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**THE ECCENTRIC MASTER
AND
THE FAKE LOVER**

Volume 2

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The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover, Volume 2

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Act 5: Infiltrating the Magic Academy!

Chapter 1: Girl, Enrolls

IN the center of Arcanshiel, a lush forest of towering trees surrounded Elminage Academy for Gifted Witches and Wizards. Magic prevented outsiders from seeing past the greenery to the academy grounds, and rumor had it trespassers would be ejected outside the forest.

“So this is the place?” Nichika stood at the forest entrance checking over her appearance for the hundredth time that day. She couldn’t help raising her concerns with her friends. “Hey, am I pulling off this rich girl look okay? It doesn’t scream impostor to you?”

“You’re super-duper cute!”

Wolfie’s stamp of approval helped boost her confidence a smidge. Nichika was wearing the red dress she had received from Makina in Lolo Village. She tied up half of her magically dyed reddish-brown hair with a big ribbon and tapped the tip of her knee-high lace-up boots against the dirt. She looked the part of a fancy young lady from a rich family, or so she hoped.

Confirming she had finished her self-assessment, the wolf sitting at her feet proudly puffed out his chest. “Look at me! Look at me! I get to wear a bowtie, too!”

“Make sure you don’t talk in front of other people, okay?” Nichika reminded him for the thousandth time that day as she straightened out his lopsided bow. He barely passed as a big dog, she hoped.

“Shall we head inside, my lady?” asked an uncannily serene voice behind them.

“.....”

Nichika suspiciously turned around. Before her stood an impeccably perfect butler from every visible angle, offering her a dashing smile. Silken locks of

brown hair fell on his round glasses, his starched black dress shirt accentuated the broad chest hidden under a waistcoat and matching white jacket. The look was topped off with unwrinkled trousers and white gloves.

After gaping at him with an indescribable expression, Nichika finally managed to say “Excuse me?”

“Yes, m’lady?”

“Why are you so into this, Oswald?”

The young butler was indeed Oswald in disguise. He was normally a handsome man with a frosty edge, but his butler act shockingly turned him into an approachable and charming youth. Amazing was about the only thing she could say for his ability to completely change how people viewed him.

“I believe I asked you to please call me Will, my lady,” her master advised with an affable smile, the entire aura about him shifting to fit his role.

“How can I?!” Flabbergasted, she searched for the right word to describe her problem.

I’d be instantly convinced if he said he was someone else Oswald hired to fill in for him... Actually, maybe that’s exactly what he did?

Displaying a polished smile capable of stealing anyone’s breath away, the butler gracefully offered his hand to his charge. “Come along. We should make haste through the forest before you tire, my lady. Please take my hand.”

“.....”



Any normal girl would have happily jumped at the chance to be escorted by him. Nichika, however, knew that behind the charming butler's smile was actually her arrogant, narcissist, eccentric master. Cheeks twitching, she pushed passed his proffered hand.

ANGELICA Rubens, her attendant Will, and pet Jon.

The gatekeeper compared the information on the admittance papers to the actual young lady, young man, and accompanying pet before nodding once and granting them permission to enter.

"You're good. Your papers appear legit. You're free to enter."

"Th-Thank you very much."

"Congratulations on your admittance. Good luck with your witchery."

Nichika, disguised as the transfer student Angelica, internalized her sigh of relief as she passed through the poorly lit stone gateway into a magic tunnel invisible to those without permission to enter. Her eyes widened in awe over what she saw on the other side. She had been under the impression the forest only housed a magic academy, but she also discovered a bustling town.

Directly ahead was a castle that screamed of a hidden history, and rows of fascinating shops in peculiar shapes lined the gently sloping hill leading to it. Boys and girls walked in every direction wearing the same black robes that designated them as students. Closer inspection revealed different color fabric lined each of their robes.

Growing more excited by the second, Nichika squeezed her hands together and looked around with stars shining in her eyes. "Oh my gosh! It's exactly like what I've read about in books!"

"What books?"

"There was this children's book I read a long time ago about a magic school just like this. Wow! I'm so moved!"

The students walking by stared at the enthused Nichika like she was some sort of rare animal let loose into their midst. The butler urged his charge ahead

and away from those needling stares.

“Elminage Academy for Gifted Witches and Wizards was originally made up of only the castle you see before you, but the locals slowly gathered here to do business with the students, eventually creating the town you see today,” he kindly explained for her benefit.

“Cool. That’s a graduate for you. You know a lot about your alma—” Nichika darted her gaze around to make sure no one heard her careless slip of the tongue. Fortunately, no one seemed to be paying them that much attention. She unwillingly raised her gaze to the butler beside her, but he naturally changed the topic without a hint of anger.

“I understand the town fascinates you, but let’s finish your enrollment formalities first, my lady.”

“Oh, okay.”

Let down that she couldn’t enjoy the town now, Nichika followed Oswald up the hill. He was being kind today. Too kind. Obviously it was all part of his act, but his behavior threw her for a loop anyway.

He usually jumps down my throat and mocks me like it’s a big deal whenever I goof. It’s disturbing that he’s not doing it now... Hold on! That makes it sound like I want him to make fun of me! I so don’t!

But I also feel like something’s missing... I’ve been totally poisoned by him, Nichika concluded just as they arrived in front of the castle.

A deep moat surrounded the castle, and students had to either fly on their brooms or cross the long drawbridge to enter the grounds. Nichika crossed the bridge trying her best not to look over the side at the rumbling river below.

A girl was waiting for her when she arrived at the imposing arched gate leading inside. She appeared around the same age as Nichika, and a black robe with red lining covered her well-rounded frame. Her green eyes practically shot into her forehead the moment she spotted Nichika.

“You’re five minutes late!” she snapped in a cutting voice.

“I am? I-I’m sorry?”

The girl flipped her flashy pink curls over her shoulder and broke into a shrill lecture as if she didn't deign Nichika's apology worth hearing. "Great Spirits, this is why I DESPISE spoiled girlyies who hail from the nobility! Hurry up and follow me! Man, why am I stuck with this stupid job?"

The girl marched into the entrance hall and up the imperial staircase ranting complaints under her breath without waiting for them. Nichika hurried after her as she unenthusiastically listed off the names of the different wings and pointed in their general direction...but she spoke so fast it was hard to catch what she said.

"The central wing is for the Department of General Magic and other common area facilities. The west wing that can be reached from here is the Wizard Department. The east wing that can be accessed from there is the Witch Department. If you go straight ahead, you will reach the General Department's dormitory. Okay, here's the key to your room."

"Ooph!"

Nichika barely managed to catch the key the girl tossed in her general direction. She glanced up from the gold skeleton key to where the girl glared scornfully down at her from atop the stairs.

"Not only did you enroll at the oddest time, but you even got the best room in the dorms, and brought along a manservant and even your pet to boot... I bet you're just after an academic record to score yourself a better nobleman, but this academy won't be as easy on you as your doting parents led you to believe."

"Excuse me?"

"I showed you around. Bye."

The nameless girl turned on her heel and stormed away. For whatever reason, she hated Nichika with a passion, which was a shock to say the least.

"The students admitted into this school are split into two groups: those who passed the entrance exams and those whose rich parents paid their way in through 'donations,'" her butler explained in gentle tones as he picked up her trunk. "She's envious because they rolled out the royal treatment for you, not

her. You needn't concern yourself with her, my lady."

"...Would you give the act a rest already?" Nichika requested, her master's formalities giving her hives.

"Nonsense. We don't know who might be listening, my lady," he rejected on the spot.

His grin was so wide she seriously wanted to ask him if he was enjoying himself that much.

THE gold key opened the penthouse room on the top floor of the dormitory. Astoundingly, they had the entire floor to themselves. Nichika was stunned by the gorgeous, palatial interior.

"What in the world does Lady Angelica's family do...?"

The girl she was posing as had kicked the royal treatment at school to the curb and fled to do who knows what instead. Was she enjoying a leisurely walk in a quaint town with her manservant in tow right about now?

Oswald answered her query as he lowered their things on top of the plush carpet. "*Your* family, the illustrious Rubens, operate inns across the world. You are expected to be in attendance at the academy for the next year, my lady."

"I am?"

"Please develop at least a basic awareness about your own family. You never know when you might be questioned."

"Ugh." Nichika struggled to come up with a good comeback. She didn't know when or where she might slip up. Averting her eyes, she began muttering excuses. "Easy for you to say when you've lived your whole life with a glib tongue meant for deceiving others."

She didn't mean for him to hear her, but the butler's gentle gaze temporarily gleamed with the icy chill of Oswald's blue eyes. The apprentice sat up straight on the bed and started speaking fast before her master could.

"Y-You are absolutely right! Please give me the papers on them! I'll cram it all into my brain!"

“Good girl.” Oswald turned from her and crouched behind the wolf intently sniffing every corner of the room, happily wagging his big, bushy tail. “Jon,” he called Wolfie by his undercover name.

“...Hm? Oh, that’s me!”

“There is a big building behind Elminage Castle. If you go inside and enter the second room on the left, you will find an old man who loves dogs. Please befriend him,” Oswald ordered, maintaining his butler voice even with Wolfie.

“Befriend? As in become friends? I want friends! Yippie!” Wolfie leapt with joy. He had grown much more confident about making friends since the incident in Lolo Village. The brown furball shot out of the room through an open window, not the penthouse double doors.

“Oh my gosh, Jon!” Nichika instinctively reached out to stop him.

“Don’t fret, my lady. He’s running along the ledge to get there.”

“What if someone sees him?”

Oswald glanced at the grandfather clock and asked her a question instead of answering hers. “You have one general magic class in the afternoon. Do you wish to attend, my lady?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I?” she asked like it was only obvious.

What was the point of enrolling if she didn’t attend?

“...Well, it won’t hurt for you to find out for yourself,” he replied with hidden meaning.

While a part of her was bothered by the implication there, she was even more excited than worried. Her mind filled with scenes from her favorite magic school books that she had devoured as a kid.

I get to take magic classes! I wonder what they’ll teach. I should really learn more about magic before using it.

When she thought about it, fighting from instinct until now seemed like courting danger. This was the perfect opportunity for her to absorb all sorts of information and new skills.

“WHAT the?”

Nichika stumbled into the classroom; everything she envisioned dashed the moment she opened the door.

Though the people here called it a classroom, it was a far cry from anything found at a modern school on Earth. The lecture hall was shaped like a mortar, with the students sitting on the dimly lit flat floor with concave walls rising high above them. It was more like a coliseum than a classroom with its lack of a ceiling. But that’s not what took her by surprise. The second she stepped inside, a row of glowing letters sparked in front of her eyes.

“This isn’t a ballroom, princess.”

I can see that?

“Whoa!”

Before she had the chance to process, new glowing letters started slapping her in the face at the speed of a kid sending hate texts on their smart phone.

“Why don’t you go sip tea and eat off a silver spoon in the comfort of your private rooms?”

“Wizards study here. You don’t belong.”

“How much did you bribe them with? Gimme some spending cash!”

“Real cute!” Nichika huffed, swatting away the tenacious letters.

Their spiteful remarks reminded her of what Oswald said about students being jealous of Angelica for getting in without taking the entrance exams.

Now I get what he was hinting at. She figured it out, but swinging her arms at the ever-increasing “posts” did nothing to stop them from sticking to her.

“Oh, c’mon! Give it a rest already, brats!”

The laughter rising from all over the classroom ticked her off. She clenched her fists and shouted from the pit of her stomach, “I came here to study! Don’t get in my way!”

The annoying letters popping up endlessly around her like a bad computer

virus abruptly vanished. A single sentence exploded in front of her eyes after a few moments.

“Why don’t you take a seat already?”

Fired up by their challenge, Nichika hopped off the ledge into the bowl of the hall and claimed the seat at the front of the class. Their childish bullying was no skin off her back. Like she would let them scare her away. Admittedly, the glowing words smacking her in the back of the head like spitballs were beyond annoying. They couldn’t have come up with a more irritating gimmick if they tried.

Ignore it. Ignore it. Don’t light them on fire and get yourself kicked out on your first day of school, Nichika told herself in a weakening attempt to keep from exploding with anger and lashing out.

“You won’t understand even if you study.”

“Why don’t you go crying back to Papa? Not that you know who’s casting this spell!”

“Annoyed, aren’t you? Getting to you, isn’t it?”

Ticked. Ticked. So damn ticked. Nichika was nearing her snapping point, when a brilliant idea hit her and she snapped her fingers under the desk.

BURST.

She grinned from ear to ear as all the posted words went up in flame around her. Magic really was the best way to deal with magic. Hearing the gasps behind her brought such satisfaction she internalized her grinning and faced forward with her features schooled.

The professor had arrived while the students were having their hidden battle of magic words. An elderly witch wearing a pointed hat rode in on a broom from the open ceiling. She landed with a heavy thud and scowled after surveying the hall.

