitted Nicola.

About one month earlier, Alois had told Nicola that the vice president might be Olivia’s successor. Back then, Nicola muttered in response, “Wait, you said *she’s* been working with him?” That was what she had meant.

“Even Emma could only see a pure black figure from head to toe,” said Emma.

“With your eyesight, that’s to be expected, sis,” said Char. “Strictly speaking, she looks like she’s inside a spinning washing machine or maybe a pitch-black tornado. There’s no way we could tell what the person inside looks like.”

Seizing upon Emma’s words, Char turned to Nicola and shrugged.

“Seriously, how many spirits and grudges, big and small, do you have to gather to end up like that…?” he muttered.

Nicola nodded in agreement.

Even if the spirit of the slain prince of the neighboring kingdom remained earthbound and haunted the vice president, he would be tangled up in that vortex, soon becoming a part of it.

“Thoughts of resentment, feelings of rage… Such things have become tangled layer after layer, forming a roaring vortex with that girl at its center. There is simply no way we could see what she looks like,” said Nicola.

The mere mention of the vice president’s haunting did not adequately capture the depth of her sinister appearance. Nicola thought that her bad karma exceeded what a human could reasonably bear. She’d heard that the vice president’s fiancé had only passed away in an accident, but the girl’s bad karma was so

incredibly aberrant that one had to question whether it had been an accident. The vice president was most definitely guilty of other sins.

"Well, that's about the shape of it," said Alois. "If she happened to be one of those people able to perceive such things, she would see nothing but pitch-black in all directions and could probably not even properly see what was right in front of her. If I were in the middle of that, I wouldn't be able to lead a normal life… I think it would probably be difficult for me to even walk alone."

Alois quickly glanced at Ernst, then shrugged his shoulders as he grinned.

"So you see, it's impossible for her to be someone who can see things from the other side or for her to have manipulated such a monster into killing the prince. Isn't that right?"

Nicola and Char both nodded in response to Alois's question.

At first, Nicola and Char suspected an apparition had committed the murder. But that prediction came from the notion that the apparition had acted with free will. They knew that there was no chance that the vice president had command of something she could not see. The theory that she had commanded an apparition was impossible based on all their assumptions, so they had eliminated the possibility at the very outset.

"Um, I'm only asking this out of curiosity, but… Now that she's in that condition, what will happen to her next? Will she be able to go on living normally?"

After Emma timidly raised this question, Nicola and Char shared a glance.

"Well…" said Nicola. "I think that's probably impossible. She's already at the point where it wouldn't be strange if the spirits killed her any day now."

The vice president had become so haunted that she might appear dead from a sudden, mysterious myocardial infarction one day soon. Whether she was aware of it, her bad karma would inevitably eat away at her.

With her eyes downcast, Nicola muttered, "If someone like that came to me as a client… Speaking for myself, I would jack up my fee by three digits at the very least." Her mind wandered. *Don't call me greedy. What goes around, comes around.*

The world could only keep on turning as long as cause and

effect remained balanced. To throw a spanner into the works of karmic justice, anyone who might try to help someone in such a bind had to make some hefty demands. Nicola could not face divine punishment even if she bled such a client dry.

As for Char, he seemed to have an objection. He propped his chin with one elbow on the table, smirking, then stated, “Really, you’re so naive. You’re always a soft touch with cases like this. If someone like that came to me, I wouldn’t even hear what they had to say. I’d turn them away at the door and say, ‘Yeah, yeah, see ya, better luck next life.’ Perhaps I’d tell them to give up on surviving this time around and at least try to live a better life next time. And I might offer to sit at the negotiating table with them after they’re dead.”

Well, thought Nicola. *It’s not like I don’t understand what he’s saying. In the first place, I’d prefer not to deal with someone in that condition either.*

From the perspective of someone who could not even perceive her condition, like Ernst, the vice president would look like any other person. Having thought that far, Nicola sighed as she finally realized something, “Ah…”

Had Sieghart seen the vice president’s condition, he would have been more cautious when dealing with her. But Nicola was quite certain Sieghart could not see her condition. That was entirely different for Nicola and Char, who had been able to see so well ever since they were born. Even Emma, who had developed her sixth sense to compensate for her severely impaired eyesight, was different.

Each member of their group had developed the ability to *see* through a different series of events. Sieghart had come to see through his own unique set of experiences.

From a very young age, Sieghart had attracted the attention of an immense number of supernatural beings. Later, his instinct for self-preservation enabled him to recognize those beings from beyond the human realm. Given that his abilities had such an origin, when such beings did not mean to harm him, there was no need for him to perceive them clearly.

In other words, harmless supernatural beings would not be visible from Sieghart’s perspective. He had met a person who was well and truly in turmoil. That inky black vortex of enmity

surrounding the vice president had directed its hostility entirely at her.

The vectors of its hostility and its malice all pointed inward. Sieghart likely noticed nothing but a normal female student when he saw her. Nicola thought that if only she had warned Sieghart to be more cautious around the vice president, he would likely have conducted himself with even more care than usual.

Most of the time, Nicola and Sieghart shared much the same worldview. Since they often saw things similarly, she had an unfortunate habit of overlooking the subtle discrepancies.

On this occasion, as well, Nicola had thought that one only needed to look at the vice president to know she was bad news. She believed she did not need to warn Sieghart, though.

During their conversations they gradually became aware that they were beginning to talk past one another and that their accounts contained inconsistencies. Even if Nicola forgot about the discrepancy between their sixth senses, they could also correct this by talking.

Sieghart had taken precautions against his stalker, so Nicola had fewer opportunities to meet with him. He had also almost certainly harbored some conceit because of how used he was to dealing with such people.

While it might sound horrible for someone to be used to stalkers, the vice president's normal look made Sieghart misjudge her for the usual kind of stalker.

That was why Sieghart had brushed it off, saying that it always happened. He even mused that the usual countermeasures would suffice. That was what he had thought.

The rash strategy Sieghart took of losing a battle to win the war had produced consistent results. Hence, he assumed that using the same approach this time there would be no problem.

Sieghart may have let his guard down, safe in the knowledge that he could see any supernatural beings that meant him harm. Many exceptional elements had all converged, resulting in the situation they now found themselves in.

Though Nicola could hardly praise Sieghart for developing a sense of conceit through his acclimation to being stalked, she could not blame Sieghart for not seeing the vortex of enmity that surrounded the vice president. She could understand why he had

concluded he was dealing with a garden variety, given that he could not see any evidence to the contrary. Without being informed before this encounter, he could hardly have been expected to suspect that something far more sinister lay beneath the surface.

Rather, Nicola had really dropped the ball because she had instantly seen that the vice president was dangerous. But she had not even considered that her childhood friend might not have been able to see the same thing. She could not help thinking that they would have had a chance of avoiding this misfortune if she had warned Sieghart about the vice president. Her feelings of regret were unending.

“I might as well ask, what if the prince of the neighboring kingdom killed himself in the art room? Is there any way of framing it like that?” suggested Emma, apparently unable to bear the silence any longer. “In that case, then there would no longer be any culprit to find, right?”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right!” exclaimed Ernst as he rose.

Char agreed, “Well, the main merit of a closed-room murder is making it look like a suicide, so I guess there’s a chance?”

Indeed, no one had to be punished if a culprit did not exist at the time. But Alexis shook his head dejectedly, with a glum expression.

“I thought of that too, and I suggested it to Sieg when I visited him after his confinement. He denied that possibility… The door to the art room appeared to be locked, and there was no clear motive for Lucas to commit suicide. Without an explanation for how he could have sneaked into the art room without the keys held by Sieg and the vice president, we cannot overturn the theory that this was a homicide. Even if Sieg said this, he’s right…”

Alois buried his face in his hands before slumping over the mahogany table in front of him. Then, he let out a long sigh as if squeezing all of the air out of his lungs.

“The person we’ve always counted on most at times like these is the one person who isn’t here. I give up…” Sounding like he was at his wit’s end, Alois said no more. Their discussion once again stagnated, silence descending once more.

The candles they had carried there and set down on the table grew steadily shorter with the passage of time. Their discussion

remained firmly on the rocks. Everyone had surely exhausted most of their potential ideas by now. From that point on, nothing else new emerged.

With a feeling of claustrophobia ruling over the five, there was no further movement until just before the hour hand of the clock turned to display 11 p.m.

Ernst rose from his seat and stated, “I must go now and replace the personnel assigned to keep watch on the room His Grace is being confined to.”

The academy still hid the incident from the general student population and most teachers.

For that reason, Ernst, the exchange students, the ones who discovered the body, and some teachers were selected to watch over Sieghart during his confinement.

Ernst remained standing as he looked down at Nicola, asking, “Are you coming with me?”

As Nicola displayed her confusion at having been asked this, Ernst looked away, appearing slightly uncomfortable.

“For as long as I am assigned to guard His Grace, I can allow you to speak with him through the door,” said Ernst in a subdued, wooden tone. Yet he made Nicola a clear proposition.

Seeing Nicola blink in surprise, Alois said, “Go and see him, Miss Nicola.” He then pushed her from behind.

Nicola bit her lip tightly, but she eventually gave Ernst a slight nod.

◆◆◆

Elma’s face was very pale.
As she trembled, scared of something.
Tremble she did, tremble tremble.
After a while, she stopped moving altogether.
It looked like she wasn’t scared anymore.
I’m glad.
I’m glad.

Good night.

Chapter 5: The Melting of a Raison d’Être

1

A drawing room meant for receiving guests had become Sieghart’s temporary confinement near the back of the first floor of the schoolhouse.

The authorities had probably decided that they could not allow a person currently being investigated for murder to be confined to a room in a dormitory where other students slept.

Ernst exchanged a few words with the teacher who had taken a position in front of the door to stand guard over the drawing room. After waiting for the teacher to leave, he called Nicola over from her hiding place in the shadows.

When he quietly knocked on the door in front of them, he said, “Your Grace, can you hear me? It’s Ernst. I have come to relieve your previous guard. Although this is a personal matter, I must admit that I am extremely sleepy. I might doze off during my watch, regardless of whether I want to or not. As long as I am asleep, I won’t overhear anything. Ah, I’m so sleepy. I might fall asleep at any minute.”

Having said this, Ernst sat down with his legs crossed in the corridor a brief distance from the door before leaning back against the wall and closing his eyes. Even though his performance had been so wooden that one could make a chair out of it, Nicola was still grateful for his consideration.

Once they approached the door, Nicola saw they were double doors with two knobs tied together very firmly with rope. But when she really thought about it, this was completely natural.

A room with a lock usually had components that allowed it to be unlocked from the inside or the outside. More primitive methods were used to secure someone confined to a room from the outside.

Looking at how complicated the knot was, Nicola imagined that, if one untied it, it would take a lot of effort to put it back how it was.

“Wow, is it my time to shine?” Gemini seemed to say as it suddenly emerged in the shape of a key. Seemingly disappointed after a brief moment, it abandoned this form and reappeared as a black cat for some reason.

When Nicola picked it up, she found that the texture of its fur and the warmth of its body was exactly like that of a real cat. It must have been concerned for its master and hoping to lend her some warmth. Gemini nuzzled up closer to Nicola to warm her all the better.

Holding Gemini in her arms, Nicola called out through the door.

“Are… Are you in there?”

She heard a *whoosh* as the air was disturbed inside the room. Sieghart must have been startled to find that Nicola was there.

Finally, an answer came back almost as a whisper. Nicola turned to lean back against the door, before sliding down it to sink on to the floor.

She could not help feeling like she was hearing Sieghart’s voice for the first time in quite a while.

“Now, what did you think you were doing…? Really, this isn’t like you.”

Sitting on the floor, Nicola hugged her knees along with Gemini. Through the door, she could hear a wry chuckle.

“Yeah, it was careless of me. I’m honestly surprised at myself.”

Nicola could just barely hear Sieghart’s faint, self-deprecating laugh through the door. But she knew that she had been careless, so she did not say anything further on the matter.

Sieghart might have preferred to harm himself. He had answered the vice president’s invitation to meet her alone by deliberately presenting her with an opening and prompting her to attack him.

Rather than remain constantly vigilant about the possibility of a surprise attack, he thought it would be better to allow her to attack him head-on. Nicola could understand that.

On the other hand, Sieghart had likely been vigilant about the possibility of Nicola coming to harm. That was why he had staunchly refused to be seen with her in public and likely factored that Nicola would come to the ball with enough makeup on to look like a different person.

In reality, Nicola had made the most out of her natural bone structure and exaggerated her makeup. While she danced with Sieghart, it was not as if she had introduced herself before doing so. She had been confident that she could avoid identification after returning to her daily life without makeup.