“Oh goodness me. It reeks of magic in here. You all know magic is forbidden in the classroom. All right, get your books out. Class is starting.”

“YOU’RE not half bad at holding your own, girl.”

After class, Nichika was trailing behind the students leaving the room in droves when a girl spoke to her. She looked over her shoulder to find the pink-haired girl who had shown her around school with her arms crossed at her chest and a humored smile.

“You’re—”

“I didn’t think you’d burn the Chirps. An aggressive but effective move.”

Nichika instantly went into defensive mode and shot her down before she had a chance to say something nasty again. “What do you want? Did you have fun pestering me with those things?”

“Me? I wouldn’t dream of it! I wish you wouldn’t lump me in with those babies.” The girl’s catlike green eyes widened like she was offended by the assertion. “I had assumed you were a self-important noble, but I saw you taking class seriously,” she admitted, sounding touched.

“I didn’t come here to play around.” Nichika pouted.

The girl broke out in a big smile and apologetically held out her hand. “Sorry, sorry. I know that now. I never did introduce myself, did I? I’m Melissa. It was rude of me to be so cold before I even knew you.”

“...Angelica.”

Nichika returned her handshake while trying to get over how unexpected the apology was. Melissa tugged Nichika up to the door and out of the classroom.

“I’ll treat you to some Magico Beer in town! To apologize!”

“Wah! Hey!”

They were the same height yet Melissa was a lot stronger. She charged through the hallway dragging Nichika behind her. The other students gave them funny looks.

“Hey, what’re you looking at?!” the girl clipped out in response. “If you’ve got enough time to stare you aren’t studying hard enough. Ruppa! You haven’t forgotten about the magic herb quiz tomorrow, have you? You can’t graduate if you fail again! Celi, you napped through class again. The professor caught you.”

The students called out by name bitterly saw Melissa off. She paid them little attention as she left the castle with her head held high. Nichika panicked as she ran to keep up with her.

Wh-What's with this girl? She seems like an honor student, but does a horrible job at interacting with others...

Nichika worried whether it was smart to get involved with her. She and Oswald had disguised themselves and enrolled in Elminage in order to dig up information on the Witch's Council. Standing out in a bad way should be avoided at all costs. But she was reluctant to push away someone who was trying so hard to be her friend.

They arrived at their destination while she debated whether to shake off the other girl or not. Melissa had brought her down the hill to a shop in town. Laughter and young voices spilled outside the antiquated but welcoming shop walls. Nichika looked up at the hanging wood sign and read the letters engraved there. The name "Pointy Hat Pub" drew a small scream from her.

"You brought me to a pub?! We're underage!"

"Hm? It's all good. There's not a drop of alcohol in Magico Beer. I mean, it is a type of stimulant, but one approved by the school," Melissa cheerfully explained and headed for the counter where she placed an order with an apron-clad bartender. "Master! Two mugs of Magico Beer, please! Angelica, you can take it straight, right?"

"Um, sure?"

Melissa returned with two full mugs and placed one down on the table in front of Nichika with a loud clank. It was a bubbly carbonated cocktail with a gradient that changed from vibrant blue to hot pink.

"Without further ado, cheers!"

The girls clinked their mugs and took their first sip. The refreshing feeling of cool liquid sliding down her throat brought Nichika untold pleasure. Tasting the unknown gourmet drink finally brightened her mood.

"It's delicious!"

“Right? This is the most popular pub among students.”

Nichika’s wariness for the girl smiling happily across from her finally waned. Her first impression was about as bad as they came, but she didn’t seem to be an intentionally mean girl.

Melissa placed her mug on the round table for two and frowned with guilt. “I need to apologize to you again for earlier. I just assumed you were like all the other nobles who enroll for impure motives.”

“You take learning seriously, don’t you?”

The advice she threw out at the other students on their way here was said for their own good. Nichika’s honest opinion drew a bright smile from the other girl who proudly put her hand on her chest.

“Of course I am. I mean, I am Headmaster Grindieda’s granddaughter, after all!”

That unexpected confession stayed Nichika’s hand before she could bring the mug to her lips. She placed it back down on the table and the square ice cubes clinked against the glass.

“You’re the headmaster’s granddaughter?”

“What, you don’t believe me?” She shot Nichika a reproachful look.

“No, I don’t doubt you,” Nichika promptly replied with a shake of her head. “So that’s why you were advising the other students on the way here.”

“Oh my Spirits, not a single one of those children takes their studies seriously.” Melissa slammed her mug down on the table and burst into a rant with a glint in her eyes. “That’s right, someday I will become headmaster! I can’t have this school start in the pits when I take over. I’ve got to reform things before it’s too late!”

“Ahahaha...”

It was anyone’s guess if she would become headmaster, but she was a bigshot in her own right being able to ignore the other students’ apathetic, irritated glares the way she did.

Nichika poured herself another glass of Magico Beer and asked, “What’s all

this about nobles enrolling with impure motives?”

Melissa twirled a pink curl around her finger as she contemplated how to best answer her. Playing with her hair seemed to be a habit whenever she was deep in thought.

“Okay, here’s the thing: while the headmaster has the most authority over Elminage, there’s also a group that’s only second to her in power called the Five Eldra Steorra. This group is made up of professors selected from each department, but there’s been some seriously fishy rumors going around about them lately...”

Nichika knocked back the Magico Beer while listening to her. *Man, is this drink delicious.*

“Rumor has it they’re letting noble kids enroll after receiving hefty bribes and that they’re actually secretly in cahoots with the Witch’s Council. Hard to know what to do with them without clear-cut proof.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

I just got ahold of some unexpected intel, Nichika absently noted as she tipped back her glass, only to realize it was empty.

“Heyy, Melissa? Can I have...another?”

“Sure? I don’t mind. It’s on me as an apology for earlier. Have as many as you want.” Melissa raised her hand and another pitcher appeared on their table. “And get this: if the Five Eldra Steorra all agree on something, not even the headmaster can overturn it. It seems like Grandmother is having a hard time lately because of that.”

“Fa-ive...Elda...Steorraaaa...and the Witch’s Couuuncil?” Nichika slurred.

“I believe they’re connected. Don’t you think the Witch’s Council has grown more radical since Spirit Goddess Yuna went into hiding? It’s looking more and more like the Five Eldra Steorra have a direct say in the direction the council takes—”

“Scaryyy.”

Melissa only then realized that several dozen empty mugs filled the table in

front of the slurring, inarticulate girl. The nobleman's daughter had both hands wrapped around the new pitcher and was staring dreamily into its contents as if she were holding the Holy Grail of bliss.

"...Angelica?" Melissa called, sensing something amiss with the girl.

"This is yummmm—y! I could drinks lots and lots of it," she replied, sounding more like a four-year-old than a teenager.

"Uh, don't tell me you got drunk on Magico Beer? Very few people get drunk on ether."

"Ahahahaa! I'm not dwunkkk. Melissha, your head is sooo curly and cute. Like a poooodle."

"Hey!"

Nichika pulled on a pink curl and added the sound effect "Boing!"

The noble young lady felt so good she passed tipsy. Red flushed her cheeks and her eyes shimmered. Learning how easily her new friend became inebriated, Melissa took a mild approach to stopping her from drinking more.

"Angelica, you should stop drinking—"

"Don't wanna. Gimme more!" Nichika hugged the pitcher to her chest like a child when their mother threatened to take away their favorite toy. But when someone snatched it up from behind her, she tilted her head back with a curious expression. Excitement blossomed on her intoxicated face at the man she saw. "Oh! Oswa—"

"So this is where you were, my lady. I have been looking all over for you." He covered her entire face with his large, gloved hand. The noble young lady giggled and happily squirmed under his hold.

Melissa apologetically came to her feet on the other side of the table. "If I'm not mistaken, you're Angelica's attendant?"

"I apologize for the trouble my lady has caused you. Lady Angelica has a low ether tolerance, so even the weakest amount takes immediate effect."

"I shouldn't have treated her to it then. We should take her back to the dorm to rest."

“I agree. I shall take responsibility for her. My Lady. Lady Angelica.”

Tapping Nichika on the shoulder only got a wimpy reaction out of her as her head lolled to the side. Sighing with resignation, the butler wrapped a supportive arm around her waist and helped her stand. He shifted her under one arm and tried to pull some bills from his pocket.

Melissa waved it away. “Oh, I have it. She didn’t cost much. Besides,” a bashful smile lit up her face as she continued in a voice that sounded delighted from the bottom of her heart, “she gave me the chance to have fun drinking with someone for the first time in a long time. Would you mind telling her I had fun once she sobers up?”

The butler gave a slight smile and a bow in return before leaving the pub with his charge. Melissa sat back down and brought a mug filled with the remaining Magico Beer to her lips.

“What a suave butler...”

The man had only been present for a whole minute and he turned the head of every female student in the pub who now excitedly gossiped about how handsome he was. Melissa pretended not to notice their hopeful glances.

At the same time, she tried to figure out why she felt like she had seen him somewhere before.

I know I’ve seen his face somewhere, but the personality doesn’t match up with who I’m thinking of.

She tipped back the rest of her drink while she fought with the aggravating sense of déjà vu that she just couldn’t put her finger on.

“**I’M** bein’ carried like a primcess! Ahaha! Can’t believe Master’s carrying me. Are spears gonna rain from the sky? Ah, wait, I want spearmint instead of spear-rain! Spearmints gonna rain!”

Oswald wanted to groan over the girl innocently throwing her arms in the air trying to catch imaginary candy. The people walking the evening-lit road chuckled as they watched them go by. It took every ounce of self-control for

him to maintain a gentle smile as he softly admonished the girl in his arms.

“My lady, you are more susceptible to curses and hypnotism because you haven’t been baptized yet. Please tread extra carefully.”

“Ahahahaha! Hey, hey. Why you talk so funny? What’s wrong with yousss?”

“What’s wrong indeed.”

Feeling his smile twitch at the corners, the sham-butler hurried. He never expected the girl who tried so hard to be independent at all times would turn into such a baby after drinking a basic stimulant.

By the time they finally returned to the dorm room, the sun had settled beyond the forest, leaving only a speck of orange light. In darkness navigable without light, he gently lowered the girl he had been carrying onto the bed. The spoiled princess who had been in such elated spirits until then darted her unfocused gaze around the room with a glazed look. Yet when her eyes found his, her whole face lit up and she began chirping away like a pesky little bird in the wee hours of the morning.

“Listen, listen. So yesterday, Mommy kneaded the steak in bed!”

Oswald peeled the wrapper off the candy capable of suppressing the Fake Lover parasite and pushed it into her mouth. And still her chitter chattering didn’t stop.

“It made this ooey-gooey, slurpy-urpy sound. And then the sausage went kaplooy!”

“Why don’t you lie down and get some sleep, my lady?”

Annoyed by his suggestion, the girl puffed out her cheeks and tugged him to her by his hair. He scowled from the pain, but found himself lost in her clear eyes only inches from his face. When he said nothing, she put an unexpected request to him.

“Name.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I’m not your lady. Call me by name!”

What are you? A toddler throwing a fit? Oswald suppressed his thousandth sigh that day. He reluctantly called her by the name she currently went by.

“Lady Angelica.”

“Not! That! One!” The girl shook her head back and forth and pinned him down with a commanding glare. Then she pressed another demand on him. “I hate you being all prim and proper.”

“You have my deepest apologies.”

“Talk to me like you usually do.”

“You have my deepest apologies.”

Her expression clouded over the more he treated her like a stranger. Unease filled her voice when she called his name.

“Oswald...?”

“Please call me Will.”

“C’mon, Oswaaaaald!”

“My lady, please listen to—”

She yanked him the last few inches separating them, erasing the smile off his lips and the next words off his tongue. She childishy pecked him on the lips and quickly withdrew. Her eyes glistened as she clung to his shirt until crystalline teardrops rolled down her cheeks.

“Do you hate me now...?”

He wiped away her messy tears with the pad of his thumb. The sham-butler maintained a troubled smile as he placated her by stroking her hair. He purposefully spoke in a soothing voice to appease her.

“How could I hate you, my lady?”

“I hate it when you don’t kiss me.”

Oswald’s hand stopped midstroke. Unaware that she had thrown off his perfect actions as butler, Nichika begged with him to drop the act.

“I don’t want the butler Will. I *want* Oswald.”

Hers was likely an innocent request for him to stop acting like another person. But the meaning was changed entirely by her inebriated state and pink cheeks. Tears stained her face still shaped by the vestiges of adolescence, and the moonlight traversed a white trail across her thighs exposed by her slightly hitched up skirt.

She wasn't a woman. Nor was she a child. Before he knew it, Nichika's hands had moved from his chest to his back. She let out a sigh of relief like a wanderer who had finally found a place to rest their weary soul.

"So warm."

Her husky whisper gnawed at his heart, transforming his desire to protect her into something altogether different. Oswald pretended not to notice that unknown feeling and forcefully tossed it to the wind.

He decided to sober her up once and for all. As her master, he needed to teach her what happens when you carelessly cling to a man. Finally discarding his butler mask, Oswald lifted her face from his chest and gazed intently into her eyes.

"Are you...inviting me to take you?"

"Um..."

"All right." The corner of his lips curled up in a wicked smirk as he brought them closer to her ear and whispered in the sexiest voice imaginable, "If you so desire it, I'll love you until you're begging me to stop."

Chapter 2: Girl, Forestalls the Inevitable

SWEET poison infiltrated Nichika's ears and directly jolted her brain. She snapped right out of her intoxicated state as if someone had doused her tipsy mood with ice water.

Sobering up made her current situation suddenly very sketchy. She and Oswald were all alone on top of a bed in a room illuminated only by shafts of moonlight spilling in through the blinds. They were so close they were practically on top of each other, and she felt her pulse throb under his hand on her wrist.

Bad. This was an extremely bad situation. And she was pretty sure she had run her mouth saying something preposterous only seconds ago. Something about wanting kisses and fear of being hated. She put a little strength into her free hand to give his chest a gentle push.

"Um, Oswald?"

The man she called master briefly looked into her eyes and smirked as if that told him everything he needed to know.

"Good morning, my fair lady," he greeted in a ridiculously polite voice.

"Yup, I'm up! I'm all here now! I'm sorry for running my mouth! I've regained my sanity, so you can stop—wah!"

He lifted her into the air and sat her on the edge of the bed. She was dead scared of his smile because she was fully aware of going overboard this time. Stupidly overdrinking caused her to become oddly giddy. Swearing to herself to never again touch another mug of Magico Beer wasn't going to do much about her present predicament. What did he have in store for her? A lecture? Or a taste of his unforgiving sarcasm?

Nichika braced herself for the worst when he presented her with an unanticipated suggestion.

“Why don’t we go ahead and enjoy ourselves since we’re already part way there?” he whispered into her ear.

“Enjoy what?!” she shouted against her better judgment.

Oswald knelt in front of her. Was he continuing his butler farce? He took her right hand in his and reverently pressed it to his forehead.

“I live to serve your every desire.”

Nichika’s heart practically leapt from her chest with the way he touched her like an irreplaceable treasure. Flustered, she fumbled over her words. “U-Um...”

“To your fingertips I offer my admiration. The back of your hand, my respect and affection.”



“Ah!” Nichika gasped as he planted a kiss on each spot he mentioned. Electricity coursed under the skin his lips brushed along.

“Desire. Love...obsession.”

“Anhh...”

Wrist. Arm. Neck. His lips gradually moved higher as he slowly pushed her down on the bed.

“Where do you wish it next, my lady? Order me however your heart desires.”

Her whole world was monopolized by the beautiful blue of his eyes. A peculiar color, she thought. It was different from sky blue and ocean blue, and wholly unique to him.

“My...desire...is...” she breathed.

She was being swept up in his pace. The words froze on her tongue with his weight on her chest.

“My everything belongs to you, my lady,” the butler whispered against her nape.

Though her mind knew it was all an act, her heart was swayed by the passion dripping from his husky voice. She should have been sober, but a bewitching heat lit her up from the inside, dazing her mind once more.

I want him to touch me more, then take me—what? Oh my gosh. What in the world am I thinking?!

Nichika was horrified by her indecent thoughts. But the terror was washed away by the stimulation it caused. She was drowning in the feelings raging inside.

“Nichika...”

“Ahhhh!”

Something deep inside her squeezed tight when he called her real name out of the blue. Nichika lifted her gaze after releasing that longing, breathy sigh. She reached both hands up to take hold of the handsome face gazing down at her, when—

“Wha-?!”

“Kya!”

A light barrier suddenly formed between them, momentarily lighting up the dark room. Frowning, Oswald drew back a foot, and Nichika took that chance to push herself upright and scoot away.

“Wow! Wow! What a sh-shock! Ahaha! That was some static shock! You okay?” she asked in a purposefully loud voice and hastily escaped to the other side of the bed.

Silently clicking his tongue, Oswald pulled his loosened tie off.

“.....”

“.....”

The silence was painfully loud. Nichika endured his burrowing stare while her cheeks were still aflame. Hurtful words flew out of her open mouth of their own volition.

“S-Stop joking around with this stuff.”

“What?”

“I know you’re just teasing me, but I don’t have any experience in that area, so...well...” *I might take you seriously.* Not that she could say that out loud. A pause stretched out before she lamely finished with, “you can’t...do that.” She clutched the sheets and hung her head.

When he finally spoke, his voice was devoid of emotion. “I see. You mean to say you and I aren’t a good match.”

“I mean, isn’t that obvious?”

This man only kisses me because of our deal. He’s forced into it to keep me alive. That’s all, Nichika told herself.

“You’re only troubling me by doing what’s more than...*necessary.*”

She was ashamed of herself for hoping for more. Especially when her master had a multitude of admirers lining up at the door to win over his affections. There was no way he would get serious about a kid like her. So she drew a line

in the sand, forestalling what came next. After all, emptiness was all that went with physical relationships without feelings involved.

Just how much time passed before anything else was said? The next she heard Oswald speak, he addressed her with the indifference of a servant.

“Your wishes have been noted, my lady. Please forgive my many indiscretions. I am not worthy.”

“Hey...” When she raised her face, Oswald had switched completely into butler mode.

“Goodnight, m’lady,” he quietly said with a facile smile, elegantly bowing before departing the room.

“.....”

Left all alone, Nichika pulled her knees to her chest in the pale light of the blue moon.

OSWALD leaned against the door and looked up at the red moon. “I’m no good, huh?” he muttered in a threadbare voice.

He was fully aware that he was a dangerous man. He broke laws, deceived people, and was a bona fide wanted man.

That girl was genuine, simple, and shockingly pure. In all likelihood, her path in life ran straight through where the sun always shone. On the opposite end of the spectrum stood Oswald whose path twisted and turned through every shadow and dark corner of the planet. Dragging her down to his level was unforgivable, no doubt. He didn’t want to be her downfall nor did he wish unhappiness upon her.

They were traveling together because of the way things were right now, but someday their paths would split.

The girl had once asked him, *“Do you think someone like that exists for me? Someone, somewhere in this world, who can come to think of someone like me as their number one?”*

It appears I’m not good enough to be that someone.

Hurt shimmering from the depths of his blue eyes, the eccentric master sneered at himself.

“A wise choice, Nichika.”

The feelings brewing on both ends of the single pane door failed to reach the person on the other side.

THE next morning Oswald coolly went about his work in direct contrast to Nichika’s awkward behavior. He brought her breakfast, poured her tea, and prepped her things for class while she ate.

“Are you getting used to your classes, my lady?” he broached a natural conversation while inspecting her writing materials.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I’ve got my letters down well enough to read and write, and the things you’ve taught me during our travels have really come in handy.”

Nichika had braced herself for what nasty things he might say and was relieved they could hold a normal conversation still.

Ha, I almost forgot. My relationship with him is nothing more than master and apprentice (well, mistress and butler right now). What more do I want from him?

Wiping the sandwich crumbs from her hands, Nichika wondered about their missing companion. “Oh yeah, when is Wolfie coming back?”

Something fluffy stumbled inside the room and weakly collapsed in front of the hearth as if waiting for her to ask that question.

The utterly exhausted wolf groaned with his head planted firmly on the carpet. “Awoooo...” he whimpered. “I met a fate worse than death.”

“Wolfie!”

Nichika ran over to see what happened and balked. The fur coat he was so proud of had been dyed different bright colors and braided with butterfly clips. His new look was topped off by a top hat, bows clipped into his mane, a cape tied at his neck, and a matching set of doggie slacks with an ugly sweater.

Nichika lifted a pink braid tied off with a flower clip and asked, “What happened to you?”

“Welcome back, dear Jon. Did you have a fun playdate?” Oswald greeted with a complimentary smile.

Wolfie peered pathetically up at his master with tears shimmering in his big eyes and wailed. “You’re a big fat meanie, Master! You said the old man loves dogs!”

Trembling with the fur standing up in tufts on his back, he began relaying what had happened the night before.

“All night he cooed, ‘You’re so cute, I could eat you right up!’ And then he kissed me all over, put me in all sorts of weird clothes, forced me back with magic when I ran away, and did other things I don’t wanna remember! I finally got away because he had to go to class, but if not for that, I would’ve become that pervert’s plaything for life!”

“See? The man *loves* dogs.”

It’s not what you say, but how you say it that makes all the difference in how people interpret things.

Oswald’s nonchalant dismissal drew a long howl from the wolf. “Nu-uh! That ain’t love!”

Nichika strained a smile thinking this must be how all the dogs on Earth must feel when their owners dress them up. But her thoughts snagged on something else he had mentioned.

“He had to go to class? Is he a professor here?”

“Umm, umm. What’d he say again?” Wolfie scratched at the top hat with his back paw, trying to remove the annoying decoration. “I know, I know! He called himself a Five Eldra Steorra. Whatever that is.”

“Then he’s one of the professors trying to control the school from the shadows!”

The Five Eldra Steorra. Nichika’s mind had been dulled by the effects of Magico Beer, but she clearly remembered talking about them. Remembering

Melissa's dismayed expression left Nichika astonished to hear Wolfie was with one of those very members.

Butler Oswald raised an impressed eyebrow at her reaction. "Oh? You have heard of them, my lady?"

"Yep. From the girl who became my friend yesterday. Wait! Why did you send Wolfie to one of those dangerous people?" she asked, sliding a pointed glare at him.

Her 'butler' confessed his reason without a modicum of guilt. "I believe you are aware that a 'certain witch' is currently being hunted by the Witch's Council, yes?"

Said witch is standing right in front of me, she snarked internally.

At long last, Oswald was revealing the true reason why they were in attendance at Elminage. "Rumor has it the Witch's Council is in cahoots with the Five Eldra Steorra, so the objective is to infiltrate their ranks and discover the truth of these claims. Said witch sent his familiar on ahead to do some of the preliminary legwork."

"Seriously...?"

When Oswald said he wanted to investigate the Witch's Council's pull within Elminage, she didn't think he would take such a direct method. She was starting to worry about his approach.

Oswald put his hand to his chin and contemplatively mentioned, "Their whole reason for trying to capture said witch makes no sense. This isn't his first time selling items that cause chaos throughout the world. So why take umbrage with it now of all times?"

"So you're aware your items cause chaos..." she couldn't resist pointing out.

The church bells signaling class would begin in five minutes rang across the grounds. Panicked she was going to be late, Nichika shoveled the rest of her breakfast into her mouth.

Oswald handed over her books and opened the door. "I shall handle the investigation. Please enjoy your schooling to its fullest in the meantime, my

lady.”

“Mmph!” she gulped down her last bite. “Phew! Be careful!” She accepted her things and took off in a run for her next class.

Wolfie’s tail limply fell from its curled-up position as he watched her go. “Hey, Master?”

“My name is Will.”

“Did something happen with Nichika?” he asked, concerned. Oswald’s impeccable smile twitched at the corners. Pretending not to notice, his familiar continued, “She seemed tormented.”

“Surely because she has been thrust into an unknown enviro—”

“You too, Mister Will,” Wolfie whimpered. Oswald didn’t meet his gaze. “I can smell your hurt,” he quietly murmured.

This time the man he served failed to school his features. A cynical smile unbefitting of a butler curled his lips, and he uttered what the wolf could smell was a big fat lie.

“You are imagining things.”

I know he said he’ll handle it, but I hope he’s not taking any big risks. I’m worried.

Nichika rested her chin on her hands in class and mulled over her last conversation with Oswald. Sitting beside her, Melissa moved her lamb skin paper and writing materials to the side and leaned over.

“You have bags under your eyes. Couldn’t sleep?”

“Ack. Really?” Nichika rubbed under her eyes, but she couldn’t tell without a mirror. She swept her gaze over the classroom in hopes of finding one when Melissa’s voice brimming with curiosity hit her smack in the side of the face.

“Don’t tell me you spent such a passionate night with your butler that he wouldn’t let you sleep until morning?!”

Nichika slipped from her chair and hit her forehead against the desk in a loud

thwack. Rubbing her temples, she glanced incredulously to where her friend stared at her with stars shining in her eyes.

“Melissa...you do know what a butler does, right?” she had to confirm first.

“They care for their master’s *ever-y* need, right? Kya!” Melissa covered her face with her hands in a bashful display.