Sieghart had taken care to prevent either his fiancée or himself coming to harm. If he had been dealing with an everyday stalker, that probably would have been enough.

However, his adversary on this occasion had not been a mere stalker but someone far more dangerous than that. Sieghart had made a mistake, and in combination with Nicola's lack of communication, this had resulted in things taking a turn for the worse.

"Haste makes waste, huh?"

Thud. The door behind Nicola shook slightly.

Judging from the nearby sound of fabric rustling against it, she imagined that Sieghart must also be sitting with his back against the door. Nicola kept quiet and listened for the voice that would come from a point slightly above where her head was resting.

"The student council vice president is a second-year, whereas you're still only a first-year. Despite that, I'll graduate and leave you behind in a few months, Nicola. That's probably why I felt I had to end this while attending this academy. I unconsciously started to act hastier than usual. When my opponent seemed to present me with an opportunity to dispense with her, I thought, 'This is perfect.' I almost felt relieved."

Sieghart's voice was soft, and the words flowed from his lips effortlessly. Occasionally, there was a hint of a wry chuckle behind them.

As far as Nicola was concerned, being used to dealing with stalkers was still a horrible state of affairs. Sieghart's rashness resulted from the previous success of the countermeasures he had employed up to this point. Ultimately, his lack of preparedness landed at the worst possible time.

He probably felt more aggrieved by this fact than anyone else. Indeed, Nicola could tell as much from his tone of voice.

Nicola hugged Gemini closer, burying the tip of her nose in its black fur.

The words Nicola's lips reserved were not even meant

resentfully but rather constituted her usual banter. Perhaps she knew they were on thin ice and wanted to make a vain attempt to preserve the everyday life they had shared until now.

“You know… If you just have to be the best at academics, martial arts, and other things, you will attract all sorts of people.”

“Yep. That may well be right.”

If Sieghart had only been a fool who just happened to be good-looking or a total klutz in sports, he might have attracted slightly less affection. Because he had so rashly mastered every activity beyond average, he drew the attention of some strange characters.

Still, he had responded to the words Nicola had muttered the moment after they suddenly occurred to her. It was as if he had an answer for everything.

Knowing full well that her childhood friend had only trained himself to be such a capable man to protect her from more temporal threats, Nicola grimaced in sorrow.

She also knew that, once Sieghart had matured to a certain point, his supreme eligibility as a gentleman had allowed him to portray someone who was flawless, and so far out of anyone’s league that they would be better off just watching him from a distance.

But Nicola was quite sure that she remembered that he had only taken on that act for her sake.

“I only went through all that effort to feel worthy of standing next to you, Nicola. If I could live my entire life over again, I would probably do the same thing.”

Sieghart spoke of that “if” with his usual calm tone. Unfortunately, Nicola had known him for ten years. Just from his choice of words, Nicola could tell that, deep down, he could face the worst.

Nicola, who had no abilities besides the power to exorcise spirits, knew nothing of politics or diplomacy. But her childhood friend must have some idea of how plausible the prospect of his execution was.

“Say, Nicola.”

“No, I won’t listen. Please don’t say any more ominous ‘ifs,’” she cut Sieghart off before he could continue, her lips trembling. She had accurately predicted what he would say.

Still chuckling, Sieghart said, “Sorry. But this might be our last chance to talk to each other.”

He did not humor Nicola’s insistence that he stop. Even though he knew how much Nicola did not want to hear what was coming, he defied her wishes. Since they first met, it was the first time he had ever done so.

“Nicola, I want you to be happy. In my heart of hearts I want to be the one to make you happy. But, if that wish should not be granted, I don’t want you to feel bound to me or burdened. So, Nicola. If that time should come…”

Will you tell me to forget all about you, to find happiness with someone else? There’s no way I could stand to hear you say that. “I just told you not to say it, didn’t I?! Don’t you dare tell me to give up on my future with you after waxing lyrical about your future with me…!” A violent wave of emotion that could not be described simply as anger or sorrow overcame Nicola. Before she knew it, she raised her voice.



Her voice was so shrill it was undignified, and her lips trembled. She felt dizzy, frantically breathing as she found that she could not get enough oxygen no matter how deeply she inhaled.

Faced with the full extent of her vulnerability, she found herself in total emotional disarray.

There was only one door between them. Even so, Nicola felt like Sieghart was very far away. She struggled to breathe as she imagined they were already in separate worlds.

Within her, she imagined a deep, impassable river between them. Alternatively, it was as if they were two of the many stars scattered across the universe. Even though two stars may appear close together in the sky, they were light years apart. Unless one were to warp the space between them, they would never meet for all eternity. Nicola was terrified by the thought of that insurmountable distance.

“Don’t leave me…” Her voice was so feeble that it sounded like the whine of a mosquito that had somehow accidentally survived until winter. She expressed a feeling far more twisted, far less pretty than love or affection.

What followed was laughter that scratched the back of her throat as it dragged those emotions out of her.

Ah, really? Is that how it is? thought Nicola, having an epiphany. Now that her feelings had surfaced, she finally realized why her emotional state had been so unnatural, so unstable for the past few hours. *How stupid I’ve been. How foolish.*

With a masochistic sneer, Nicola let out another desiccated laugh.

“Was I the one who was dependent on him this whole time…?”

Now that she said it out loud, it seemed apparent.

2

As far as Nicola was concerned, her past life as Rikka did need not be described as especially absurd. Despite her family’s lack of good luck, she did not feel particularly inclined to resent her parents. Nicola had been the one who must have seemed strange and could not blame them. She was all too aware that she was a creepy kid.

Overall, she had displayed the habit of glancing fearfully in all

directions, always on her guard, and jumping at the slightest sound.

It was understandable that the other adults around her had suspected her parents of abuse. Faced with those unfounded suspicions for so many years, her parents must have experienced their own share of suffering. Rikka could not blame her parents for their lack of love and interest in her either.

After Rikka met her mentor and junior apprentice, who shared her perception of the world, she was at least no longer alone. They understood one another, even if she had not felt very close to them. Meeting people she could call her kin had been a definite stroke of good luck.

When she was still inexperienced as an exorcist, she stopped attending school. However, she regretted this choice when she considered how painful it had been to conceal her true nature.

Though her small world had comprised only her kin and clients, Rikka had been more satisfied with this life than she might have expected. But it did not last.

No sooner had someone suddenly killed her had she found herself hurled into another world with an entirely different language and culture. She then had to lead a second life. This life, in which she could immediately exorcise anything that threatened her rather than crying in terror, was much easier than her previous one.

If she simply exorcised spirits well in advance, she could pretend to be a normal child the rest of the time. She believed she had built quite a favorable relationship with her parents in this life. But she knew there was another side to this story.

Nicola could not defy feeling a certain amount of guilt at having stolen the place of the *genuinely* normal child who should have been born to her parents. Therefore, she could not shake the reservation and alienation deep inside her heart.

Moreover, the deviation between her mind and body had likely been a source of immense stress.

Regardless of how much she struggled, the emotions and intellect she carried over from her previous life would not fit into the body of a small child. The stress she felt from being unable to properly express her thoughts through action was a stress she knew she could never convey. Because Nicola could not vent these

depressing feelings, they continued to build up like so much sediment.

In this new world, Nicola had no kin or anyone to turn to. Without even knowing why she had been born again, she carried the burden of a soul her body could not accommodate. Nicola had only the vaguest sense of being alive, of having anything to live for. She could find no reason to take an active role in this life, nor could she find a reason to seek her death actively.

At that most unstable period in her life, who should she meet but Sieghart? The young boy had a propensity to attract all manner of beings, including living and dead, animal spirits, gods and fairies, and monstrous apparitions.

When faced with this unfortunate boy, Nicola thought, *Ah, well. Guess I can go on living, in order to protect this child.*

She had unearthed a *raison d'être*: watching this small child who looked as if he might cross over to the other side the moment she took her eyes off of him. *Only I can protect him*, she had thought. Unconsciously, she made this her excuse to settle in this world.

Though the kin she had found in her past life had been important to her, she knew they could live even without her protection. As for her clients, she only protected them to a degree proportional to the payment she received. They never could have provided her with a reason to live.

For Nicola, this was the first time someone had ever needed her, in this life or the previous one. She realized that she must have wallowed in the feeling of being needed.

This commitment was also why she had been so willing to choose to throw her life away, without hesitation, in any situation where Sieghart's life hung in the balance. That was another reason she had lost her composure at the possibility of Sieghart being killed in such an unsightly way.

Nicola had determined that her entire life must revolve around protecting Sieghart. From an objective point of view, she realized the danger this posed to her state of mind. Despite the tightness in her throat, Nicola could only laugh at herself. When the young Sieghart had realized the same thing, he must have been horrified.

Someone with a tenuous attachment to life had decided that her whole life would now revolve around protecting him.

Moreover, she herself was completely unaware of this fact.

From where Sieghart stood, it must have been hard to watch Nicola make such a difficult choice. He must have been desperate in his search for a way to restrain her from throwing her life away.

In that case, he likely knew this and believed Nicola would return to her old way of life. She would have no reason to take an active role in life or actively seek her death. One could only characterize her as a passive individual. Indeed, one might even say that she had found a reason to die.

“Hadn’t you considered that, if you ever left this world, I might follow you…?” declared Nicola. *Am I a psycho lover now?* She could not help but think this as she let such a cringeworthy ultimatum slip. But with a brisk but gentle chuckle, Sieghart shrugged this off.

“True. I might have considered that chance a little while ago. But you have other people close to you now. I know you wouldn’t throw your life away as long as you have someone to protect. The bounds of your inner circle have already expanded, so it’ll be all right.”

Once Nicola heard how clearly Sieghart saw through her, she clenched her back teeth in frustration.

Yeah, that’s certainly true, she mused. *If Alois or Ernst ever found themselves in trouble, though I might say one thing, I would definitely lend them a hand. We have that much of a connection by now.*

She wondered if Sieghart had encouraged Nicola to interact with other people, almost by force, to give her new connections to convince her to continue living.

I see. It’s all just as Sieghart planned.

Nevertheless, Sieghart could have made Nicola dependent on him forever if he had been so fond of her. That he had not done so was an expression of his sincerity and cruelty. He really was a wicked man.

“I thought I told you, you wouldn’t be allowed to return me…”

“As long as I’m alive, right… But that promise will expire if I pass on ahead of you.” Hidden deep in Sieghart’s voice was the slightest hint that he was starting to feel troubled.

Even though Nicola had become used to his voice, it now made her uncontrollably conflicted. She did not wish to hear anything further, but her childhood friend, almost callously, continued his

speech regardless.

“Wishing for someone to find happiness, and to go on living happily, I think that’s love. But wanting to be the one to make someone happy, I think that’s just ego.”

“Whether it’s ego…!” The words Nicola had attempted to string together stuck in her throat, ending with a mere exhalation. *Whether wishing to make someone else happy is just ego, that’s for the recipient to decide*. Yet she wondered how much she had managed to respond to Sieghart’s feelings.

Being showered with affection was the same thing as having one’s existence affirmed. If it came from someone one had feelings for, that effect was all the stronger.

Even the sweet nothings Sieghart whispered to her, which had left her embarrassed and flustered in the past, were now a source of comfort and delight for Nicola.

But she wondered how far she had managed to put that into words. Had she not always lied, responding to such questions as “Don’t you hate it when I do that?” with such charmless words as “You must know I don’t *hate* it.”

Not only did she not hate it, she actually liked it. Nicola wondered if she had ever told him that, even once. She even considered if she had been too complacent, confident that Sieghart could more or less manage to read between the lines. The more Nicola questioned herself, the more her regret deepened, seemingly without end. She felt hopeless.

“Ah, I really…” stammered Nicola. *I really can’t save him*. She let out something resembling a groan as she tore at her hair.

Sieghart’s occasional negative question to Nicola, “Don’t you hate it…?” may have stemmed from his reluctance to impose his emotions on her. Having been the object of unwanted affection many times, he must unconsciously have feared doing the same thing to Nicola.

Her childhood friend had had quite the warped upbringing himself. Realizing this, Nicola let slip the slightest of chuckles before speaking softly to Sieghart once more.

“The truth is…I think I have a lot of things I need to say to you.”

No matter how long they had known each other or how close they might have become, they were still separate people. Without words, people cannot connect. If one did not say the things that

mattered most, they might remain uncommunicated.

Even so, Nicola should never tell Sieghart what she wished to express in such a manner.

“Please give me the chance to say those things face-to-face, not through a door… I absolutely refuse to go through with a double suicide while I still have these regrets,” she stated. *Do you really expect me to find happiness with someone else?* Nicola tossed her words at Sieghart with that clear intent behind them. She knew there was no way her childhood friend would not pick up on that intent.