She was undoubtedly letting her imagination run wild. Her expression told Nichika that things would escalate very quickly if she chose even one wrong word in her explanation. As she was trying to pick her words, Melissa scooted even closer. “I know all about it because of what I’ve read in novels and magazines. Is he skilled? Make you feel good?” she squeed.

Memories of last night came flooding back. His blue, passionate gaze shining in the pale moonlight, the lingering feel of his lips on her sensitive skin, the smell of him on her—

“Oh my familiar! I knew it! I knew it!” her school friend whooped when she saw Nichika’s flushing cheeks.

“W-We didn’t do anything!”

Good grief! Not even schoolgirls in the height of puberty are this forward! Nichika chased away the lingering sensations from last night and drew on her memory of what Oswald forced her to study about Butler Will.

“He’s the son of my father’s subordinate and was only recently hired once I was accepted to Elminage. It hasn’t even been a week since we met.”

“Aww, really? Too bad.” Melissa’s shoulders sagged with her disappointment. “He’s so cool though.” She clenched her round fists and animatedly exclaimed, “I’m looking forward to seeing where the relationship takes you, Angelica!”

“.....”

Where do you want it to take me? Nichika was saved from a response by Melissa placing a finger to her chin and staring up at the open ceiling in recollection.

“On another note, I just know I’ve seen his face somewhere before. Somewhere on campus.”

“C’mon, stop thinking about boys and start focusing on class!”

Oswald used to attend Elminage. Chances were there were traces of his attendance left here and there, but it’d only spell trouble if she pieced it together while they were investigating the school. Nichika swiftly changed the topic by pointing to the lectern in the center of the hall. She was positive an honor student like Melissa would fall for it, but her friend shrugged.

“Doesn’t matter. This is the second time I’ve heard this lecture.”

“The same lecture?” Nichika followed her gaze to the person standing at the lectern.

“So, because of that, magic itself has no power, spells can only be activated with the help of spirits—”

Teaching the lecture in a dreadfully flat voice was a professor with a receding hairline and a beer belly.

Sighing, Melissa rested her chin in her hands and explained, “That there is a member of the Five Eldra Steorra. I don’t know if he’s gone senile lately or what, but he’s been repeating the same lecture every time. Oh, right.” She apologetically pressed her hands together and dipped her head. “Sorry, I forgot this would be your first time hearing him. Shouldn’t have interrupted you if you wanted to listen.”

“Yeah, it’s my first time. Thanks.”

Melissa scooted back to her own seat and behaved herself after that. Nichika didn’t mind chatting with her, but she was relieved to be free of her interrogation.

Letting her mind wander would inevitably lead her to think about last night, so she took up her quill and concentrated on the lesson at hand. The professor seemed to be using either a spell or a magic item to project his voice to the far ends of the large, cylinder hall.

“In other words, a person is composed of three parts: the soul, the body, and the heart vessel that connects them.”

Soul and body. And the heart vessel that connects the two.

The girl from another world learned the principles of this world while taking notes. The professor's monotone voice increased in intonation.

"The heart vessel contains the soul. The shape varies from person to person. Say a soul tries to enter another person's vessel, it will either overflow or, conversely, the soul will deform to conform to the shape of the vessel. They say this is why replacing or taking over the mind rarely succeeds."

Did that mean someone went around experimenting by tearing out souls and jamming them in other people? Nichika became immersed in the lecture while thinking that was something Oswald would likely try.

"The vessel is also believed to be where we access magic. Put another way, the heart vessel is where the magic within interacts with the mana in the universe around us."

Essentially, the heart vessel acted like a converter that transformed mana into magic. Not being a person of this world, Nichika had to wonder if she had that organ too. Then again, she probably couldn't use magic if she didn't, so she had to. Right?

"The heart vessel normally can't be physically materialized, but it is said that the Goddess Yuna you are all familiar with took her vessel out while collecting spirits and used it to gather their power. Well, it was probably just some sort of magic orb that she used."

The sudden mention of that item startled Nichika into running her fingers over the belt around her waist. She had left the magic orb in her room to avoid drawing attention to it, so it wasn't there.

Goddess Yuna: the woman who journeyed to free the spirits from evildoers. Would it be farfetched to think Nichika was reenacting her same journey? After reading the picture book in Cherry Blossom Kingdom, she had asked Oswald about it since the story mentioned spirits, but he told her that the tales about Yuna were so old they were more like unproven myths.

Should they really be leaving something as important as saving the world to someone like me? I mean, they left it in my hands, so I'll do what I can, but still. The loud man with large golden wings came to mind. Now that I think about it, I haven't heard from Ini since then. What's his deal? Forcing his request on me

then throwing me to the wolves.

Then again, I'd rather not be on the receiving end of his sexual harassment. Better that he's not around. I'm sure he'll show up when he needs to.

The bell rang as she reached that conclusion. The professor shut the book floating in front of him and ended class.

"Oh dearie. Let's stop here for now. Be sure to review what I taught today."

"You said the same thing last time," Melissa griped with a wry smile. She pushed out of her seat and cheerfully invited, "Want to go to lunch with me? I heard the cafeteria's B Lunch Set is the tastiest option today."

"Sure."

Flashing letters appeared in front of Nichika's face as she was about to leave the hall. *Again?* Irked, she lifted her hand to bat it away, but froze when she glimpsed the contents.

Melissa looked back when she didn't follow her. "Angelica? Something wrong?"

"...Sorry, can you go on ahead? I just remembered I have something to ask the professor."

Not the least bit suspicious, Melissa accepted her excuse as truth. "You're so motivated with your studies. I'm impressed. All right, I'll save you a seat, so come as soon as you can."

The door heavily swung shut after the last student left the hall. Nervous energy filling her belly, Nichika turned around and rested her eyes on the professor still standing in the middle of the basin.

Clasped in her hand was the magic Chirp saying, "Stay after class, Miss Nichika."

"Who is Nichika? My name is Angelica," she stoutly announced to the room, barely managing to keep her voice from quivering.

"Now, now, don't be so guarded. Let's have a lil' chat, why don't we?" the professor chuckled in a lively voice that belied his earlier monotonous droning. He cracked his neck while complaining like a young man. "Ugh, this form really

cramps my style. My shoulders are killin' me."

Raising his right hand, he snapped his fingers. His beer belly swelled within inches of exploding before instantly deflating. Nichika's eyes flew wide open at the unbelievable spectacle unfolding before her.

"What the?!"

"Ah, man that was suffocatin'. Wonder if I can't get the Prof to go on a diet. Wish he'd think 'bout how I feel havin' to transform into him all the time. Sheesh a meesh."

From the deflated fat appeared a tall and slender young man. His long, dark-green bangs covered his right eye, and a number of rugged metal piercings glinted on his ears. Yellow eyes that had more in common with reptiles than humans snaked over to her. A grin broke out on his roguish face.

"Hi! Good to meet ya in the flesh, Nichikaa."

He spoke with an odd accent and had a frivolous way about him. Nichika broke out in a cold sweat at the sound of that familiar voice. Dashing every hope she had that her instincts were wrong, the man openly introduced himself.

"Thanks for the good times back in Lolo Village. It's me. Your good pal, Lambert."

The first person on the list of people who shouldn't find her here took one step closer to Nichika.

Chapter 3: Girl, Gets Eaten

NICHIKA couldn't hide her trepidation over reuniting with the last person she wanted to see again. Trembling as she took a step back, the question "H-How?" slipped out.

"Did I know?" Lambert slowly closed the space between them with a smile.

Retreating from him, Nichika cycled through all the ways Lady Angelica appeared different from her. She should've looked like a completely different person from who he met in Lolo Village. Her dark-brown hair had been dyed red, her clothing style changed, and her cheeks were powdered with makeup.

Her lower back collided with a desk, knocking her into the seat where she froze in place. Lambert's yellow eyes reminded her of a snake's. Chuckling, the serpentine man placed a hand on the desk and leaned down.

"That's a good question," he answered in a teasing voice. "I was too far away at the time to get a good look at ya. And I honestly couldn't make out your face." He scooped up a lock of her hair with his free hand and planted a kiss on it. "The smell of your magic gave you away," he sneered.



Sharply sucking in a breath, Nichika's hands started shaking. Though her brain screamed to run away, her body didn't listen. Was she under some kind of spell?

Paying her fear no attention, Lambert went on with a grin, "You see, I've always been able to sniff out the subtle difference in people's magic. It's a specialty of mine."

He treated her with the friendliness of someone chatting to an old friend and yet her heart thrashed against her ribcage like a drumbeat warning her of danger. Instinctual fear unexplainable by words washed over her.

Did he realize it? He reached over in yet another casual display of touch. "Y'know, you've got an amusing smell. Sweet enough to melt a man and... tantalize his taste buds."

The hand he placed on her neck was colder than ice. Nichika finally came back to her senses when he brought her a little closer to him. Magically breaking free of his hold on her, she pushed him away with all her strength.

"Get...away!"

"Whoopsie wooh." Lambert drew back without a fight. He gave her a little space and threw his hands innocently into the air. "Don't be mad. I'm joking. Joking."

"....."

Flaying him with an unforgiving glare, Nichika stood with the desk as a blockade between them. She had left the magic orb that connected her to the fire spirits in her room, but she was prepared to take him on here and now if it came to it.

Catching on to her battle-readiness, the young man hung up his teasing grin. "Whoa, down girl. Don't go into battle mode on my account. I'm not so arrogant to go at it with the Priestess under the divine protection of the spirits."

"What are you after? Planning to snitch to the school?" she asked sharply.

Hands folded behind his head, Lambert drolly shot down her accusation. "I'd never tattle."

“Why not?”

“I’ll lose my entertainment if you get kicked out so soon. I’ll probably tell the truth if my bosses ask, but till then I’ll be a happy spectator. Good with that?”

“Th-Thanks?”

He chuckled at her misplaced gratitude before breaking out the wicked grin of a naughty boy. “Then again, I might tattle if you fail to amuse me.”

“HUH?!”

He may not be antagonistic at the moment, but he wasn’t one to let her guard down around. Wary, Nichika slowly inched her way from the room.

“Ooh, right,” Lambert’s well-timed utterance stopped her. “Say, Nichika, aren’t you forgetting somethin’?”

“Forgetting something? Like what?”

Am I forgetting something I shouldn’t be?

Lambert’s single remark plunged Nichika’s mind into a thick fog.

“Haven’t you forgotten something important? Or are you just pretending to have forgotten? That’s how it looks to me at least.”

The rest of what he said sounded like it came down through a foghorn. Nichika’s lips moved automatically, answering in a voice that was not her own yet sounded just like her.

“I haven’t forgotten anything.”

What the heck is this? Who is speaking for me? The calm part of her vacantly questioned.

“.....”

Silence fell. First to throw in the towel, Lambert shrugged.

“Well, whatever. Let’s just leave it at that.”

Released from whatever magic held her mind at bay, Nichika blinked several times, bowed, and ran from the room. Left alone, Lambert made a lollipop appear with magic and began chomping it into tiny pieces.

“That’s some amazingly powerful memory suppressing magic right there.”

Lambert had sniffed out a very nasty smelling spell enveloping her that in no way belonged to the girl herself.

Who cast it on her and what for? Are they hidin’ some inconvenient truth?

The first person to pop into his head was the man in black who was always with her. Wasn’t he about the only person in her life capable of exercising such powerful and dark magic?

“Things have just gotten a whole lot more interesting.” He spat out the lollipop stick and smiled like a boy looking forward to his new toy. “I wanna taste test that girl.”

AROUND the same time Nichika came face to face with a dangerous acquaintance, Oswald was in the height of breaking and entering. Thrusting his face through a sticky spider web, he clicked his tongue and wiped the tendrils off.

This the spot?

Crawling on his hands and knees, he moved aside a board, filling the attic with the heavy stench of beasts. He stifled a cough and swung into the room with catlike precision. In the dark he felt his way to the desk in front of some bookshelves, placed his hand on the exact drawer he was searching for, and uttered the magic password. There was a click as the drawer unlocked and obediently slid open.

Grateful for the information Wolfie obtained during his infiltration the prior night, Oswald unashamedly fished through the Five Eldra Steorra member’s desk. Quickly finding the documents he sought, he ran his eyes over the text there, his eyesight assisted by a magic item.

This is it. The items of concern to be addressed during the next Witch’s Council meeting.

Without a minute to waste, he confirmed their agenda which was a long list of things that were greatly inconveniencing to him:

1. The proper way to restrain and detain witches without an official license
2. Revoking technology and knowledge from those who aren't under the Council's guidance
3. Requiring witches to seek approval from the Council before creating any dangerous items or compounds
4. Any items with a rating of A or higher are to be immediately handed over to the Council and impounded until—

“Tch!”

Picking up on the heavy footsteps outside, Oswald quickly put the desk back in order and hid behind the bookshelf. As an extra precaution he activated an Elusive Ball and slowed his breathing. The bickering voices he heard passing by the room likely belonged to the Five Eldra Steorra living in this building.

Oswald stood to make his getaway before the room's owner returned.

“The magic items you create are still too amazing.”

Oswald spun toward the rich, profound voice behind him. His eyes rounded at the person he found there. An older woman with her head held high and a refined air about her stood there unsmiling. The woman he recognized—or more like, the woman he had, at a time, met with every single day, continued her evaluation of him in the same stern voice that plagued his memories.

“Your creations are *too* excellent. Hence why you rely on them too much and fail to notice the presence sneaking up on you. I believe I gave you ample warning about considering your surroundings before activating your items.”

Grindieda, Elminage Academy for Gifted Witches and Wizards' headmaster, completed the magic circle she was secretly erecting with a wave of her hand. It was a cordon circle from which one couldn't escape without the express permission of the caster.

Knowing her spell on the spot, Oswald let out a resigned sigh and removed the magic distorting his appearance. In a matter of seconds, the gentle brunette butler reverted back to the raven-haired, frigid witch.

“I see you still always manage to find a reason not to give me full marks,

Master.”

“I’m pleased to reunite with my worthless apprentice. Come along to the headmaster’s office. We can catch up there.”

Several minutes later, the door clicked open and the owner returned. By then, no one was around, and only a pinch of magic lingered.

UNAWARE of her master’s capture, Nichika returned to the penthouse after class that evening to a wolf restlessly pacing the room. His ears flicked upright and he ran over and jumped on the girl wailing.

“Awooooo! Nichikaaaa! Welcome baaaack!”

“Hey there. What’s wrong?”

Wolfie let out a distressed howl then gave her the unbelievable news. “Maaaster has...Master has vanished!”

“H-How?”

Wolfie tearfully explained that Oswald had snuck into the Five Eldra Steorra’s mansion earlier that day to further his investigation. He ordered Wolfie to keep watch outside, but time flowed on endlessly without any signs of him returning. As the wolf paced back and forth debating what to do, the man with an unhealthy love of dogs came back, reigniting Wolfie’s trauma from the other day and he scampered away.

Oswald didn’t return at the time he set? Nichika’s thoughts arrived at the worst possible conclusion. She clapped her hands around Wolfie’s fluffy cheeks and shouted, “Doesn’t that mean he got caught?!”

“Awooooo! What do we dooooooooooo?!”

Nichika was about to ask more questions when she noticed a sudden change. Pebbles of red light rolled from her hair and melted into thin air.

“Oh no!”

The magic disguising her wore off with a loud POP. Her flashy red hair reverted back to its original subdued color. Oswald had activated the magic

item clipped into her hair, and its effects continued to be in use by constantly burning a minuscule amount of his magic. Something must have happened to him if he couldn't even maintain that low-scale spell.

Wolfie seemed to draw the same conclusion as his fur stood on end and he let out a long howl. "Awoo! Something's happened to Master!"

"Let's go look for him, Wolfie!"

Nichika snatched the magic orb from its hiding place under her pillow and flew from the room with the wolf. Someone called her to a stop just as she made it to the bottom of the dorms and was about to pass through the entrance hall.

"Ohh? Why are ya in such a hurry?"

"Mister...Lambert!"

Dyed orange in the evening sunlight, he flicked his hand in an amused wave. He was being stared down by the girl and her pet wolf, but tossed them a friendly grin and fussed, "Aw, shucks. Don't treat me like a stranger. Call me by name."

"Uhh, who are you, mister?"

"Me? A champion of justice." Lambert messed with Wolfie who was meeting him for the first time.

"You're a hero?!"

Nichika held her head in one hand at her friend whose eyes twinkled. "Sorry, I'm in a rush! I'll deal with you later!" she shouted, her boots squeaking on the hardwood floor as she broke into a run past him.

"Could it be you're searchin' for good ol' Oswald?" he casually remarked.

She skidded to a halt just past him and looked over her shoulder at his mildly startled expression. She took three steps toward him and growled, "You know where he is?!"

"Uh-huh. I sensed someone usin' teleportation magic somewhere on campus a short while ago. That was him, probably."

“Please! Tell me where the user teleported!”

Surprise flashed across his face when the girl grabbed him by the collar, but it was immediately replaced by a deadly grin. “You might be the first person to ever outright ask me for what they wanted.”

Bargaining and haggling dictated most of the exchanges in this world. Ashamed of having forgotten that rule yet again, Nichika released his shirt.

“I-I’m sorry.”

“No worries. My heart did a little flip. Oh, but I think I’d like a reward in return.”

“If it’s something I can give—” she said, her fists clenched and head tilted back to face him.

Something brushed Nichika’s lips. Unsure of what just happened, she merely stared at his face only an inch or two from hers.

“.....”

Lambert licked his lips which curled into a satisfied smile. “Thanks for the taste.”

***THAT** was just payment. That was just payment. That was just payment. That was just payment,* Nichika repeated in her head like a litany as she ran. *Why do the people of this world kiss without permission? Do kisses have no feelings attached here?*

Unconcerned with the great state of dismay he put her in, Lambert showed the way, explaining things as it pleased him. “Students can’t teleport because there’s a barrier covering the entire campus. Only professors or higher are allowed, but from the bitter taste in the air, I’d say that spell was cast by the headmaster.”

He spun around and skillfully ran backward, a big grin spreading across his face. “Speaking of taste, your magic tasted delish. Can I have another bite?”

“Quit your yapping and focus on getting me there faster!” Nichika demanded, her cheeks crimson. Lambert cackled at her.

"I didn't know you were a friend of Master's, Mister. You a student here?" Wolfie asked out of curiosity as he frolicked alongside Lambert.

"Moi? I'm more a grad student. I currently work at the magic lab assisting the Prof."

"Prof?"

"Yup. Lolo Village's lil' Makina's old man. Professor Logical."

Nervous tension shot through Nichika, staying her legs. *Right, this guy used a magic item to control Sumire into throwing herself off a cliff.*

Suddenly stopping and eyeing him with a dark expression told Lambert more than he needed to know about what she was thinking.

"What's wrong?" he asked in a friendly voice that went along perfectly with his always approachable expression. "Lemme guess: you're worried I'm gonna lead you straight into the wicked arms of my Prof?"

Laughing, he waved his hand in front of his face and denied the question he put out there. "Nu-uh. Not happening. Relax. I'm the type of guy who follows through with a job after I've been paid. I really am gonna bring you straight to where upperclassman Oswald is."

"....."

His assurances did nothing to alleviate her wariness of him.

"The whole ordeal with the maid in Lolo Village wasn't my doin'," he added for good measure. "I didn't have much choice since it was Prof's orders. Gotta work for the money received, y'know?"

"That doesn't give you the right..."

Lambert, who'd only been laughing and smiling the whole time, suddenly turned serious. His tone dramatically shifted to a deadly calm as he stated the conviction he lived by.

"Anyone who deals with magic must keep a promise once made. Even the most trivial verbal agreement becomes a contract to us."

He's saying the same thing as Oswald. After an internal struggle, Nichika

finally conceded.

“Fine. I’ll trust you to lead the way.”

Lambert grinned and resumed his backward run. Sneaking a peek at the girl running beside him, he snickered on the inside.

She’s as innocent and trusting as a child. They say sincerity is a virtue, but put another way, it just makes the person more convenient. He purposefully didn’t warn her about it. After all, her trustfulness might make things “more convenient” for him later. *Not that I know when that’ll be.*

FROM there they ascended one staircase, went down another, climbed another, and descended again. Nichika had forgotten the way they had come by this point, and her stamina had subsided faster than her willpower as she ran more out of desperation than actual energy. Stopping, she placed a hand on the brick wall in the dimly illuminated passage and caught her breath.

“Haah...haah,” she panted. “How much farther...are you gonna take me?”

Beads of sweat rolled off her onto the cold floor. It didn’t matter how much stamina and endurance she had gained since arriving in this world, she still had the strength of a girl from modern Japan. She couldn’t compete against a wild wolf and an even wilder young man.

Worried, Wolfie rubbed against her leg and nosed the miniature broom hanging from her belt. “How about you fly the rest of the way?” he suggested.

“If I could do that...I wouldn’t be...running...” she wheezed.

One wrong move with the broom and it’d rampage on her, eating up more energy than running with the wolves. Lambert walked back to her without a single sheen of sweat on his face.

“It’s just a hop and a skip away. The headmaster’s office is up there,” he encouraged in an annoyingly energized voice.

“Up there? That’s it?”

Several dozen stairs awaited her where he pointed.

“Want me to give you a piggyback ride the rest of the way?” her guide offered with his hands folded behind his head.

“No need! I came this far...!”

Willing herself to stand, Nichika glared at the last obstacle. She was going to make it the rest of the way on her own whatever it took.

“Come to me!”

She removed the miniature broom from her belt and chucked it in front of her. Boom! With a puff of white smoke, it turned into a full-size broom. She mounted her flying companion sidesaddle and commanded it.

“Let’s go!”

The wolf and young man easily ran up the stairs after her as she rapidly ascended. It suddenly dawned upon her as she focused on her destination that the method Charlotte taught her for stopping involved coming to a slow stop by creating wind resistance around her. But that applied to the outdoors, and she was currently inside a narrow brick passageway.

How do I stop?

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!”

“Nichika?!”

Accelerating to an unstoppable speed, Nichika burst through the door to the sound of her own screams. She somersaulted several times on the floor before she knew what hit her.

“Ooww.”

Finally tumbling to a stop after banging every part of her body, she sat up rubbing her lower back. An exasperated voice rained down from directly above her head.

“...What in the world are you doing?”

She craned her neck at the sound of the voice she had been searching for. Her master, now dressed as himself rather than a butler, stared down at her with his arms folded at his chest. Before he could say another word, she hopped to

her feet and inspected his tall body clad in all black.

“Oswald! You okay? Hurt anywhere? Did they torture you?!”

“Torture? What goes through that small brain of yours?”

He wasn’t bleeding and nothing was bent in the wrong direction. Relieved to find him intact, Nichika placed a hand on her chest and smiled.

“What a relief!”

“How did you even get all the way her—” Oswald doubted her ability to get there on her own, but the moment he locked eyes with Lambert in the doorway he scowled. “Geh.”

Not the least bit bothered by his upperclassman’s disgust, Lambert smirked. “Hiya, pal. Awww, shucks, don’t look so darn happy to see me.”

“Maaaster! I’ve been looking all over for youuuu!”

Nichika swept her gaze over her surroundings as she grabbed her broom off the floor. The round room towered over the castle gardens, and she could make out the dimly lit townscape and the dark forest that extended beyond it through the windows. The room itself had a somber interior. There was nothing particularly strange about it, except for one magical object spinning around.

“This is the headmaster’s office?”

Where is the headmaster? Before she could locate the room’s owner, a hand reached out and pulled her into an unwanted hug from behind.

“NICHIKAAAA, baby! My precious angel! How have you been?!” trilled an excited voice next to her ear.

“GAAAAAAAAAAH!” She jerked her neck back to find a brilliant smile floating in a ball of blinding, gold light. Startled, she cried out the name belonging to that familiar voice. “Ini?!”

The mysterious man who had entrusted her with the magic orb and the mission to travel the world collecting the power of the Four Great Spirits hadn’t changed one bit since their first encounter. Nor had his inappropriate sexual advances.

“Mm, mm! Nothing’s changed about you! Hm? Did you grow a little here?”

SQUEEZE!

“Ick...!” Nichika brought down the full might of her fist on the devilish man who suddenly squeezed her breasts. “Don’t touch me, pervert!”

“AUGH!”

Her powerful right straight punch landed a direct hit on his cheek, sending the golden man soaring into the back corner of the room.

This is what you get for testing me, Nichika thought with her shoulders rising and dropping with heavy breathing.

“Can you get any more disruptive?” a new voice boomed through the headmaster’s office. “Where do you think you are?”

Nichika turned toward the owner of that strict, commanding voice. An older woman was standing in the broken doorway. When did she get there? Intelligence gleamed in her rose-brown eyes, and white streaks peppered her mousy brown hair pulled into a tight bun.

“Grindieda.”

“Master.”

“Headmaster.”

Ini, Oswald, and Lambert addressed her at once, revealing the woman’s name and identity without Nichika having to inquire. The woman who seemed to embody calmness in demeanor and pose was Elminage’s headmaster and, apparently, Oswald’s master.

Deigning not to look at the men who spoke her name, Grindieda flipped her black witch’s robe behind her and stood before the sole girl in the room. She addressed her without smiling. “You must be Miss Nichika.”

“Erm, yes. Nice to meet you!” Panicking, she dropped into an awkward curtsy. Something about the headmaster made her feel like she was before a queen and needed to act as such. She glanced up under her lashes at the intimidating woman and received a question she couldn’t easily answer in return.