She paused.

“If you want to hear what I have to say, if you don’t want me to end up a spinster for life… Don’t just prepare for the worst possible ‘if.’ Please, lend me your wisdom.” Nicola was uncertain about the likelihood of Sieghart’s execution in the future.

Sieghart, who must have known more about politics and diplomacy than Nicola, could estimate that probability more precisely. Still, that hardly mattered to Nicola. She did not even want to think about a future without that man by her side. There was no need to consider it.

So it really was meaningless to ponder “what if?”

“Really… I can’t compete with you, Nicola.” After a brief silence, these words finally emerged, mixed with a sigh and a sharp chuckle.

Though she still sat beside a closed door, Nicola could picture her childhood friend’s expression down to the slightest detail. The same thing must have been true on the other side of the door. Perhaps it was not entirely a bad thing to spend time in such close proximity that they could read each other’s faces without even looking.

“Well then, Nicola. Maybe you can tell me what conclusions you and the others have reached?”

When she heard the faintest sound of fabric rustling, she knew that her childhood friend had straightened his posture. Clutching Gemini close to her chest in place of a hot water bottle, Nicola explained what had transpired step-by-step.

3

“Given that you and the vice president had the only two sets of keys in the school, we think it’s likely that the vice president is the true culprit. As a matter of fact, she was also the one who asked you to meet in the art room’s supply closet in the first place… Her alibi is fuzzy the first dance, a span of twenty minutes. And that falls within the margin of error for the estimated time of death.”

One could not definitively state that a corpse was freshly dead just because it was still warm at the time of discovery. Even Ernst, who had been the first to examine the body, had acknowledged that anything between thirty minutes and an hour after death fell within the margin of error.

Alois’s party had discovered the corpse at a point in time when thirty to forty minutes had elapsed since the beginning of the ball. Because the vice president had been carrying a set of keys, she could have committed the murder during the first dance before returning to the hall in time for the second.

So long as one did not pull out the murder weapon, it would serve to plug the wound it had made and prevent a shower of blood. If the vice president had moved away from the prince immediately after stabbing him, she could have avoided even getting her dress dirty.

A lady wearing long gloves could either turn them inside out or remove them should they become stained with blood. So, she could have easily concealed any such evidence.

“Only… If we assume that, it does raise one particularly troublesome question…”

The question concerned the source of the light Alois, Ernst, and the rest of the search party had witnessed through the art room window and the subsequent sounds of a struggle, with broken vases and urns. This could perhaps be partially explained if one assumed that the vice president had an accomplice.

One could suppose that the victim and the accomplice, who carried out the crime, were in the art room together, and it was a candle carried by the accomplice that Alois and his party witnessed from downstairs. It was likely that the accomplice and the victim had engaged in a struggle, resulting in the victim’s death.

But the door to the art room had been locked while Sieghart stood in the supply room next door.

It surely would have been impossible for the accomplice to return the keys to the vice president before Sieghart entered the art room through the interior door. Or they could have done it before Alois and his party ran up the stairs shortly after.

Contrarily, it made more sense to assume that Sieghart, who had a light with him, and the victim had been in the art room together from the start. Their possible struggle would have been responsible for the broken vases and urns. It was natural to conclude that Alois and his party had seen and heard the signs of that struggle.

If she were being honest, she would have to admit that adopting the view that Sieghart was innocent made the situation appear defiant.

The group had considered the possibility that it had been the work of something outside the bounds of human reason—an inhuman being. Unfortunately, the only beings Nicola and Char had left roaming the halls of the academy were the Seven Wonders. And those had only achieved a flimsy state of existence.

Such beings were still at a stage where, far from being able to harm humans, they appeared very hazy to Nicola and other psychics. It was difficult to think that any such spirit could have affected any change, given that their mere existence was ambiguous.

“So, that’s why we’ve hit a dead end…” Having given Sieghart a rough explanation, Nicola sighed in unison with Gemini, which still rested in her arms.

For a short while, Nicola had clutched Gemini tightly enough that it probably would have gotten angry with her had it been a real cat. But her familiar just went along with what she wanted, allowing its form as a black cat to become less defined.

As she stroked a catlike *something*, a thought suddenly occurred to Nicola.

“Come to think of it…” she murmured. “When I was called to the crime scene, the art room, I felt something there just didn’t make sense… But I don’t know what that something was.”

Nicola continued to stroke Gemini as she stared off into space and dredged her memory, leaning her head with a puzzled look. She was pretty sure that the first thing that caught her eye was what a mess the art room had been left in.

Porcelain vases and glass vases, probably intended as still life drawing class motifs, were scattered all over the floor alongside a puddle of water that likely had come from the contents of the vases.

Several easels and canvases that had only dried had been toppled over, perhaps knocked down by the vases thrown to the ground. In the center of all that was the white outline of a person. She dimly recalled that the scattered debris from the smashed motifs appeared outside that outline.

“Ah, well, I think I know what that was,” responded Sieghart, having overheard Nicola’s murmurs. “One thing that didn’t sit right with you might have been that all the urn and vase fragments were *outside* the outline of the body.”

“Now that you mention it, I feel like it might have been, but at the same time, might not have been that…?” As far as Nicola was concerned, she would not be in such a difficult position if she had expressed what seemed off in her words.

After hearing her wishy-washy response, Sieghart chuckled wryly before continuing.

“Well, the shards outside the outline means that the urns and vases broke after the body had already fallen on the floor. If the sound of them breaking indicated a struggle between Lucas and someone else… That seems unnatural.”

Now that he brought it up, the situation was as Sieghart said. A struggle could not have produced the sounds of smashed urns and vases if the victim’s body was already on the floor.

“So… You’re saying that at the time your group heard broken glass and porcelain, the victim was already dead…?” said Nicola.

But Sieghart claimed he stepped into the art room immediately after the sound of the urns and vases smashing had abated. So how had the person responsible for smashing them vanished from a locked room?

Paying no mind to Nicola’s confusion, Sieghart proceeded with his matter-of-fact explanation.

“If asked whether breaking the vases and urns from a distance would be possible, I’d have to say that it probably isn’t impossible.”

Nicola just blinked in surprise, wondering what Sieghart was talking about.

He continued, “Let me see… For example, imagine you filled a

vase or urn with a small amount of water, propped it up at an angle, and froze it like that. What would happen if you put it on a shelf, allowing it to stick out so it's barely stable?"

She pictured an urn with ice frozen inside it at an angle.

Of course, freezing water in the urn would alter its specific gravity after setting it at an angle. With its center of gravity displaced and the urn placed so that it protruded slightly from the shelf it was sitting on, what would happen next?

"The ice would soon melt, so the center of gravity would change… The vase or urn would then lose its balance and fall after a certain delay…?"

"Yes, precisely. I think the other thing that bothered you about the crime scene was the water spilled on the floor."

When Sieghart mentioned that feeling, it definitely had bothered her. Though she had assumed that the water had been used to fill the vases, if there had been no flowers in them, there would have been no need to fill them with water.

Nicola thought about it, and given there were no flowers scattered among the shards, it was strange to think that there had been water in the vases. The proposed trick relied on some surprisingly simple laws of physics. As to whether it was possible, it certainly did not seem impossible.

"I'm amazed that you could think of that," said Nicola.

"Though I understand my testimony assured the noise stopped after I stepped into the art room and found no signs of the culprit, from an objective point of view, it sounds completely untrustworthy. I understand that profoundly… But I am the one person who can be certain that it's the truth. I even thought, how can I reconcile these circumstances? That's all."

With a brisk chuckle, Sieghart added, "Fortunately, I've had nothing but time to think about it. That said, it would have taken a lot of experimentation to simulate the night of the murder and to get the vases and urns to drop at exactly the right time. I can't say how realistic that would have been."

After that final word, Sieghart sighed slightly.

In this kingdom, where snow had been piling up since the previous month, freezing water simply by leaving it for a night would be simple. Given the room's temperature, how long would it take for the ice to melt and the vase or urn to fall?

When Nicola imagined someone repeating that sort of experiment repeatedly and obsessively, she suddenly felt a shiver and realized she had a strange sense of déjà vu. The puzzle pieces seemed to snap into place, causing her to widen her eyes involuntarily. She felt as if a single line now joined two points that had appeared entirely unrelated.

"A...poltergeist..." stammered Nicola. *Reportedly, a will-o'-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color roams the first-floor girls' bathroom at night. During that time, a poltergeist is breaking something in there. Apparently, one student even saw this happening.*

Then, Nicola recalled a conversation she had overheard.

"Hey, have you heard? Someone saw a will-'o-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color and a poltergeist in the girls' first-floor bathroom."

"I heard. One of the boys witnessed them both from a distance when he went to the bathroom at night."

"Yeah, those are the third and fourth entries in the Seven Wonders."

"If she really did all those experiments, simulating the night of her planned murder... If that's true, wouldn't it explain those wonders whose origins were previously unknown...?"

The truth was that those two wonders had been bothering Nicola all this time.

These newer rumors seemed like counterexamples to the theory that ghost stories always appeared part of an oral tradition. With their origins unknown, how had they even spread? Who was the first person to tell the story?

Nicola supposed that a student had seen the will-o'-the-wisp and heard the din made by the poltergeist. In that case, just what did that student witness?

Even through the eyes of someone who could see spirits, nothing was visible besides something still in a hazy stage of development. Nicola would have only noticed a glow, and the apparition there was certainly not developed enough to break anything. It was an unstable and unreliable being. Still, a student said he had seen such things.

"It was the other way around... The rumor didn't start with the sighting of an apparition. Witnessing something strange actually

led to a rumor, which planted the seed of an apparition…”

◇

Tell enough rumors, and they will cast a shadow. Once the shadow takes shape, the tale becomes true.

The source of the Seven Wonders was undoubtedly Nicola’s junior apprentice. Char had come up with his plan to switch places with Emma during the trip they had all taken three months before and developed an interest in having a doppelgänger as a familiar.

He had spread the rumor to create a doppelgänger to give himself and Emma cover while they practiced swapping places. That included the doppelgänger and the “Red Paper, Blue Paper” story as part of a set of Seven Wonders.

School ghost stories were wont to enjoy popularity, only to be discarded irregularly. All Char had done was set an upper limit of seven for the number of ghost stories and filled in two of those empty slots before spreading the rumor.

As long as the society in this world still lacked mass media, this kind of story would usually become part of an oral tradition, children hearing about it from their parents or older siblings. This would typically result in the same stories being passed down from generation to generation. Without someone like Char spreading rumors with some ulterior motive, new stories did not often replace old ones.

Therefore, Nicola’s junior apprentice must have thought that preexisting ghost stories would eventually fill the five empty spaces he had left. Unexpectedly, the first ghost story to claim a space was not one of the old ghost stories but a new rumor. That was the rumor of the female student who repeatedly threw herself off the western tower.

Regarding this rumor, Elsa had spread it soon after coming to the academy to frighten the person who had driven her older sister to suicide. Just like Char’s rumors, she’d had an ulterior motive.

The fact that this rumor had been popular throughout the school before Char even sought to spread that of the Seven Wonders was likely the very reason that it had been the first to fill one of the missing spaces. What would be the next story to claim

one of those spaces?

One might think that it would be one of the enduring ghost stories passed down as part of an oral tradition, but this assumption would have been wrong.

After all, this academy was a boarding school that required all students to take lodging away from their families. A certain amount of time would need to elapse for rumors to pass between new students and their families.

What if the students heard the reports of a brand new ghost sighting during that time, and then that rumor circulated throughout the population? They would surely be more inclined to talk about a recent sighting of a ghost rather than a story from several years or decades ago told by graduates of the academy.

Most likely, the students allowed these new reports to fill in the empty slots in the Seven Wonders instead of waiting to hear the stories their parents and siblings knew, thought Nicola.

A female student who repeatedly throws herself from the top of the western tower

A doppelgänger spotted lurking in the halls

Red paper, blue paper

A poltergeist

A will-o'-the-wisp that bathes the walls around it in color

Contrary to Char's schemes, most of the spaces for the Seven Wonders had been filled by brand new rumors.

Only older stories took up the two remaining spaces at the very end: the severed hands that crawl around the music room and the full-length mirror that drags people inside.

When Nicola had finished explaining her hypothesis and everything that had gone on concerning the Seven Wonders, Sieghart appeared to nod in satisfaction. The faint sound of Sieghart's clothes shifting on the other side of the door also prompted Nicola to adjust her posture.

"I see... Let's suppose that she conducted her experiments in the first-floor girls' bathroom, making the vases drop. If she did those experiments there, it would be easy to hide any trace of the water she spilled once she tidied up the shards of broken glass..."