“It appears Angelica Rubens rejected her enrollment into the academy.”

“—!”

This is bad. Real bad! What excuse can I make now? Sweat dampening her palms, Nichika maundered her excuse.

“Well, you see...it’s like this...and that...”

“I’ll allow it to pass for now. Raise your head, child.”

Nichika timidly looked up to where the other woman stared down at her without a single readable expression upon her wrinkled face. After a long while, she exhaled a cumbersome breath and closed her eyes.

“I see. So you are the Spirit Priestess...”

“How do you know that?”

Did she hear it from Ini?

Before Grindieda could answer, Ini stepped forward, his golden wings spreading obnoxiously wide as if he had been waiting for this opportunity to steal the spotlight.

“Looks like it’s time for me to step up. I wish I could’ve explained everything to my precious Nichika during our fated meeting on top of the Whale’s deck, but various circumstances prevented me until now.”

Ini snapped his fingers and cushioned chairs burst into existence with a tiny boom behind each person in the room. He threw his arms out wide with theatrical pomp and took charge of the scene with a flourish.

“Take a seat, ladies and gentlemen! For now is the time to unveil the details behind this time’s Spirit Priestess Project!”

IT was undeniably stirring in the darkness. Amid the thick and viscous nebulous black of night, *It* felt joy.

Soon that person will come. Soon they will feed me that delicious substance, It thought.

Before long a small person cloaked under a white hood slid into the darkness.

They were carrying a heavy tin bucket.

It roared with delight upon their arrival. The visitor apathetically listened to the guttural sound that would've scared the soul out of an ordinary person. They casually apologized for being late and flipped over the bucket, dumping out the contents.

"Sorry for the wait. Eat to your heart's content."

A thick, sticky dark-purple gel-like substance oozed out of the gray container.

It jumped with joy. The visitor spoke in gentle tones as they watched over *It*.

"Ahaha. Grow up big and strong for me soon. And once you do..."

Only the disturbing noise of chewing, crunching, and splattering filled the dark.

"IT'S my job to revive Goddess Yuna?!" Nichika leapt from her seat. The chair fell over and clattered against the floor. Too ruffled to notice, she organized the information Ini provided aloud. "Uh, hold on. I'm not sure I get this. Isn't Yuna a mythological being? You know, just a legendary character that went down in ancient history as *possibly* a god?"

As Nichika scraped together the bits and pieces of information available to her, Lambert tossed in his two cents from the seat next to her. "Righto. And now there's a rumor floating 'round 'bout her having died several months ago."

"Mana has been actin' up and not functioning properly since. I heard you can't use magic at all in some areas. They say that's why monsters have been rampaging lately," Wolfie continued after him, lying on the floor across from her, his ears pricked upright.

Ini cast down his gaze and woefully replied, "I truly do feel bad about the issues we've caused on that front. As a representative of the Celestial Realm, I offer you our deepest apologies."

Celestial Realm. The sudden mention of a phrase right out of a fantasy novel rendered Nichika speechless. Did that mean another realm existed in the skies above Arcanshiel?

Exasperated with his apprentice who fell silent, her eyes having rounded into perfect circles, Oswald prodded her from where he sat to her left.

“Why the dumb look this time?” he sighed.

“Master, what’s the Celestial Realm?!”

“.....”

She turned toward her master with all the vigor of a lioness pouncing on her prey. He eyed her like she was some kind of rare exhibit on display at a mystery shack. Fuming at his reaction, she sought an answer from him.

“Oh gosh! You’re giving me THAT look again! Yeah, yeah. I get it. I’m OH SO ignorant when it comes to the ways of your world. But you know what? They say: to ask may be a moment’s shame, but not to ask and to remain ignorant is an everlasting shame!”

Nichika was proud of herself for having her first good comeback in a while. Oswald blinked several times before answering her without his usual snark—though his answer seriously lacked in the useful department.

“The Celestial Realm is what it sounds like it is: the world where the celestial beings live above the skies... Or so they say.”

“Why do you sound so uncertain?” she asked, thinking that was rare for the man who often lauded his extensive knowledge over her.

He crossed his arms at his chest. “The Celestial Realm is as much a fairy tale to us as the legend of Spirit Priestess Yuna is. No one has breached the realm before, and its residents rarely see it fit to show themselves according to the records, but...” he slid his judgmental gaze over to Ini and snorted, “then you get some worldly, perverted celestials like this one who ruin your whole image of the heavenly host.”

Ini returned his remark with a snicker and retorted, “Why, I was wondering what all the buzzing in my ear was, but I see it was just my empress’s manservant prattling. Your dismal face is still such a bore.”

“And you’re still parading around like an idiot ruining the moment. Have you found any of your missing screws yet?”

“Ahem! Save it for later!” Nichika shouted, stepping between them before the conversation derailed completely. “Is it true that Ini is some sorta god?!”

The golden pervert cracked a goofy, self-satisfied grin. “We call ourselves celestials, so we’re probably on par with gods to those who look up to us from the surface.”

Ew, I wouldn’t want a sexual harasser for a god. Nichika kept that thought to herself. She didn’t say anything out loud, giving way for Ini to launch into a story of his own.

“I used to serve Yuna as her attendant...”

In those days, the world revolved around the continent of Arcanshiel and had only two big countries, rather than the dozens of independent nations that made up the land today.

Those two countries absorbed even the smallest settlements scattered around the continent, eventually splitting the world into two main factions. The conflict between the White Kingdom based in the north and the Red Kingdom governing the south was plain for all to see.

Unsurprisingly, the two countries moved to conquer the other. They commanded the spirits to massacre and used their crafty witch’s items to kill millions of innocents. Some sorrowful spirits sealed their power and disappeared for good.

“It’s just like the story I read...” Nichika observed as she recalled the picture book she found in Cherry Blossom Kingdom.

“That much is covered in the books of this realm,” Ini confirmed. “But this next part has only been passed down in the Celestial Realm and can’t be found in any book.”

The celestials, who usually hid their existence, saw the gravity of the situation for what it was and finally got off their lazy butts to take action. After all, with their deep connection to the spirit realm, they determined the long, drawn-out war to be nothing more than a blight on the world at large.

Thus, they prepared a lone girl to enact their plans, believing offering up a heroine would prove more effective in touching human hearts on the surface

below.

“And that was Lady Yuna?” Wolfie interrupted for the first time.

“It’d definitely be a lot easier for the masses to get behind an adorable girl coming down from the heavens on God’s mission to punish evil than a buncha butch men.”

Like Jeanne d’Arc? Nichika thought after Lambert’s remark but kept it to herself because she didn’t think anyone present would get the reference.

Ini went on with the story.

The Celestial Realm’s plan was a huge success. In particular, the settlements that were forced to surrender and be absorbed into the two nations gave Yuna their full support. Yuna traversed the continent recovering the spirits forced into doing evil and sheltered them in the magic orb. Eventually, the small rebel armies popping up in each region grew bigger, and the war finally came to an end by defeating the kings of both countries. White and Red kingdom were dismantled, and the people dispersed to start the several dozen nations that made up the continent today.

After listening through Ini’s history lesson, Nichika confirmed the historical ending she had garnered from reading. “Yuna became the Spirit King after that, right?”

“The correct term is Spirit Goddess. The person in that role doesn’t order the spirits around, but rather acts as their representative,” Grindieda explained as if teaching a lecture on the topic.

Ini closed his eyes beside her as he recalled the distant past. “Exactly. She was truly radiant during those days. War Maiden has never suited another more than she.”

“...Uh, you saw her? In person?” Nichika asked, hung up on the nostalgic way he spoke of Yuna.

“Of course! For I had accompanied her on her journey to punish evildoers!” Ini proclaimed as if it were a given.

“Didn’t that happen hundreds of years ago? Just how old are you?”

The man who looked no older than mid-twenties put his hands on his hips and leaned back. “I stopped counting once I hit the third digit. I’m forever twenty-six!”

“Sorry for calling you an old man when you’re actually a fossil.”

Ini shot a wicked look at Oswald, “Ha! You can only dream of a body this youthful when you get to be my age!” before resuming his storytelling in the same vein as before. “How far along was I? Oh, right, once Yuna became goddess the surface world stabilized for several hundred years. But then...” He cast down his gaze and his tone dropped several decibels. His always glittering expression clouded over for the first time. “A certain incident happened in the celestial realm a while back causing Yuna’s soul to separate from her body.”

“What...?”

“Allow me to take a slight deviation from the story to touch upon the three elements that compose a person. Do you know what the third element is that connects the soul to the body?”

Ini’s sudden change in topic clicked right away with Nichika who looked toward the young man slouching in his chair. “Isn’t that what you taught about in class today, Lambert?”

“Hey! Don’t rat me out, Nichika!” He slid from the chair under the headmaster’s hawkish gaze.

“I hope for your sake that you didn’t teach Professor Logical’s class for him again—”

“Ah! Uh! I’m not what we’re talking ’bout, ma’am! Anyways, the answer is the heart vessel, God Ini!”

“That it is.”

Grindieda looked like she wanted to interrogate him some more, but, fortunately for Lambert, the mic passed back to Ini. With a nod, a hologram-like image displayed between his open palms. An enchantingly beautiful golden chalice flickered there, drawing a dreamy sigh from Nichika.

“Beautiful...”

The palm-sized chalice was embedded with shining red, blue, green, and yellow stones in each of the cardinal directions. It appeared to be an invaluable relic that was too marvelous to ever name a price for.

But then the bewitching chalice shattered in a million fragments without warning. Glittering light spilled out from the scattered shards.

Confirming the look of shock on Nichika's face, Ini sorrowfully nodded. "As you can see, Yuna's soul departed her body after her heart vessel was destroyed. "

"Did she disappear for good then?" she asked, careful not to offend him.

He slowly shook his head. "No. It's hard to imagine a soul as powerful as hers would so easily revert to the cycle of life. I believe she is wandering somewhere, unable to find the body she should return to."

Ini raised his right hand, displaying a different image of a simple vessel that was similar in size and shape to the golden chalice, but pure white and without any decoration. Spinning it round and round in his palms, he confided his plans in her.

"I have already prepared a new heart vessel. The problem I face is how to draw Yuna's soul inside it..."

"And that's where I come in?" Nichika asked, almost positive that was the case.

Smiling, Ini pointed to the magic orb dangling from her belt. "Exactly. Yuna's soul was always with the Four Great Spirits. I just know if she can sense them together—"

"That her soul will surely come to be with them," Nichika finished. Squeezing the orb in her right hand, she felt reinvigorated about her role. "Okay, I'll do what I can! We have to return Lady Yuna back to her body as soon as possible. Right, Oswald?"

She looked to her left, but her master's face was a nebulous void. Anxiety surging within her, her hand curled around the orb and her lips trembled.

Why did her bad premonitions always have one-hundred percent accuracy?

She sucked in a breath to speak before he could say what she didn't want to hear, but he quietly spoke first.

"Nichika. I'm not going. This is where we part ways."

He avoided looking at her saucer-wide eyes. Instead, Headmaster Grindieda took a step forward, blocking Nichika's view of her master.

"I was actually discussing that matter with this child before you came. Miss Nichika, you are about to embark on a journey to save the world's goddess. Do you honestly believe such a wicked man is worthy of standing beside the world's savior?"

"I...he..."

No one could blame Nichika for stumbling over her answer. Thinking back on their time together, they were hunted down by the Witch's Council at the first village they visited because of him, he had tried his hardest to brainwash an innocent Whale, and she had nearly died in Cherry Blossom Kingdom from a magic bullet of his making.

Headmaster Grindieda didn't wait for her response before delivering her own conclusion. "I do not believe so. Oswald's notoriety is growing in the underworld. What will the world say if such a heinous man is traveling with the Spirit Priestess?"

The desire to refute her sparked to life within Nichika. Sure, Oswald was a genius at starting arguments and creating enemies wherever he went. But she knew he was more than that. But before she could decide on her defense of him, the headmaster made the decision for her.

"I don't know how he wheedled his way into your good graces, but I can say with confidence that he did so to use your reputation and power."

"He did not! I coerced him into taking me on as his apprentice long before either of us knew I was the Spirit Priestess!" Nichika protested.

"Then don't you believe that is all the more reason to end your relationship here?" the headmaster's heartless voice drowned hers out. "Your personal feelings matter not. This is all for Goddess Yuna and her reputation. You should understand as much. Unless you are a small child who wishes to throw a

tantrum?”

“.....”

Nichika sunk her teeth into her bottom lip. Frustration pulsed through her veins. Her mind was thrown into turmoil by his sudden farewell and couldn't process anything anymore. Hanging her head, she dug her nails into the sides of her skirt.