"The student council had custody of one of the sets of keys to

the schoolhouse, correct?”

“Yeah. Given the vice president’s role in the council, she should have been able to take it out freely. I think it would have been possible for her to sneak into the schoolhouse at night.”

Should that be the case, it would have been possible for her to break vases and urns from a distance.

“Well then, can we just explain the light everyone could see in the art room before the noise even stopped…?” Nicola murmured hesitantly.

She could tell that Sieghart was pondering this on the other side of the door.

After a spell of silence, Sieghart softly answered, “Nicola, I want you to check and find something. Can I count on you?”

“Yes.”

Nicola naturally had no reason to refuse. She immediately agreed, nodding energetically.

Once they finished making their plans, Nicola stood up, still holding Gemini in her arms. Now that she had a clear idea of what to do, she had no reason to stay there.

Nicola turned on her heel, then suddenly changed her mind and stopped in her tracks. After she took a shallow breath, she braced herself and added, “Ah, one more thing… No matter how much we struggle, and you still get handed a death sentence… If that happens, we can just run away together.”

Upon saying this, Nicola displayed a defiant smile.

She had indeed expanded her circle and could not throw her life away if she had someone to protect. It was an excuse to settle in this world that had already put down its own roots in Nicola’s heart. Nicola felt convinced that she would no longer think of following Sieghart should he die.

Having only one person to turn to meant being dependent, but having many made one independent. Nicola believed, in a way, that she had finally started to find her independence, though that really did not matter.

It did not matter how emotionally independent Nicola might become. Regardless, if this man was not by her side, life would be meaningless after all. Not being able to follow him in death, she would do whatever it took to keep him alive and have him live by her side. That would be Nicola’s new source of pride. Whether they

had to elope or even abscond from the law, she would do whatever it took.

“Ego, you say? Suits me. What kind of woman would I be if I failed to save the man I love?”

Though Nicola felt a little sheepish about her rhetoric, she had deliberately driven home her intent so that she could not turn back. However, she would say nothing further until she was face-to-face with Sieghart.

The words she should have told him, the regrets she had failed to convey, could not be said through a door.

Still, she no longer had any intention whatsoever of carrying those feelings into a double suicide. This time, Nicola walked away without looking back once.

4

Ernst had said there was still time left until he would be relieved from guard duty. With no alternative, Nicola returned to the student council room, finding Alois and Char engaged in a friendly conversation.

Char had loosely put an arm over Alois’s shoulder, looking as close as any two male friends. Meanwhile, Emma watched this scene with a smile. Were those two really as close as that?

Just as Char always referred to Alois as “that prince,” he called Ernst “that knight fella.” That gave the impression that he was making an effort to put some distance between himself and them. Nicola could not help but wonder what had prompted this change.

No sooner had Char seen her face than he assumed an expression of shocked displeasure.

“What’s with that face…?” inquired Nicola.

“What? This face shows that I just keenly felt the truth in the adage,” said Char. “Learn wisdom from the follies of others…”

“What the heck does that mean?”

“It means I got to look at myself objectively and think, was I really that awkward? Then I felt ashamed about it.”

“No… What are you talking about?” Nicola began to rack her brains, understanding Char’s point less and less. He finally raised his hands in surrender and shrugged.

“You see, while you were gone, I was making fun of you. Saying

stuff like, ‘If she’s that flustered, she must really be in love with him. I’m surprised she’s grown so dependent.’ A friend’s romance is perfect joke fodder, isn’t it?” remarked Char without a hint of remorse.

He paused and chuckled.

“But, well, my big sis told me off. She told me if we’re talking about dependence, my case is far more severe. So, I came to realize a lot of stuff.”

Nicola met Char’s olive green eyes.

“I was probably just like you. At my most emotionally unstable moments, I felt a deep sense of gratitude. If I could live for the sake of my big sis, maybe life wouldn’t be so bad, and I made everything revolve around that. I would lose my head just like you in the event my sis faced a situation where she might die. Unlike you, I still have no one besides my big sis to base my life around. I do have a much worse case of dependence than you.”

After Nicola heard her junior apprentice murmur this heartfelt speech, her eyes were round as saucers. Yet she let slip a wry chuckle. Despite not being related by blood, she and Char were alike in the strangest ways, in both their previous lives and one.

“Anyhow, that’s how I realized just how uncertain my state of mind was. I thought I needed to find more people I wouldn’t mind helping, even without charging a retainer. First, I considered making friends with this guy, y’know?”

Once Char glanced sideways at Alois, he looked back at Nicola with a carefree smile as if he had a curse lifted from him.

“Look. I’ve even been thinking that I’d like to try getting along with that childhood friend of yours. So, let’s hurry up and deal with this situation.”

Hearing Char’s words, Alois and Emma nodded slightly. Nicola did the same before walking over to where the group was sitting. She shared the new information she had obtained with them, then raised her head resolutely.

“Let’s go to the art room…”

◇

The blizzard outside rattled the frost-covered windows in the corridor. With only the candles they held to light their way, the four

friends walked in silence.

Having no fireplaces, the air in the corridor chilled them to the bone, making their breath turn white each time they exhaled. It was almost time for the date to change. The dormitories were only dimly visible.

Only a few teachers who knew what had happened and the students who had been the first to discover the body remained in the schoolhouse. The rest of the schoolhouse had descended into an unsettling silence.

“Come to think of it…” muttered Char.

In order to receive even a little warmth, Nicola felt her body drawn to the flames of her companions’ candles. Since they had naturally come to stand quite close to each other, she could hear her junior apprentice even if he muttered.

“In the end, you never wondered if *that demon* was involved, did you?” asked Char.

A demon was a being that humans could summon, and it would grant their wishes if they paid a sacrifice, albeit often with a nasty twist. Demons existed outside the bounds of human reason. Should one do a human a favor, a murder under circumstances impossible for a human to commit may be possible.

Nicola certainly was aware of past cases in which humans and demons had joined forces. On this occasion, she smiled wryly and shook her head.

“In the first place, Olivia was always gifted with a sixth sense.”

Olivia had been able to perceive beings from beyond the human realm in her previous life and this one. That was why she had cursed the world for her misfortune before summoning a demon and wishing to be reincarnated. Tempted by the demon’s silver tongue, she used the *kodoku*—a curse of venom—on another person.

Although she had not relished her talent for seeing spirits, that was what had allowed her to summon a demon in her previous life. Moreover, it had allowed her to be manipulated by the demon in this one.

“So, she was fundamentally different from the vice president,” stated Nicola before slowly lowering her gaze. “There’s no way for that demon to interact with someone like the vice president, who can’t *see*. Olivia was almost a one-of-a-kind pawn for that demon,

but he already chewed her up and spat her out."

Nicola continued her matter-of-fact explanation in a low voice so neither Alois nor Emma could hear her. But Char looked back at her doubtfully, knitting his brows.

"We can't really say if she was unique, can we? There are people like Alois and my big sis who gained the ability to see later in life. Other people in this world might be able to see, right?"

"But… Neither Emma nor His Highness were reincarnated here, were they? It's not as if anyone with a sixth sense could summon a demon. It's not that simple."

Alois, Emma, and even Sieghart could see if the demon was present. But demons only ever interfered in the world when people summoned them.

Nicola thought she did not need to finish what she was saying, and Char ought to understand. When she looked at her junior apprentice, his face showed that he was still not satisfied with Nicola's explanation and was still racking his brains. Though confused that he had not yet received the message, Nicola continued.

"Hey, Char… Do you know anything about the religion of this world?"

"Huh, religion? This world is based on Europe, right? So isn't some sect of Christianity the main one?" inquired Char, puzzled by Nicola's sudden question.

I see. So that's why we were talking at cross purposes. "This world has a unique polytheistic religion, akin to Japan's kiki mythology or Greek mythology," noted Nicola.

"Huh? Really? But why?"

"Now, let me ask you… What would you need if you wanted to take down a demon?"

"Well, a church, the Bible, some holy water— Ah, now I get it." Char, who had been listing the necessary items of demon's bane while counting on his fingers, finally nodded in realization. "You're saying that if the demon was free to construct this world, there's no way he would have included the means of his destruction."

"That's right," said Nicola, nodding. "It's similar to the notion that language shapes our thinking. Some people say that if you have no word for a concept, you won't be able to use it when making decisions. For another example, people asked what foods

they like or dislike cannot include foods they've never eaten. Of course they wouldn't since they might not even know they exist."

In this world, there was no concept of a demon, which had its origins in Christianity. If someone did not even know of the existence of demons, those individuals might never consider summoning such a being.

"Let me ask you something. You don't have any desire to summon a demon, do you?" asked Nicola softly, glancing at Char out of the corner of her eye. Given that Nicola and Char recognized the existence of demons, they could summon one.

But Char just raised his eyebrows slightly and said, "Of course not! I'd never take a gamble with odds as bad as that."

Then he shrugged and said, "Even if you prepared a contract thicker than a complete compendium of Japanese law, a demon will still pick out some detail to trip you up with in the end. There's no reward big enough to make up for that risk!"

Char contorted his face into a profound expression of disgust. Perhaps Nicola should have expected as much from a man who had been forced into the role of the protagonist of a dating sim, all to spite Olivia.

Once upon a time, Olivia wished to be reincarnated in the world of the dating sim that had formed the basis of this one. She thought the demon would understand that she wanted to be the protagonist, even if she did not say so explicitly.

But the demon had gleefully seized upon her naivety, twisting her words. It even went so far as to place the person she had killed as a sacrifice—and a man, at that—in the role of protagonist, which she had so wanted. A demon was a being filled with that almost innocent malevolence.

The misfortune of humans was a source of supreme pleasure for a demon, showing their wicked existence. Any human aware of just what type of being a demon was would never think to sign a contract with one in the first place.

This was all to say that the only people who could contact a demon in this world must firstly have memories of a world in which Christianity existed. They also needed to have the qualities that allowed one to see beings from beyond the human realm. Thirdly, they had to be ignorant about such beings.

These were the three minimum necessary conditions. People

who satisfied all three would be surprisingly scarce.

From the demon's perspective, now that he had already chewed up and discarded Olivia, he had lost any means of interfering with this world. Nicola and Char were the only people who knew about demons and had the ability to see them, but they would never even think of summoning one.

While the demon may wish to find someone to summon him once more, the very concept of demons did not exist inside the heads of anyone else in this world. It was simply impossible for someone to even think of calling upon a being they had never imagined to exist.

"So I guess that makes what happened with the Childcatcher's Box a pretty rare case, then?" asked Char.

"Well, I guess it does."

The demon must have hidden the written record of the Childcatcher's Box in the world while he was still creating it. But it very much depended on the person who discovered such a record as to whether they would carry out the instructions written within.

And so Nicola guessed the demon must have seen that it was time to cut his losses with this world, for better or for worse.

"I guess I understand now, that the very concept of a demon doesn't exist in this world... But what if the religious views in this world ever changed to include a concept similar to that of a demon? Wouldn't it be possible for a person to summon one in that case?" wondered Char.

If the prevailing religious view in this world ever gave rise to a concept similar to that of a demon, the first condition Nicola had presented would no longer be necessary. But Nicola shook her head in response to this question as well.

"Now hold on. I think the chances of that happening are pretty slim. After all, the concept of a demon, a being of untold evil, simply isn't compatible with polytheism."

"Huh, but why?" retorted Char without missing a beat as Nicola sighed softly.

Char, who tried to understand the world with his senses, frequently dismissed any logical argument he heard.

If he thought about it even a little, it would be self-evident. "Simply put, there's a difference in how they think about God... Look, even the gods in Japan's *Yaoyorozu* all act according to their own volition

and only pay attention to humans occasionally. They don't give off the impression of existing for the sake of humans."

Greek mythology was like that too. Disputes between gods would tear up mountain ranges and toss them around. After a god's infidelity, a human woman might find herself subjected to a goddess's wrath, caught in a lovers' quarrel.

When their whims directed them to interact with humans, sometimes the gods would bestow the people with wisdom or bring upon calamities. In any case, the gods did as they pleased. It was frankly debatable whether one should refer to them as benevolent beings.

Perhaps because there were many gods, none could emerge as a purely benevolent god. Whether only one was good or they were all good, the pantheon would become uncontrollable.

"But a monotheistic god is meant to instruct and guide his followers. He must be busy as a beaver with judgment and salvation in his job description. In other words, he exists for the sake of humans and is a being of perfect benevolence. As his polar opposite, another type of being emerges—a being of absolute evil who exists only to lead humans astray. Something like that."

A god only existed after believers emerged, and that was true of monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Imagination eventually allowed thoughts to take shape. In the final analysis, gods and demons were metaphysical beings, meaning people's recognition influenced their state of being.

"Ah, now that you mention it, oni, asura, rakshasa, and even yokai are all different from demons. There is no mythological being in Japan that exists purely for the sake of evil. Now I get it. Hmm…" Char intoned, nodding in satisfaction. Without even looking in his direction, Nicola nodded as well.

The pure evil of a demon existed only in opposition to some absolute good. In this world's polytheistic religion, where there was no absolute good, no concept resembling that of a demon would ever arise.

As long as Nicola and Char kept their mouths shut, the demons would have no way to interfere in this world's business any longer, given no one was left to summon him.

Olivia, who had embodied all three preconditions—knowing of the concept of demons, having a sixth sense, and being ignorant

of the true nature of demons—probably really had been a one-of-a-kind pawn for the demon. As Nicola thought about the demon disposing of the overzealous Olivia, she felt like saying, “Serves you right.”

“Char, Miss Nicola, what are you doing? You’re lagging behind…”

When Nicola snapped back to her senses, she noticed that Alois and Emma were walking quite some distance ahead. After Nicola and Char exchanged a glance, they hurried as much as they could without their candles blowing out, quickly catching up to the other two.



◇

After Nicola slid Gemini, who had taken the shape of a set of keys, into the keyhole, she felt the faint sensation of the key's teeth connecting with the mechanism through her hand.

Opening the door without difficulty and slipping inside, she entered the art supply room. It was a small room akin to a closet, surrounded by shelves stacked with painting materials.

The culprit had likely assumed she only needed to lock the door and maintain possession of the two schoolhouse keys to preserve the crime scene. It was not as if others closely watched the room. All the curtains were closed, with the only source of light in the room being the candles that Nicola's group held.

As Nicola lifted her candle and gazed around the room, she saw that the wallpaper in the supply room was a rather ordinary cream color that contrasted with the art room.

Framed paintings and plaster figures—likely replicas based on their management—as well as brushes and saucers intended for use as palettes were piled high all around her. Overall, the room gave the impression of being cluttered.

"What lovely colors," said Emma, holding her candle very slightly toward an oil painting set on an easel. It depicted a single-flower vase with a lily inside it.

Peering at the same painting, Alois muttered, "There's a signature in the corner. It looks like that schoolmistress, the art instructor, painted this for fun. She's outstanding."

"Uh-huh," intoned Char, his expression reminiscent of a stupid but adorable puppy. "I really don't get what makes art good or bad."

Sieghart must have also looked at the paintings and statues in the room by candlelight while he waited for the vice president.

Nicola stepped closer to a window and slowly reached out toward the curtains. They had probably been hung there to protect the artwork from degradation. The fabric felt very thick as she touched it, so she could tell that it could block out a lot of sunlight.

She quietly pulled the curtains aside, revealing the innermost pane of the window's double glazing. Upon opening that first

window, a gust of cold air immediately rushed inside.

There was a gap of about fifteen centimeters between the first and second window panes. Nicola rested her hand on the plain wood window frame, reaching out for the lock on the outer window pane, but eventually withdrew her hand.

She then turned her head briefly to look at Alois behind her.

“Your Highness, when your search party noticed the light on in the art room, could you also see a light in the adjoining room?”

“No, we couldn’t. I think all the curtains in the supply room were probably shut. If they’d been open, I’m sure we would have been able to see the light from Sieg’s candle.”

This statement did not contradict Sieghart’s testimony either. Nicola nodded, then posed Alois another question. “If I’m not mistaken, you split up at the vice president’s suggestion to make sure that all the windows were closed, correct? Where did the vice president check?”

“Ah, I can answer that. She checked the windows in the supply room.” Alois’s response was more or less exactly what Nicola had predicted.

Alois and Ernst had known from the start that the vice president had called Sieghart to meet her in the art room. Given her suspicion of her from the outset, it was not difficult to imagine them driving her into another room to prevent her from touching anything at the crime scene.

Ernst had said that if the vice president had thrown anything out of the window, they would have immediately known because an open window would have made the noise created by the blizzard apparent. She probably had not opened any of the outer window panes.

Nicola nodded slightly, then placed her hand on the interior door connecting the supply room to the art room. It showed no sign of being locked but opened smoothly as soon as she pushed against it.

When she stepped inside, the distinctive green walls caught her eye. Next were the toppled easels and canvases, which had probably fallen after being struck by vases or urns, and the shards of those shattered motifs. Nothing had changed since the first time she had viewed the scene.

Just one of the curtains was partially open, allowing a glimpse

of the plain wooden window frame behind it.

Perhaps it was due to the double glazing, but the wind roaring outside and the snow beating against the windows seemed far away. Nicola almost experienced a sense of isolation from the outside world, heightened by the warmer air. That feeling probably also had to do with the knowledge that someone had died there.

The humanoid outline that marked where the body had fallen seemed strangely lifelike. Nicola slowly shifted her gaze away when she suddenly realized something.

Someone had placed a flower near the outline of the body. Displayed in a single-flower vase, though it was difficult to be certain with it surrounded by darkness, it appeared to be a white sasanqua or baby's breath. Feeling she had seen such a flower somewhere, Nicola leaned her head in confusion. Emma, who stood next to her, also thrust her head forward to get a better look.

"Is that... Is that from your boutonniere, Your Highness?" wondered Emma.

"Ah, now that you mention it..." began Nicola. *Now that you mention it, I have the feeling that he did have something like that in his lapel. But because it just vanished at some point, I forgot all about it.*

With a sheepish smile on his lips, Alois nodded and with a shrug and said, "I felt kind of bad about wearing a flower in my lapel in the room where Lucas had just died. After getting the proper permission, I borrowed a suitable vessel from the supply room."

Having said this, Alois glanced at the vase, which Nicola now held in her hands.

"I bet it was easy to get Lucas to come to this room... Lucas might have jumped at it if the vice president suggested playing dead here to shock the teachers and the other students. He had the personality that makes someone want to do wild stuff like that," said Alois before silently lowering his gaze. "He may never have listened to other people, and he may have been quite the troublemaker, who enjoyed messing with those around him... But he was not such a bad fellow as to deserve to be killed in this perfunctory way."

The person who had died here was a total stranger to Nicola, and she had not even known his face. But for Alois, who had had

at least some dealings with the prince, the murder was naturally a more troubling affair.

Alois stood with his lips drawn tightly until he shook his head as if to shake off any gloomy feelings. When he raised his head slightly and turned to look at Nicola, he did so with his usual bright expression.

“But we can always mourn the dead later, can’t we?” said Alois, after exhaling softly to collect himself. Emma continued to look at him with concern, yet she must have elected to respect his intentions.

Perhaps hoping to change the subject, Emma nervously spoke up.

“Although it might just be my imagination... One thing has been bothering me. Char, Nicola, could you lend me your candles?”

This request caused Nicola and Char to look at each other in surprise because they could not discern Emma’s intentions or see any reason to refuse. Both held out their candles, which Emma took and placed them on either side of the single-flower vase.

Emma then placed her own candle with them, illuminating the boutonniere flowers with a white sasanqua as their keynote, from a very close range. After scrutinizing them, Emma finally muttered, “I knew it.”

She paused before continuing with a slight laughter.

“As you know, my eyesight is far from good, even with my glasses on... But that has just made me pay all the more attention to colors. You might even say that I can only tell individual people apart based on the combination of colors in their hair, eyes, and clothes.”

Indeed, people could distinguish between colors, whether their eyesight was excellent or dreadful. However, Emma realized her friends were still blinking at her in confusion, so she frowned slightly.

“The color of this flower has changed just a bit. These sasanquas and baby’s breath flowers, which should be pure white, now have a tiny hint of green.”

Nicola gasped in realization upon hearing this, then looked closer at the flowers lit by the candle flames. Even though the change was small enough that she felt she had to strain her eyes not to to overlook it, their color was indeed different.

“The capillary…effect…” murmured Nicola. Then she whirled around to face Alois. “Your Highness, you said that all you did was place your boutonniere in a vase that happened to be here, correct?”

“Right. I just put it in something close to hand in the supply room. I didn’t go to the trouble of filling it with water myself,” said Alois, nodding.

Rather than nod, Nicola simply half-closed her eyes before continuing.

“In that case, just one more question. When Your Highness’s search party discovered the light in the schoolhouse while crossing the breezeway, how did you determine that it was coming from the art room?”

Alois must have already guessed what Nicola was driving at. When nodding again, he furrowed his brow in dismay, then chuckled nervously.

“You see… When we looked at the plain wooden frame around the window of the room where we spotted the light and snow on the outside, it all looked green. We immediately thought that the light must have reflected off those green walls. It’s not like we counted the windows to check how many it was from the end.”

“That…makes sense,” said Nicola, sighing heavily. With this, she had addressed what Sieghart had asked her to find and what he wanted her to check. All that was left was to bring the entire incident to an end.

5

“Do you think the vice president will return to this room…?” asked Emma nervously.

“I think she probably will… I expect she’ll want to dispose of the contents of that single-flower vase,” responded Nicola without much confidence.

Alois answered, “It is about time for her to be released from questioning.”

The party of five who had been the first to discover the body—Alois, Ernst, the two exchange students, and the vice president—had apparently all been subjected to questioning in order, one by one.

This technique was supposedly so the investigators could check for any contradictions in their respective testimony about the state of the crime scene when they first discovered it.

Exploiting his position and authority to the fullest, Alois had convinced the investigators to put him and Ernst first in the order for questioning. He explained that as soon as their interrogations were over, they made a beeline for the student council room to meet up with Nicola and the rest.

This left a period of time during which Nicola's group had shared information in the student council room, followed by Nicola's visitation with Sieghart. And the vice president could not have returned then. The vice president spent this time either waiting for her turn or actually undergoing questioning. Ernst supplemented this information, having just returned from his guard duty to meet up with the group.

"Well, if she's gonna show up, I'd like her to hurry up already. There's nothing to do," mumbled Char. The five of them chatted idly in that fashion. They were all hidden in the art supply room, now huddled around a single candle.

"It might be a bit late to say this, but wouldn't it have been better to hide in the art room itself?" wondered Emma with an inquisitive look.

Alois chuckled wryly and shrugged. "Well, if I had to look at the green walls in there for hour after hour, I think I'd start to feel depressed."

Sitting in the art room briefly while taking a lesson was one thing, but one could not cope with that shade of green while waiting for someone without even knowing when they might arrive. At that point, the wallpaper in the supply room was an unremarkable cream color.

They did not feel particularly cold, thanks to the double-glazed windows or the fact that there were five huddled together. But the warmth might have been a curse in itself, with feelings of drowsiness an ever-present threat.

It was already 1 a.m. when Nicola blinked and stifled a yawn. Char eventually decided to make some noise. The junior apprentice, who had always lacked restraint, complained in a low voice, "Ah, I've had enough! If we don't do something I'm gonna fall asleep!"

“Do something? Like what?” asked Nicola, suspiciously looking at Char.

After Char pondered this for a few seconds, he suddenly looked up triumphantly as if he had the perfect idea. He then took a deck of cards from his pockets that Nicola knew all too well.

“I mean, it’s not like I was going to do anything with them, so I brought them with me thinking I’d shove them back in your face.”

The cards, which were longer and narrower than typical playing cards, were the tarot cards Nicola had forced on Char some time ago. When he had roughly shuffled the deck, he fanned them out and presented them to her.

“This is perfect. Now pick one.”

“Huh… I’d really hate to get a bad result just before this crucial encounter, but…”

Nicola grimaced to show Char how disgruntled she felt at having the cards forced upon her again. According to her subconscious intuition, tarot readings could reveal the near future. These predictions came true just a bit too often for Nicola to dismiss divination as hit or miss.

“It’ll liven things up. Just pick one. Even if the result is bad, that’ll help you be that much more cautious, won’t it?” said Char despite understanding the reasons for Nicola’s hesitation. Feeling cornered, she sighed in resignation.

Though her heart was not in it, she firmly drew a card, which turned out to be an upright Ace of Swords. Nicola could not help but smile dryly at the profound irony of this card’s meaning.

Char, however, said with a more cheerful smile, “You see? Nothing better for livening things up.”

“What, what, what does it mean?” quizzed Alois.

“Is it a good meaning?” asked Emma.

“Wait… In the first place, do tarot readings even come true?” mused Ernst.

Each of the other three—Alois, Emma, and Ernst—who had watched silently at first, now crowded around and peered at Nicola’s card. With an ambiguous expression, Nicola looked down at her card.