A very harrowing realization dawned upon her as she scoured her mind for a reason for them to stay together: the only thing keeping them together was their vague master-apprentice relationship. And even that was something she had one-sidedly pushed on him that was little more than a verbal agreement.

Last night suddenly entered her thoughts. Would something have changed if she had accepted the touch he offered then? Would their relationship have turned into one she could proudly announce to the people in this room?

The gentle weight of a hand rested on her aching head. Surprised, she looked up at the unusually gentle eyes of the man she called master. His brows were drawn together in a troubled expression that was marked by a small smile. Ironically, it was his kindest expression to date.

“Nichika, you're confused. You're merely placing your baseless faith in the first person you met after being dropped into this world. You're no different from a duckling that grows attached to the first thing it sees.”

The remonstrating edge to his voice stunned her. *What in the world is he saying?* Her brain refused to parse the information passing through her ears. The words she couldn't swallow relentlessly tore at her heart.

“You can make it just fine without me,” he mercilessly pointed out in the gentlest of voices to his apprentice who could only shake her head and gnaw at her lip. “No doubt you had the talent to make lots of people like you from the very start. You never needed me.”

Why did this man only ever choose these moments to show kindness? Why couldn't he just downright reject her? Didn't he know his kindness was even crueller than cruelty?

Nichika couldn't take it. Large droplets spilled over and trailed a path down

her cheek onto the floor. Oswald's face contorted painfully at the sight of her tears and he removed his hand and took a step back.

"Our relationship as master and apprentice ends here."

His quiet delivery of that announcement caused her shoulders to jump. *Don't say it. I don't want to hear the rest.* Her secret wishes were dashed as he declared the end of their relationship.

"You are no longer my apprentice."

Chapter 4: Girl, Coaxes

AFTER undergoing a traumatizing shock, the Spirit Priestess returned to her room accompanied by Lambert and Wolfie, leaving the other three to continue their discussion in the headmaster's office. Headmaster Grindieda addressed the last topic that needed attending to.

"Now then, the reason why the Witch's Council has been tenaciously seeking you out is—"

"To secure a talented new recruit," Oswald finished in a harder voice than usual.

What he discovered after risking capture by sneaking into the Five Eldra Steorra's mansion was that they were secretly going along with a plan concocted by the Witch's Council. Grasping the gist of their plans during his short infiltration, he simply summarized their intentions from the list he had found among the documents in the professor's desk.

"Their current agenda consists of collecting rare materials and securing talented witches by luring them into their folds. It's anyone's guess what they're trying to make."

Flipping his shining golden threads of hair over his shoulder, Ini snorted and turned his derisive gaze on Oswald. "Probably the same kind of junk you're always making, cretin. Sheesh. Intelligent humans never use their knowledge for good, and they only make things worse when they put their heads together. Grindieda, you are a member of the Witch's Council. Don't you know what they are plotting?"

"The only information that comes to an *honorary* advisor is paltry scraps without a lick of real intel." The headmaster cast down her rose-brown eyes and exhaled. "Wizmac, the current chairman, seems to find this old lady who doesn't play to his tune to be a rather large nuisance. I presume he's plotting to have me overthrown sooner or later so that he can insert one of the Five Eldra

Steorra in the headmaster's seat."

Of course, she would never allow that to come to be. Grindieda held to a strict set of rules, but the one loose thread threatening her plans was her very own apprentice.

"Oswald, I hope I am wrong, but you haven't already..."

Immediately guessing his master's misgivings, Oswald lifted his shoulders in a slight shrug and honestly denied her false assumption. "You think I joined that cult, Master?"

"I'm worried because it is within the realm of something you would do."

Knowing how dangerous her apprentice really was brought a scowl to Grindieda's face. She wouldn't put it past him to leap at any job opportunity if someone wagged enough cash and rare resources before him.

Sensing her utter lack of faith in him, Oswald narrowed his unfathomable blue eyes and clearly voiced his convictions. "I only create what I want. I couldn't care less how others use my creations, but I don't create things that don't interest me."

Put another way, he was essentially declaring he would happily join forces with the Witch's Council if their request piqued his interest. That part of him had never changed no matter how hard she pounded rules and ethics into him during his school years.

Sighing, his master blamed her past self for creating this monster as she muttered, "...I knew I should have kept you on a tight leash."

Oswald's abilities as a witch had already surpassed his much older master. *I should have never banished him from Elminage on that day.*

Enacting the same tone she had when she exiled him, Grindieda ordered, "I hereby order you as your master, headmaster, and one who wishes for peace: remain here, Oswald."

"....."

"You may set your mind at ease, for as long as you are here, I will protect you from the Witch's Council."

In the back of the silent young man's mind, he saw one girl's sunny smile, but erased it from thought with a somber nod.

NICHIKA had returned to their room where she remained in a stupor with the lights off. Too much had happened for her brain to keep up, and she absently stroked Wolfie on the edge of the bed. His fur was a little rough in patches, but her heart was partly soothed by petting him. The wolf nudged her arm with the tip of his wet nose and whined.

"Nichika, cheer up," he sniffled encouragingly.

"What are you going to do now, Wolfie?"

"Master told me I can do whatever I want. He said he'd free me of my familiar contract if I wanna go with you instead."

"I see..."

Nichika was set to depart in two days since Headmaster Grindieda was preparing something for her. She even offered to lend her a student from Elminage as an escort if she wanted one. But what good would that do her? Would this student have even a quarter of the knowledge Oswald did? Would they nag her when she became discouraged and lazy? Would they roughly grab her arm and lead the way when she couldn't take another step?

Nichika stopped petting Wolfie and hugged her knees to her chest. Her faltering voice spilled through the space between her arms and knees. "He's such a jerk, though."

Since when did she start trusting him this much? Maybe he was right and she was acting like a newborn duckling. Maybe she had become attached to him because she didn't have anyone else and didn't know better. And yet some corner of her heart wouldn't stop screaming. The rational side of her put a lid over that piece that continued crying: "I don't want to be apart from him."

"That jerk said he'd keep his promises even unto death..." she grumbled under her breath despite having just stuffed those feelings in the corner.

How many times have I cried since coming to this world? I'm supposed to be

getting stronger, not weaker. I'll make this the last time I cry. I have to stop crying.

The sound of rapping on glass echoed through Nichika's room, interrupting her thoughts. Startled, she looked toward the window where someone floated with one hand on their broom. One look at that flashy green hair and lanky figure told her who it was.

"Lambert?!" she cried.

"O-P-E-N U-P!" he mouthed beyond the glass.

After a moment's hesitation, Nichika undid the lock and pulled the window open. He rode in on the cool breeze. Coolly sticking his landing, he flashed his trademark overly friendly grin.

"Hiya there. Fine evening, ain't it?"

"G-Good evening?"

Lambert drew back his right leg and bowed with his right hand pressed against his abdomen, and he held out a flower he made appear from thin air in his left hand. The lovely pink flower had a delicate, slightly folded petal that resembled a butterfly's wings. Yellow eyes twinkling, he teased, "To bid adieu to the fair lady before her journey."

"What kind of flower is it?"

"Sweet pea."

Nichika was unfamiliar with flower language, so she didn't know the hidden meaning behind his choice. She accepted it anyway and clenched the flower stem in front of her chest.

"You must've cried a lot to end up with a face looking like that," he commented on her red eyes swollen from crying her heart out.

"Buzz off..." She rubbed her eyes with her fists.

Lambert shrugged. "Good ol' Oswald is a helpless fool, making a girl cry. Then again, he's made countless women cry."

Nichika wanted to cover her ears. A part of her felt like she was special to

Oswald because she was his apprentice, but she meant nothing to him, as evidenced by the ease with which he ended their contract.

“Why are you crying?” Lambert asked in a sympathetic voice, breaking the dam holding back her tears and pent-up feelings.

Struggling to keep her sobs in check, Nichika started organizing her feelings aloud. “That pighead’s...not my...type...at all...”

“Yeah.”

“He’s arrogant...doesn’t think about others...and a crude, dangerous jerk.”

“Sure is.”

“But...I’d rather not go at all if it’s not with him!” she blurted, then gasped.

She looked up at the sound of Lambert whistling. He smirked at her. “Good girl, you did well speaking your true feelings,” he teased. “But dang, you went right for the ‘I can’t live without that person!’ kinda line. I was gonna wedge myself into the hole he left, but there’s no room for me to butt in.”

“I d-didn’t...it’s not what it sounds like! I’m shy around strangers and would rather travel with someone I’m already used to. That’s all!”

He winked at the girl who frantically tried to explain herself with crimson cheeks. Grabbing her wrist, he led her to the window. He leapt onto the windowsill and straddled the broom he’d been carrying.

“Then let’s go make that dream come true,” he proposed out of the blue.

“How?”

“Look after the house, lil’ wolf!”

“I don’t know what’cha doing, but have fun!”

Nichika was already hanging more than halfway out the window. Screaming, she instinctively clung to his hand.

“Come on. Fly away with me! Or you’ll fall to your death.”

Nichika fumbled for the broom dangling from her waist and commanded it to become full size. Following his soft ascent, she took off into the night sky where two moons shone. Flying after the broom ahead of her, she took out her

confusion on him.

“What in the world are you scheming now?!”

“Say, Nichika, are you the sad type who puts up with the harsh reality shoved onto them without uttering a single complaint about it?”

“Huh?”

She had no idea what he was going on about. He looked over his shoulder at her and flashed a winning grin that said it all. “Those who complain the loudest win. Sometimes things surprisingly go the way you want them to if you just say something about it. No joke.”

SOMEONE rushed through the corridors of the Witch’s Council headquarters, illuminated by flickering candles far away from Elminage Academy for Gifted Witches and Wizards. “By the celestial scourge, why must I deal with this nonsense?!”

The middle-aged man wearing a black witch’s hat and long robe was in an impatient hurry. His sprint through the corridors eventually brought him before the chairman’s office where he puzzlingly knocked on the door belonging to him.

“Enter.”

Despair slammed down on him like a tidal wave at the young voice answering from within. *Dear God, please allow me to leave this room in one piece*, he prayed, deeply inhaling what may become his last breath.

“...Pardon the intrusion.”

Resolved to his fate, he slowly turned the knob and slunk into the room. Hands held protectively over his head, he braced himself for death—nothing happened. His behavior must’ve been quite amusing to any onlooker because bell-like laughter filled the room.

“Oh my word, why’re you so edgy?”

“Aah, uuh, no, well...I see you aren’t accompanied by *That* companion today.”

The man remembered being graphically attacked by a fearsome black dragon the second he entered the room just the day before.

Reclining behind the man's desk, the boy hidden beneath a deep white hood gave his head an endearing tilt.

"Should I call for him?"

"No! You needn't go through the trouble, please!"

"Haha! That cutie is currently in the middle of a meal anyway."

The man tried to see what manner of person that voice, which sounded like rolling bells, belonged to under the hood, but shadows fell perfectly to obstruct his view.

Who would believe that the chairman had been overthrown by this young child who now controlled the Witch's Council? A few months ago, the child emerged from the shadows with unprecedented techniques and overwhelming magic. Naturally, the Witch's Council paid the child no attention at first, but the chairman shuddered at the mere memory of the consequences they went through for ignoring the boy. Ever since then he'd been used as a mere front for the boy's antics.

"Malevolent one."

"What's up?" the boy responded to that title in a chipper voice.

The chairman gave his report without looking where he assumed his eyes were. "The plan is proceeding smoothly. Freelance witches from all over the world are almost entirely ours now, and the most promising ones are already detained in the council headquarters."

"Good work."

Gulping, the chairman restlessly linked and unlinked his fingers. He voiced the unease he couldn't chase away. "...Is it truly all right for us to continue on this path?" He locked his gaze on the floorboards and rattled off his concerns with nervous sweat soaking his back. "Using black mana to create black magic weapons... If the masses discover what we are doing, they might execute us for making use of heretical powers. Aren't we dipping our hands into the taboo—"

“Wizmac.”

The chairman jumped at the sound of his name. The boy had teleported right in front of him. A slender, white hand reached up and cupped Chairman Wizmac’s right cheek. Eyes darker than the deepest black depths of night glimmered under the white hood.

“It’s fine. We aren’t doing anything wrong,” the boy cooed in the sweetest voice while his irresistible powers consumed the chairman.

The image of falling into an abyss overtook Wizmac’s brain. Hundreds of hands grabbed at him, covering his mouth and limbs and tearing him into a thousand pieces.

Just when he thought he’d been pulled to the surface, the white-hooded child endearingly cocked his head. Shuddering, Wizmac held his aching head in his hands. Moans ripped from his throat.

“Aah...aaaaaaaaahhhhh!”

“It’s all right. Before long the Witch’s Council will stand at the top of the world. And then you will be king. Or maybe emperor would be better?”