The Ace of Swords, one of the Minor Arcana. And it was upright. What did it mean?

“It means a just punishment…or victory,” muttered Nicola,

frank.

“In short, though we can win and achieve our goal, we might need to go about it in a slightly heavy-handed way. Something like that?” added Char in a somewhat mocking tone.

“Slightly heavy-handed… Yeah, no doubt about that,” mumbled Nicola, with a self-deprecating smile creeping across her lips. She knew better than anyone what this reading meant, whether she liked it or not.

No matter how much circumstantial evidence they gathered, they had no physical evidence that could prove what was true. After all, not even the very concept of forensic investigation existed in this world.

Assuming that they could dust the scene with powder and lift some fingerprints, they had no way to perform a comparison. Determining the precise time of death via autopsy was also a fraught venture, and performing DNA analysis on the items left at the scene was out of the question. In a civilization at this level of development, it was practically impossible to gather conclusive physical evidence.

Regardless, Nicola would have to force a confession out of the culprit, evidence or no evidence. She could not help but laugh at herself under these circumstances that would make any detective or police officer sneer.

“It might be cowardly… Perhaps even unfair…”

The Ace of Swords was also symbolic of carving out one’s future, even by force.

She had resigned to taking *heavy-handed measures* as long as she could obtain a confession from the vice president. Having taken another step in that direction, she was not confident that the method she had dreamed up was correct.

With her mumbled questions directed nowhere, the other four simply looked at one another and half-smiled. One opened their mouth, but before any words emerged, they all heard the faint sound of footsteps in the corridor. *Click, clack*.

Nicola quickly blew out their final candle, and the supply room immediately plunged into total darkness.

“We’ll answer that question later…” someone said before gently patting Nicola on the head. She felt an elbow lightly prodded against her right arm.

Though she had a good idea of who was responsible for each gesture, that was not important. After waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, she held her breath and rose.

The one whose footsteps resounded in the corridor passed by the supply room, where Nicola and her friends were hiding, before stopping in front of the door to the art room. Nicola distinctly overheard the metallic sound of a key turning.

Creak, went the art room door. The intruder appeared to have slipped into the room, felt their way toward the body's location, and knelt there. As Nicola confirmed this by peering through a gap in the interior door, she quietly stepped into the art room.

Nicola struck a match, and lit her candle once more. Its flickering flame dimly lit the room around her.

"Would you be looking for this vase, perchance?" asked Nicola, holding her candle toward the intruder. She could tell that the person shuddered in alarm. But, as always, not even a vague outline of her body was visible to Nicola.

She appeared to be in the middle of a washing machine cycle, or else the center of a tornado, an inky black vortex.

There really was not a better way to put it. Several beings, dozens of grudges and feelings of rage, wound around each other layer upon layer, forming a roaring vortex around her. Nicola could most definitely not make out her appearance or even a distinct impression of the shape of her body.

Standing next to Nicola, Alois looked directly at the girl with his eyebrows knitted. Ernst stood back close by, in a position from which he could defend Alois at any moment. He was also fairly close to Nicola, so he may have intended to act as Nicola's bodyguard if necessary.

Char and Emma appeared to have decided to just wait and see, watching from inside the supply room. Both were entirely unrelated to this case from the very beginning, so this was understandable.

Once Nicola walked briskly over to the outline of the body, she picked up the vase that had contained the boutonniere.

"A vase...? What are you talking about? I returned to look for my earring, which I must have dropped earlier."

Because Nicola could not even make out an outline of the intruder, let alone her expression, it was impossible to discern

whether this was true or a lie. Still, she clearly heard the voice of the vice president.

While the vortex roared with her at its center, it was entirely silent observed from outside. All the grudges exclusively directed themselves inward. Tragically, these beings had nothing left but hatred for her. It was almost pitiful.

“Miss Nicola,” called out Alois, prompting Nicola to turn around. He held a saucer intended to represent a painter’s palette, which had been haphazardly stacked in the art supply room.

Nicola gently extracted the boutonniere flowers from the single-flower vase, then titled the vase’s narrow porcelain mouth over the saucer. What poured out into the saucer was the liquid responsible for dying the petals of the boutonniere—water dyed green.

“You took water that you’d dyed green, froze it in a cylindrical shape, then stood a candle inside that… That’s how you made it look like the light came from a green room, isn’t it?”

When Sieghart first stepped into the art room through the interior door, there was no light source. On the other hand, Alois’s group testified they had definitely seen a light in the space.

It was more natural to assume that, rather than the light source Alois’s party had witnessed suddenly vanishing without a trace, Sieghart had been standing in the art room with that from the beginning. Given the evidence, that conclusion was inevitable.

“But what we saw was the window frame and the snow outside the window colored a pale green. We couldn’t tell for sure how many windows from the side of the building that window was. Based on how high and how far back the fourth-floor classroom at the very end of a corridor was from the breezeway, we had to look up at a pretty steep angle,” said Alois, shaking his head and smirking. “At the moment, I doubt whether we would have been able to tell whether the light was coming through the art room window or the supply room next door.”

When Sieghart stepped into the art room through the interior door, none of the lights had been on. Conversely, Alois and his search party had reported seeing a light inside. None of the witnesses had lied when they gave their testimony.

However, they had seen the light coming from the art supply room, with its plain cream wallpaper. It all came down to the gap

inside one of the double-glazed windows in that room.

Except for one half-open curtain in the art room, all of the curtains in the art room and the supply room appeared firmly drawn. These were thick curtains capable of blocking out light to protect the artwork from degradation.

Behind each curtain were two window panes, with a gap of about fifteen centimeters between the inner and outer panes. There should have been a way to make the plain wooden window frame and the snow outside appear green.

For example, one might take water dyed green, freeze it in a cylindrical shape—like a roll of toilet paper—and leave a candle inside it. One could then place this apparatus on a saucer meant to be used as a palette, light the candle, and set it between the first and second panes of one of the double-glazed windows.

The plain wooden frame and the snow beating against the outside pane would make the window look faintly green. Having witnessed that, the search party judged that window as one of those from the art room and made their way there. They entered to find a half-open curtain and a single candle held by Sieghart. Due to the circumstances, it was unavoidable that they would assume that the light they had seen was indeed his.

But at that point, the remnants of the light apparatus in the supply room were still there. The vice president must have tentatively disposed of it when she checked the locks on the windows in the adjoining room.

Looking back on that moment, Alois had admitted, “It was the vice president who checked the windows in the supply room.”

Ernst had said, “Though I can’t say for sure that we never took our eyes off the vice president, even for a moment… But there was a blizzard starting to blow. We should have heard some noise if she had opened the window to throw something outside.”

Indeed, she probably had not opened any of the exterior windows. But one could not check the lock on an exterior window without first opening a curtain and the interior window pane. Simply put, the sound of a curtain or interior window opening would not be considered suspicious.

The vice president must have pretended to check the lock on one of the exterior windows, brazenly opening an interior window to retrieve a saucer filled with melted, colored ice and pouring

what had become water into a nearby vase as a temporary solution. The interior door likely provided an adequate blind spot for her to do it.

Seeing Alois and Ernst had relegated her to the supply room to prevent her from touching the crime scene must have given her a final boost of confidence. Even if they had not done so, they would have let her check the adjoining room alone if she had suggested it. Perhaps she had intended on doing exactly that from the beginning.

Finding how many minutes it would take for ice of a specific thickness to melt and how much paint needed to be dissolved in water to give it a realistic color probably required a long process of trial and error.

This situation had resulted in one of the Seven Wonders, whose origins were previously unknown: “A will-o’-the-wisp that bathes its surroundings in color.” Nicola thought a rumor with unknown origins was even more likely to have become a rumor after being witnessed.

Given that Nicola and most of her friends could perceive beings from beyond the human realm, they could never have remained entirely disinterested in changes to the ghost stories told around the school. If not for them, she did not doubt that no one else could have found the link between this case and the Seven Wonders.

Nicola gritted her teeth as she realized they were dealing with someone quite smart. The vice president was brilliant and cunning, able to rationally pursue her goals with the ends justifying the means. As such, Nicola had to admit she was impressed by how meticulous her planning and thorough her preparation had been.

“We already know how you broke the urns and vases,” said Nicola, putting aside the fact that the one who had uncovered that trick, Sieghart, was absent.

Sieghart’s guess about the lighting apparatus had also been more or less correct, but Nicola disregarded that too. Someone had to take on the role of detective—there was no getting around that.

Fixing her gaze steadily on the vice president, Nicola firmly declared, “It was you who killed the prince of the neighboring

kingdom."

She thought she heard the vice president start to laugh.

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"Yes, it was me. And what about it?"

The vice president's voice carried well through the deathly still air in the art room. Though Nicola could not see her expression, her tone level made it easy to imagine that she was not feeling even a shred of anxiety.

All Nicola could think was, *Ah, so this person really doesn't feel a thing*. The vice president did not even have guilt for either having killed a person or forcing the suspicion for that crime onto another person.

The perpetrator lacked remorse or empathy; instead, she had a belief that results outweighed all else in their pursuit of personal gain. That in and of itself would be classified as an illness. Nicola knew she should not blame the vice president for what was in her nature, but the crime committed ought to be punished.

Alois took a step forward and said softly, "Let me ask you… Why Lucas?"

"You may ask, 'Why?' But I can only answer because it seemed like killing him would cause the most trouble. Nothing more or less than that," answered the vice president nonchalantly, almost innocently, as if she were genuinely puzzled by the question.

"It's your fault Prince Lucas died, you know? You there, miss, the president's fiancée," the vice president continued. "The truth is, I thought of killing you and framing the president for the murder of his fiancée. But he concealed any and all information about you until the day of the ball, didn't he? So, I had no choice but to choose the person whose death seemed like it would have the biggest effect. So, in that way. Don't you see? It's the president's fault, as well as yours, that Prince Lucas had to die."

Alois's and Ernst's faces visibly stiffened after the vice president smoothly rattled off these words. Nicola scowled profoundly and began to mutter her rebuttal.

While many emotions whirled around in her brain, just one thought emerged, stronger than all the rest.

How dare you *say that?* "Don't say such rubbish. It's against the

rules to foist your crimes on other people. Your sins are yours and yours alone."

Nicola felt not a boiling rage but rather a chill that began in the pit of her stomach. With an expression that was neither cold nor warm, she regarded the person wreathed in haze before her eyes. Because neither could empathize with the other, displaying any emotion would be meaningless.

Alois took a step forward and softly spoke to the vice president.

"You've admitted that quite openly."

"Well, confessing to Your Highness and the president's fiancée won't change anything, will it?" the vice president said lightly before giggling. "After all, that young lady there might have planted that green water there to frame me. Though it may have been possible for me to commit the crime, who would believe your story? The ones telling it are the prime suspect's fiancée and his best friend."

She sneered and giggled in glee.

"I happen to be very good at playing the victim. There's no way I'm confessing. When it's my words against yours, I wonder which of us a third party will believe?"

Yeah, she's probably right, thought Nicola without any emotion.

Nicola knew that when differences of opinion arose, the world was not so wonderful that judgment always came down on the side of truth and justice. In the end, the one who could tilt the perspective of the decision makers always won. A trial was not a battle between good and evil but victory and defeat.

Even if that were not the case, it was often easier to prove one did not do something than to prove someone else did.

Moreover, they occupied the positions of Sieghart's fiancée and his friends. Their relationship with the suspect could weaken their credibility. Despite all this, Nicola responded frankly, "You're free to insist that you've been framed. Do as you wish."

The statement echoed the words of the vice president. In this period, where even fingerprint identification was impossible, a confession from the culprit would be the decisive factor. No other form of evidence available was remotely as strong.

Once Nicola glared coldly at the vice president, she lowered her eyes. "There's only one thing I have to say to you... Beware of the being that seeks to take over your very existence, the omen of

death. Beware the doppelgänger."

Nicola was not certain if these last words reached the vice president's ears.

This was because Ernst, who had quietly moved behind the vice president, rendered her unconscious with a knife hand strike at that moment. Having lost consciousness, she crumpled to the floor on the spot.

"Whoa, so Ern really can see her well enough to know where her neck is," murmured Alois, awestruck beside Nicola. She could only share his feelings of admiration.

Having deftly bound the vice president's hands and feet together, Ernst then expertly placed a gag in her mouth before looking up at Nicola and saying, "Shall I take her to the student council room?"

"Yes… Please do." Nicola bit her lip and hung her head.

Ernst nodded, then easily threw the vice president over his shoulder.

For a moment, Nicola thought Ernst's guardian spirit, which shined as bright as the sun, might neutralize the vengeful spirits around the vice president, finally allowing a glimpse of her face. Yet Nicola decided not to look, as knowing what the vice president looked like would not change a thing.

"Miss Nicola. You asked if this wouldn't be cowardly, or unfair, didn't you?" Just as Nicola lowered her gaze once more, Alois's voice tumbled onto the top of her head.

The following voice came from Char, who had just come out of the art supply room. "Cowardly, huh… If we were police officers or detectives, we might think of it as cheating. But we're exorcists, so it's fine."

"If we're talking about cowardice, I think it's far more cowardly to try and push your crimes onto other people," said Emma, displaying a bitter smile as she popped her head out of the supply room.

Alois picked up a tarot card that had fallen on the floor of the supply room at some point and gave it to Nicola to hold. When she looked at the face of the card, she saw the Ace of Swords she had drawn earlier.

"I think you said it symbolizes a just punishment or victory. Justice depends on where you're standing. I don't think it

necessarily has to be equated with what's morally correct," said Alois before lightly resting his hand on Nicola's head as if comforting a child.

"I mean, well... Justice in our case meant preventing false charges from being made against an innocent person. I don't think there was any need for us to take a virtuous path to do it. Don't dwell on it too much," remarked Ersnt, showing how worried he was about her.

She could only smile and mutter some brief words of thanks.

Char stood next to her and prodded her with his elbow, saying, "You never did know when to let things go."

If only she could simply dismiss everything as dryly as her junior apprentice could. She could not deny having wished as much once or twice in the past.

"You overthink about all sorts of things. It must be hard to live like that," added Char.

"You might be right. But I'm the one who gets to decide that," replied Nicola, hoping Char would get the message to mind his own business as she elbowed him back.

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I have some new tutors.

They say they're going to teach me morality and ethics.

But morality and ethics turned out to be nothing more than lessons in memorization.

Ah, what a nostalgic dream.

A dream from when I was still little. I could see a bird's nest outside the window in a child's room. When the parent birds came to feed the chicks, the chicks desperately raised their little beaks to eat their food. The fluffy little chicks were so cute, trying so earnestly to live. So I thought that when it was time for them to die, they would die in earnest too.

I'm pretty sure that was the first time, thought the vice president as she woke up from her dream, suddenly regaining consciousness.

Her head was still hazy, everything vague. As though her mind

was still dragging along some remnants of her dream, she sensed that her arms and legs were terribly far away. She wondered why she had been sleeping, but her memory returned all at once.

At the same time, she noticed a pain in her joints. When the vice president turned her head, her neck dully aching, she seemed to be in the student council room. Her arms and legs were tied up, with a gag carefully stuffed in her mouth.

I don't think I can even call for help like this, she thought, then let out a muffled laugh despite herself. *It looks like that young lady, the fiancée, and that firstborn prince took quite a frantic course of action. However you look at it, I'm the victim here.*

She had faced the suspect's fiancée and best friend on one side, falsely blamed at the feet of another to exonerate Sieghart, and being the victim of that false accusation on the other. Who would be more likely to garner sympathy? The answer was so obvious it was hardly worth thinking about.

Looking out the window out of the corner of her eye, she saw the sky already turning bright, signifying dawn was breaking. She had heard that the culprit would be transferred to the palace first thing in the morning, so his removal must have already been underway.

If you hadn't led me on by acting so kind, only to reject me, things wouldn't have turned out like this. The only thing I regret is not having the chance to kill his fiancée.

The vice president stopped pondering for a moment.

Having no other choice, at least I forced his fiancée to testify about his lack of an alibi and had his best friend discover the body. I had so hoped to see his look of despair when his best friend and fiancée refused to believe in his innocence. Unfortunately, things didn't turn out the way I thought they would.

As she reflected on her failures in order to avoid repeating them in the future, she suddenly realized something.

Someone's making quite the racket outside.

Straining her ears, she heard a woman's shrill, raucous laughter. Several pairs of footsteps and a man yelling angrily accompanied this. It sounded like the commotion drew ever closer to the room the vice president found herself in.

Once a figure flung open the door to the student council room, she saw a woman who looked exactly like her and wore the same

attire.

After this woman had untied the bonds around her hands and feet and finally removed the gag in her mouth, she whispered in the original's ear.

"The very crime you tried to pin on someone else has just been pinned back on you. I feel sorry for you."

Upon hearing that even the woman's voice sounded like hers, the vice president felt a chill travel down her spine. Even if the woman's face was identical, she wore a totally different expression.

With a pure, innocent smile, the woman whispered in a lisp, "A message from my matha. Umm, what was it…? What goeth around cometh around? Somethin' like that. Good for you, huh?"

This *thing* that had assumed her appearance said nothing more, then simply vanished like a puff of smoke.

As if taking its place, more people entered the room after practically kicking the door open. It was the royal guardsmen of the palace, accompanied by some of the academy's teachers and the exchange students from the neighboring kingdom. Finally, the firstborn prince and his personal bodyguard surrounded her, displaying stern expressions.

When she found her hands and feet bound together once more, she dimly understood what had happened.

Ah, now I see why they took such drastic measures. There's probably no way to turn this around now.

The vice president then expressed what she believed.

"Surely *this* is against the rules, isn't it…?"

6

What goes around comes around.

Said expression meant a person would one day be repaid in kind for their good or bad actions. The charges the vice president had attempted to pin on Sieghart had come back in full for her to face. That was the end of her story.

Everyone concerned with the case thus far, as well as the royal guardsmen deployed from the palace, gathered around to bear witness, Nicola and her friends exposed the trick the vice president had employed, naming her as the true culprit.

Of course, the vice president was not the one who was denounced but Gemini, having assumed her appearance. Living up to its reputation as a doppelgänger, Gemini shamelessly insisted on the vice president's innocence before ultimately acting out her confession.

In the first place, the shards of broken vases, thought to be evidence of a struggle, had fallen entirely beyond the outline of the body, which was strange no matter who looked at it. Everyone who witnessed the crime scene could recall spilled water, even though none of the vases had contained flowers.

When directed, they were all easily able to accept the theory that the culprit had made use of ice to cause the vases to break once the victim was already deceased.

Furthermore, Sieghart would not have had to go to the trouble of utilizing a timed apparatus if he was the murderer. The rest was easy once the group proved that the vice president could have committed the crime and obtained her confession.

Had they been dealing with the real vice president, she would have stubbornly continued to play the victim. She would have accused the culprit's fiancée and best friend of unjustly pinning the crimes on her to establish Sieghart's innocence. The odds probably would have been stacked against Nicola and her friends.

Fortunately, Nicola was declared the victor in the end.

Gemini provided the investigators with all the information they sought. Whether the vice president chose to remain silent from this point on or cried false charges would be meaningless.

◇

Once dawn had passed and the vice president was apprehended, Sieghart was finally set free after being subjected to some basic questioning. The day was so bright, the morning light so gentle that the previous night's blizzard seemed almost like a dream.

There were still glimpses of light snow, which looked like it would melt before it touched the ground. Though one's breath might still turn white, the sun's rays warming the air did not make it feel especially chilly.

No, *that's likely because I've been fidgeting so restlessly*, thought

Nicola.

She knew all too well why she could not calm down. Thanks to the situation that had arisen the previous night, she ended up saying some slightly embarrassing lines that she had covered up with rhetoric. Only a few hours had passed since that encounter.

“Oh, really. If you’re coming, then hurry up already… Wait, no, I’m not emotionally prepared yet.”

Nicola was not so audacious as to contradict the words that had already slipped out of her mouth. No, she felt her promise to Sieghart was not the kind one could back out of. Even so, she did not feel like she had enough time to prepare emotionally or decide what to say.

As she continued to fidget restlessly outside the schoolhouse entrance, she heard the muted sound of a door opening behind her. She shuddered and turned around to find Sieghart standing there, blinking bemusedly.

When Sieghart caught sight of her, he initially greeted her with a slightly troubled smile. Nicola noted that she was quite the opportunist, allowing herself to find a shred of resolve from nothing but that smile.

“Nicola…”

“Please, don’t apologize.” Just as Sieghart started to say something, Nicola quickly cut him off. She was pretty sure that they had both committed some blunders. But neither one of them would repeat their mistakes.

That was more than enough, and an apology would not be necessary.

“More importantly, there’s something I would like you to hear.”

“Well, then… Shall we go to the courtyard for now?” Sieghart almost gasped, but then understood Nicola’s intentions. After he nodded slightly, he took her hand and started walking.

The day after the annual ball was a day off, so the schoolhouse was naturally quiet.

Although some people were still darting to and fro, these were all those concerned with the incident. They knew Nicola’s identity now but understood they did not need to run and hide.

It sounded like far more trouble to head back to the dormitories, where Nicola and Sieghart had no idea who might

see them together. Their choice of venue was necessarily limited if they wanted to have a more relaxed conversation.

By using Gemini, they could let themselves into any vacant classroom. Explaining themselves to any academy staff who might happen by could be a pain, though. With all that in mind, the courtyard seemed to be their only option.

Even though the snow piled on the ground threatened to trip her up occasionally, Nicola allowed Sieghart to guide her by the hand. Her breath formed fluffy white clouds that floated into the air before vanishing before her eyes.

“Things may have turned out all right, but I really was useless this time around,” said Sieghart.

“Is that so?” asked Nicola. She figured that Sieghart had more or less solved the mystery all by himself.

His discovery of the delayed breaking of the urns and vases trick went without saying. But he had also proposed a few methods to make the room with the light in it appear green. One of them was creating ice from water that had been dyed green.

Because of the work Nicola, Alois, and the others had done, Sieghart had received enough information to posit a hypothesis. Thus, Nicola thought it was appropriate to consider the incident resolved by the collaboration of all six people in their circle.

The pair finally arrived at an arbor in a corner of the courtyard, where no one was around.

Snow had piled up underneath the bench, and the roof partially blocked the sun. This meant the air felt cold, although it was likely better than sitting on the edge of the fountain, where more snow lay.

Both sat side by side on the bench.

Despite Nicola’s susceptibility to the cold, she hardly felt it on this day alone. Perhaps it was her nerves or the warmth of the hand that held her own. Or perhaps she believed that their hands could finally touch.

Nicola locked her fingers with those of Sieghart. She squeezed them tightly before softly saying, “I’d like to continue our conversation from last night. What you tried to say then… I know very well that it was for my sake.”

Sieghart had said this the previous night. He wanted Nicola to be happy, and he would have liked to be the one to make her

happy. If that wish could not become a reality, he did not want her to feel bound to him or burdened by him. And so, if the time should come—but Nicola had interrupted him before he could speak further.

He spoke out of love and confessed his love for her.

If Sieghart, her first love, could ultimately not make her happy, he wanted her to forget him and find happiness with someone else. That wish was indeed a form of love.

Sieghart was the kind of man who could quietly pull himself away should he ever conclude that it was the right thing to do. He would never force his feelings on others. Moreover, he possessed an unspoken strength and kindness, which Nicola believed she should count among his virtues.

When he said he wanted Nicola to be happy, that was his unadulterated, deepest wish. She could understand his belief that insisting on being the one for her would be egotistical on his part.

Having been brought up as a constant object of unwanted affection, Sieghart must have harbored a deep aversion to forcing one-sided feelings on another. Nicola now understood that very well. How the recipient of that love ultimately felt determined whether the desire to personally make that person happy was egotistical.

Nicola was sure that she had more words she ought to have said, more words that she ought to have returned in kind than she could hope to bear. She now had to offer up the words so long expected of her but that she failed to say due to her lack of honesty.

“The truth is…what you said made me happy. Such a direct expression of love leaves me feeling a bit itchy, and I have trouble staying calm. I was pleased like someone had validated my existence.”

Once she had opened her mouth, her voice seemed to stick in her throat, not allowing the words to come out easily. Yet she strung one word after the other, expressing her most precious emotions in no uncertain terms.

She told Sieghart that she was happy to be loved by him and wanted him to know that. The words she dredged up deep inside her heart sounded unbelievably childish and clumsy. No hint of insincerity was left, nor any further attempt to save face through

bravado.

However, she still felt bashful and realized that her face grew steadily warmer, and her gaze headed downward. When she somehow managed to look Sieghart in the eye, he accepted her gaze earnestly.

That was enough for her to feel like she could vent her feelings till the very end, no matter how childish her words might sound or how long it might take.

“The truth is, I never wanted to hear you say that you would give up on finding happiness with me, just as long as I still found happiness myself.”

“I know…”

Supposing for one moment that Sieghart had left this world before Nicola, she was sure now that she would not think of following him. When she realized how fragile her state of mind had become, she would spare no effort in improving it.

Therefore Nicola could not return to the days when she thought that she might as well live as long as needed to protect her childhood friend. She also did not intend to go back. Even so…

Nicola did not avert her gaze again but looked straight into Sieghart’s eyes.

“If you happened to depart in death, leaving me behind, I can assure you that I would gather everything you left behind, treasure it, and carry it for the rest of my life. So, there’s no need to even mention the idea of me sharing my future with someone else. There’s no need for that.” She declared that Sieghart giving up on his happiness with her so that she might still find happiness was a meaningless act from the beginning.

If Sieghart wished to make Nicola happy, nothing would make her happier than for him to see that wish through to the end. Feeling that way was not egotistical in the slightest.

“It’s you I want… It’s you that gives my life meaning. If not with you, I couldn’t go on. I have no intention of taking anyone else’s hand.”

The winter sun illuminated the snowy courtyard, making everything glitter. But all was tranquil.

Nicola remembered hearing that the gaps between snowflakes absorbed the vibrations, explaining why a snowy place was silent. Sound could not travel far because their complex shapes shut out

vibrations.

Neither Nicola's heartfelt outpour or her childhood friend's sighs would be heard by anyone else. She almost felt as if they were the only two people in the world, and for once even felt that snow was not so bad.

Sieghart began to say something, only to hesitantly close his mouth. After a deep sigh, he managed to mutter, "At the time, it took a lot of guts for me to say those words…"

While his voice was so dry it sounded like it might crumble into dust, he still slowly continued to weave his words.

"I thought that, as long as you can smile in the future, I'd be happy, Nicola. Even if I couldn't make you happy, I wouldn't even need to be around as long as someone else could do that. For the sake of your happiness, I'd be happy to let you go. That's what I thought."

Once Sieghart said this, a troubled smile appeared on his face. This reminded Nicola of the fleeting glimpse of the winter moon before it dissolved into the cloudy sky.

His silver hair swayed unimpeded in the air before seeming to melt in the sun's rays that broke between the clouds. Then, his needlessly refined visage looked like it might vanish, an illusion leaving Nicola short of breath.

Sieghart gently placed a hand on Nicola's cheek to comfort her in that moment. He then softly touched his forehead against hers. When the tips of their noses brushed against each other, she could not help but feel a little ticklish.

Her heart leaped slightly once they were close enough to feel each other's breath on their skin.

"I thought I was prepared to let you go if it ever came to that… I can no longer wish to see you happy with another person. Are you truly prepared for that?"

If you love somebody, let them go. If they return, they were always yours. If they don't, they never were.

Who was it who said that, and where? Right now, I just don't seem to remember. Given that I *came back, even when he tried to let me go… That must mean that I belong to him*.

With all those feelings in tow, Nicola nodded firmly.

"If I say that I love you, never doubt that I do."

She thought one needed some sense of love to be loved and

reciprocate it. And most likely, she had been hopelessly lacking in that sense of love until now. In all honesty, she still did not know what to call these feelings or what the right way to handle them was.

Though she could not express her feelings in words, she was willing to borrow the word “love.” Perhaps she could call that destiny if she found the answer one day.

To share their slightly chilled body heat, they pressed their cheeks together and closed their eyes.



Epilogue

Tall potted plants swayed in the breeze, with the scent of green leaves hanging over the space. All this was in one corner of a vast, exquisitely maintained garden.

A small girl with black hair crouched in the middle of a carefully mowed lawn, staring steadily at her feet before suddenly standing up straight. She boldly—or perhaps uncouthly—picked up the hem of her dress, then raised one foot and brought it mercilessly down again.

Mmrghk. An unnatural noise came from the spot of grass immediately after the small girl stepped on it, a quiet death rattle that nonetheless offended the ears. Then an eyeball rolled along the ground, whereupon the small girl chased it down before snatching it up without hesitation and wordlessly squashing it in her hand.

Nicola watched this all play out and reflexively covered her face with one hand.

Upon sighing, she stood behind the girl with her arms folded and said, “Hey, don’t skip over the basics and rush things. I taught you the prayer you’re supposed to recite, didn’t I? You have to go through each step in turn.”

The girl simply pouted defiantly as she looked up at Nicola.

“But this is how Char always does it. He said that I can do the same thing.”

Nicola said nothing.

“I’ve seen you do the same thing whenever dad brings back something to exorcise, mom.”

“Well, yeah…”

It hurt to hear this. Nicola had meant to carry out such lackluster exorcisms where children could not see her. Regrettably, she appeared to have been caught in the act. However, that was beside the point. Nicola dropped to her knees to meet her daughter at eye level.

“When it comes to things like this, getting the basics right is vital, so you’re not ready yet.”

“‘Kay…” The small girl pursed her lips, seeming unimpressed, but nodded grudgingly.

The girl was as adorable as one might expect of someone her age, but her looks were not so refined as to warrant special mention. Besides her eyes, which were the same color as those of her father, the girl looked almost like an exact clone of Nicola. She was, after all, Nicola and Sieghart’s only daughter.

Despite the girl’s one flaw of her short attention span, she grew up fast and had recently begun to do everything by herself. She was at the peak of her tomboyishness. Incidentally, she could *see*, *hear*, and *feel*—all three senses of psychic potential.

“That may be, but Char is Char. He shouldn’t be teaching someone else’s daughter such things. Say, has he taught you anything else strange?”

Nicola scooped up her daughter and stared deep into her purple eyes. Her daughter glanced up for a moment as if trying to remember something, then responded with a carefree laugh.

“He said that if I throw any small fry at Mister Ernst, I’ll get to see something interesting.”

“Yeah, please don’t do that,” said Nicola. *Well, he has got one heck of a guardian spirit following him around*.

His guardian spirit was so insanely powerful that any marginal apparition would be blown away just by getting near him. If one did indeed toss any small fry in his direction, they would fizzle away in an instant.

Suddenly, Nicola felt slightly conflicted and had a faraway look in her eye. “You haven’t actually tried that yet, have you?”

“Nope. Not yet.”

“Really, please don’t…”

Hearing her daughter use the word “yet,” Nicola realized that she intended to put Char’s advice into practice one day and started to massage her forehead.

Her daughter’s naughty attitude had certainly not been inherited from Nicola or Sieghart. It must have been due to the negative influence of Alois or Char. Incidentally, Ernst almost always appeared to be the victim of her misbehavior and had Nicola’s condolences.

Nicola thought of each of her friends before sighing. “Also… You mustn’t take that tone around strangers or with your father.”

Held in Nicola's arms, her daughter screwed up her face and tried to squirm free. Even that expression appeared like a living copy of one Nicola had once made, but it was no good struggling. Nicola had picked her daughter up precisely so she could not escape her lecturing. Unfortunately for her daughter, there was nowhere to run.

"You're so petty, mom..."

Unlike Nicola, who had entered this life with memories of her previous one, her daughter had been born to a father who was a marquess. But for some reason, she refused to adopt the manners of a young lady. Whenever she spoke to Nicola, she always took this overly familiar tone.

Even if she called her parents "father" and "mother" when they had company, she went right back to saying "dad" and "mom" whenever it was just the two of them. This particular problem was undoubtedly due to Nicola's bad influence, so she could not scold the girl too harshly.

She left her daughter with a token admonishment to at least pick her words based on the time, place, and occasion. Her daughter pouted and gave her an unexpected response.

"I won't. If I end up talking like you, dad will really lose control."

Nicola was silent.

Honestly, she could not deny that.

Sieghart, who had always loved Nicola madly, now had a daughter who was the spitting image of Nicola as a child and directed this at her as well. In his own words, "She looks just like the girl I fell in love with. I couldn't have a greater treasure."

Their daughter still maintained a ladylike manner of speech around her father. If she adopted the same curt manner Nicola was known for, Sieghart would continue to dote upon her with endlessly increasing intensity. Even her efforts to act like a gracious little girl around Sieghart might have come off as an act of self-preservation on her part.

Seeing that her daughter's peeved expression was exactly like one she might have once made, Nicola smiled before murmuring, "Good grief. This is all because you resemble me in ways you really needn't..."

While it was not as if she disliked Sieghart, these countermeasures her daughter had taken were not charming.

Nicola lamented that the girl, except for her eye color, bore a striking resemblance to her mother.

As the girl looked up at Nicola, her expression seemed to say that she had just realized something.

“I’ll just have to accept that I look like you, mom. Count on my little brother to look like dad.”

“Little brother…?” There was no younger boy in her only daughter’s circle who might play the part of her little brother, so Nicola could only tilt her head in confusion.

“Yep,” said her daughter, doing nothing more than point somewhere. Nicola followed that direction, finding it led to her still flat belly. She blinked several times in surprise.

After counting *one, two, three* in her head, Nicola covered her face with one hand in exasperation. She confirmed that she had not eaten anything harmful recently and breathed a sigh of relief.

If all went well, this baby would be just barely the same age as Emma and Alois’s second child. As she considered this, Nicola looked her daughter in the eye again.

“You can tell? I mean, you’re going to have a sibling.”

“Yep. I think it’s a boy.”

“Really?”

A child’s intuition could not be dismissed. On top of that, her daughter’s sixth sense had already fully bloomed.

She’ll probably turn out to be right, thought Nicola, then a wistful expression came over her.

It might have been a nuisance, but it looked like she would continue to find more things she should and wanted to protect endlessly.

But that was surely the same thing as happiness.

“Are you happy to be getting a little brother?”

“Yep. I hope he can see the same things as me.”

“Hmmm… Well, it’s too early to say…”

As Nicola jostled her daughter to get a better grip on her, she felt something bump against her back. Then, she felt her daughter’s weight in her arms suddenly become much lighter. A pair of arms wound around Nicola from behind and embraced the pair.

She could hear someone stifle a smile right next to her ear.

“You two look like you’re having a lot of fun. What were you

talking about?”

Nicola and her daughter exchanged a glance, then giggled in unison.

And so Nicola shifted slightly, finding a more comfortable space to fit inside the arms that embraced her. Once she embraced her cheek against her daughter’s, they held a finger in front of their lips in an identical gesture.

“Sorry.”

“That’s still a secret.”

“Right?”

Sieghart did not complain and only looked lovingly at each of them. Then, Nicola slowly surrendered the weight of her body to him. She was not in Sieghart’s arms simply because he had wanted her. Before ending up here, she had yearned for the same thing and desire to feel needed.

She quietly allowed a smile to spread across her face, reflecting on the precious happiness that had come from this realization. A single kiss was planted on the top of her head.

As for their daughter, she seemed offended by the fact that her mother’s attention had diverted from her. So, she squeezed her head in between her mother and father. This gesture tickled both her parents, causing them to laugh together.

Afterword

Hello, this is Iino.

I would like to thank you for picking up the third volume of *The Troubles of Miss Nicola the Exorcist* on this occasion.

To think that this story, which was originally supposed to end after one volume, has continued to a third volume. And I certainly never even imagined that I would get to write such a satisfying conclusion.

It is all thanks to you, the readers, for picking up this series. You have my sincere thanks, my *most* sincere thanks, for sticking with this to its conclusion.

Looking back on it now, every day was hectic ever since the printing of volume one was confirmed. After all, I only had enough material for one volume. Not only did I not have a manuscript ready for volume two onward, but I didn't even have any ideas stocked up.

Just when I thought the work into printing volume one had finished, it was time to get right back to it! I had to start working on the outline for volume two.

Without even having a moment to catch my breath, I started work on the manuscript for volume two. Once that was ready for printing, I had to grapple with the outline for volume three... That should give you some idea of how rushed the last year and a half felt. But at the same time, I think it was a priceless experience.

To be honest, if asked what genres Ito Iino tends to read, I would say that I mostly read mystery and suspense novels.

Many times, I agonized over my work, wondering "Is this really the right way to write foreshadowing in a romance novel?" What emerged from this process of blindly fumbling my way forward was this *Exorcist* series, an isekai romance/occult/mystery novel.

Though I won't deny that it resulted from much meandering, I think I might have come up with quite a rare genre of story not easily found elsewhere.

(While I would call it a mystery, it’s definitely on the lighter side of that genre.)

However, I really think these genres are surprisingly compatible. I write this afterword with the secret wish that more writers might emerge in the same field—isekai romance/occult/mystery.

One final note.

Many people helped me put this book out into the world, starting with my head editor and Kinokohime-sensei, who drew such cute illustrations of Nicola. Thank you so much.

Of course, I owe my deepest gratitude to you, the reader, for being kind enough to pick this book up.

In closing, I pray that we meet again somewhere.

—Ito Iino









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The Troubles of Miss Nicola the Exorcist: Volume 3
by Ito Iino

Translated by Joshua Douglass-Molloy
Edited by Mario Mendez

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