Honeyed whispers melted into his distorting mind. Rattled with ultimate bliss and excitement, Chairman Wizmac turned dilated eyes to the heavens and swore his loyalty.

“I-I live to serve your every command.”

Trembling like a newborn doe, the chairman exited the room with a deranged smile. Left alone in the office, the chuckling boy flipped through the papers Wizmac left behind.

“That’s right. There’s nothing wrong with destroying this entire rotten world. Make it fall apart until there’s absolutely no point in having some stupid Spirit Priestess...”

His hand landed on a page about a certain young man. He pulled it out with an intrigued smile.

“Now he looks usable. I think I’ll sound him out myself.”

Wind whirled through the room without warning, sending papers flying

everywhere. By the time the final page hit the floor, not a single person was left in the room.

TWO days after Oswald ended her apprenticeship, Nichika was standing in front of Elminage's gates at the break of dawn to depart on the next leg of her journey.

"I can't believe you! You tricked me from the start!"

"Ow! I said I'm sorry. I couldn't expose myself."

Melissa, who had woken up at the crack of dawn to see her off, stopped smacking Nichika's shoulder and puffed out her cheeks. The corners of her eyes softened and she clapped her lightly on the back.

"I never imagined you carried the huge responsibility of Spirit Priestess on your shoulders. You don't look the part."

"Yeah...it's crazy that it's me," Nichika said wistfully, drawing a small smile from her friend.

"You are a disappointment for not noticing anything despite being close friends," scolded an unforgiving voice from behind, erasing Melissa's smile and causing her shoulders to jump.

"G-Grandmother..."

Nichika looked over to see the headmaster descend the last step from the castle. She didn't look the least bit tired despite the early hour. Maybe she maintained a prim and proper demeanor twenty-four hours a day, regardless of the time or place.

Cheek twitching, Nichika asked a question to which she had already guessed the answer. "Did you possibly know I wasn't Angelica from day one?"

"I had already heard of you from Ini, and while I can't comment on her magic potential, the real Angelica Rubens is notorious for hating anything to do with learning."

From the sound of it, Nichika still had a long way to go before she perfected her espionage skills. Smiling dryly at that realization, she watched as a man

shrouded in gold splendor alighted from the sky in a flurry of flapping wings. It triggered a case of déjà vu that caused her to shudder.

“My sweet honey! Good morning! Isn’t it a truly fine morning? Take the day off and treat yourself to a date with me!”

“NO THANK YOUUUUUUU!” She shoved her hand in his face, stopping him from throwing himself on her in a bear hug. Melissa covered her gaping mouth with her hand.

“Love triangle flag...!”

“It’s not like that! I swear he is so not a possibility for that!” Nichika retorted and prepared herself for another ridiculous remark when Wolfie charged into their circle with impeccable timing.

“Morning! I woke up on time like a good boy today! Praise me! Praise me!”

“You even have an innocent puppy-dog type vying for your attentions?! I’m sensing a love polygon in the making...no, once you hit this number, it’s totally going in the reverse harem direction!”

“Melissa, do you count everything that’s male as a love interest?!” Nichika exasperated.

OSWALD watched the group’s lively interaction from atop the staircase. Surliness punctuated his expression as usual, but he sighed and descended into the entrance hall. He stealthily approached Nichika and greeted her with a snide remark.

“Obnoxious energy seems to follow you wherever you go.”

“Oswald! Good morning!”

A sharp pang surged through the man’s heart at her radiant smile. But the sorrow he felt rapidly transformed into annoyance. *Where do you get off smiling like that when you’re about to say goodbye to me forever?*

“...You seem to be in awfully good spirits,” he unintentionally bit out in an irate voice.

“I do? I feel pretty normal,” she replied as if it didn’t bother her one bit.

Ini put an arm around her shoulder and puffed out his chest in some theatrical show of bravado. “My empress shines brighter than the sun at all times!”

“You’re embarrassing me, so drop it already.”

Nichika grabbed Ini by the nose and thrust him aside with a straight face, yet Oswald’s frustration ballooned as the other man latched onto her hand and pulled her to his chest.

Deciding it’d be best to quickly finish his business and skedaddle out of there, Oswald clumsily held out the long object wrapped in a white cloth he had been holding.

“Here.”

Nichika accepted it with both hands and carefully moved the cloth aside, revealing a three-foot long staff. A round pedestal sat in place of a tip on the golden staff. She tilted her head when saw it. The essential pedestal looked empty and incomplete. Knowing how she’d interpret it, Oswald explained its use to her.

“Staffs amplify magic for witches and wizards. Master and I adjusted this one. You normally insert a magic stone in the pedestal, but the magic orb is a better fit for you.”

“Like this?”

When she removed the magic orb from her belt and brought it near the pedestal a magnetic force pulled it into place.

“When not in use, the staff automatically shrinks.”

“Wow!”

There was a sudden flash of light and the staff shrunk until only the pedestal was left. Now she didn’t have to worry about it getting in her way. She rolled it over in her hands and studied every inch of it, trying to figure out what the trick was.

“Ooh,” Ini uttered with a nostalgic expression, stopping his clinginess to

admire the staff. “Now that’s nostalgic. Isn’t that Yuna’s staff?”

“Yuna’s staff?” Nichika looked over at Ini who was confirming his suspicions with Headmaster Grindieda.

“I’m positive that’s it. You kept it preserved at this school?”

“Yes. Several years ago I tracked it down to a pawn market and bought it. It’s a pity that it fell into the hands of a human who didn’t know its value.”

“Hmm. I see. I believe Yuna left that on the surface world after fulfilling her duties... But I see it had been passed around quite a bit in the time since.”

Melissa, who had been listening quietly up until that point, couldn’t keep her thoughts to herself any longer. She cried out in a loud voice as she checked out the item in Nichika’s hands.

“Oh my spirits! Is this for real? Isn’t that the rusted hunk of metal that was dangling in the trophy case?!”

Headmaster Grindieda shot a warning look at her granddaughter’s rude outburst. “My apprentice and I spent two whole days polishing it. Do not call a legendary staff a rusted hunk of metal,” she instructed with a barbed edge to her voice.

“I get where you’re coming from, but you’re asking the impossible expecting anyone to think of that junk as having once been Goddess Yuna’s staff—Ah! Sorry. I’ll keep my mouth shut. I won’t say another word!” Melissa rolled back on her heels and away from her grandmother’s pointed glare.

Nichika smiled at her and spun the surprisingly light staff in her hands. “Looks like all I have to do for now is concentrate the flow of mana into the staff... Mm...yep... I think I can activate it easier than before. Thank you, Headmaster.”

“Your thanks is unnecessary. I merely passed the staff on to its rightful owner,” the headmaster slightly tripped over her words before the girl’s unadorned smile. Though she didn’t show it, she was worried.

Given she had been assigned the grand duty of saving the world, it was only natural for her to seek greater recompense. Yet the child demanded neither status nor honor, but rather gave her thanks. Was it truly all right to entrust

Yuna's staff to such a girl?

I shouldn't doubt her, because this is the child Ini saw outstanding potential in. He can't be wrong. I hope. Driven by that thought, Headmaster Grindieda grabbed Nichika by the shoulders and advised her about the journey ahead.

"Heed my warning, child, you mustn't summon forth the staff more than absolutely necessary. You never know what evildoers are after you both."

"O-Okay. I'll be...careful?"

"However, do not hesitate in times of danger. Offense is the greatest defense. Don't wander around at night if you can help it. Blast suspicious people away with fire. Proper magic comes from proper sleep and eating. Also—"

"Grandmother, you aren't sending her on a child's errand. Sheesh," Melissa interceded on Nichika's behalf though she understood where her grandmother was coming from.

Something about her school friend who had a good head on her shoulders but a lack of common sense certainly made her someone you couldn't help worrying about. Tamping down the desire to join her grandmother in mothering her, Melissa turned to Nichika to see her off with a smile.

"Be careful out there, Angeli—that's not your name is it?"

Oh yeah, I haven't told her my real name yet. Nichika firmly grabbed hold of Melissa's right hand.

"My name is Nichika. Thanks for helping me out with a lot of stuff. You're the first friend I've made since coming to this world. I was so happy to meet you. I'll definitely come back to school once I fulfill my duty. Work hard toward achieving your dreams too."

"Of course I will...!"

She swore she wouldn't cry but the tears didn't listen to reason. At least they weren't the sole product of sadness, but also the joy of finding companionship in a new friend.

The last person to step up to Nichika was Oswald. He pressed a pouch into her hand and explained the contents in a clerical voice.

“Candy to suppress your *condition*. I created them in a hurry so there are only twenty. I’ll send Char after you with another batch before you run out.”

“Thanks.” Nichika gladly accepted the pouch and looked straight into his eyes. Neither reluctance nor regret shone there, invoking an odd sense of loneliness within Oswald.

He forced a half smile and spoke to bury those unnecessary feelings. “That’s... right. You no longer need...”

“Hm?”

You no longer need me. He swallowed the rest of that comment as it didn’t fit his character. *I knew that. This should be what I always wanted. And yet—* Oswald shook his head, stopping himself from thinking further. A sad smile pulled at his lips as he rested his hand on her head.

“Nah, it’s nothing. This is really the end for us. Is there anything else you want? How about a goodbye kiss?” he teased, but before he could make a move, she tugged on his hand.

Nichika’s lips drew an arc. The voice he heard spill from those lips felt very precious for some reason he didn’t understand himself.

“There’s just one more thing.”

“Nichika?”

In the bright morning sunlight, a smile blossomed on her face like a sunflower. The chirping birds and whooshing wind disappeared as if someone had flipped a switch so that she was all he could hear.

“I want you.”

Oswald’s face in that moment was truly a sight to see. Eyes bulging, unsaid words lodged in his throat, he froze with his mouth hanging open. But Nichika’s carefree smile brought him back to earth. Flustered, he tried to pull his hand free of hers and rambled in a voice that betrayed his rare panic.

“Y-You can’t...have me. You heard them, too. I’m not worthy of traveling with the great Spirit Priestess—”

“What they say has nothing to do with us. They can go to hell for all I care.

Because regardless of what the world thinks or says, ‘Witch Oswald’ is my dear, irreplaceable friend.”

Nichika captured his hand once more and dragged him from the shady staircase into the bright morning sunlight.



The blinding light dazzled him. Through his squinting he made out Nichika's reassuring smile.

"If you have the power to destroy the world, then you have the power to save it, too," she asserted, confidence ringing from her every word. "I want to prove that to the world. No, I will prove it. So please, come with me!"

The rest of what she said reverberated through Oswald, shaking him to his core. It was an absurd pipe dream she spoke of. *A man who has become loathed by the world, saving it? Ridiculous nonsense.* He shook his head and looked to the group of people behind him to set the girl and her wild fantasies straight.

"....."

He was struck speechless by the reactions he found there. Grindieda was sighing like she had long since given up on trying to dissuade the girl, and her granddaughter was blushing wildly beside her. Wolfie was—sound asleep, but even that obnoxious birdbrain Ini was grinning away so much it completely threw Oswald off.

"...What's going on here?" Oswald seethed.

Shrugging, Ini walked over, his golden wings sparkling under the sunlight. "Even I am not immune to the sobbing pleas of my sweet empress." He plucked a feather from his glimmering wings and inserted it into the chest pocket of Oswald's black coat. "I ordain you as a member of this mission. Do your job well."

"...Huh?"

Abandoning Oswald to his unanswered questions, Ini enthusiastically announced his plans to the group. "With that said and done, I must spread the word far and wide about the holy party traveling with beautiful, glowing golden feathers in their clothes! Your reputation will bounce back if we spread rumors of a holy maiden who has taken up the mantle of Spirit Priestess traveling with her manservant to save the world! Yes sirree, that sounds like a plan to me! Why, I'll name your party the 'Arcanshiel DE Spirit Search Corps ☆!'"

"Increasing their public image is a fine idea, but you would be wise to pick another name," Grindieda coolly pointed out. She then turned to her

apprentice with the same stern mask. “There you have it.”

“There I have what?!”

“I was resolutely against it until the bitter end, but her determination was unshakeable. She laid down the law by threatening not to undertake this journey if you were not with her.”

Her negotiation tactics exposed by the headmaster, Nichika’s cheeks burned redder than her mantle and she dipped her head. “I didn’t go that far... Okay, maybe I did.”

“I was wondering what great disaster had brought the girl flying into my room in the dead of night.”

“Don’t say anymore!”

A rare curve turning up her lips, Headmaster Grindieda turned her clever rose-brown eyes on her wayward apprentice. “Your bad reputation might improve slightly if you assist the Spirit Priestess during her travels,” she advised in a gentle voice lacking her usual harshness. “I have decided to cast my bets on that possibility.”

In a world where no one ever said what they meant and everything had a treacherous double meaning, his master’s unfiltered honesty shook Oswald to the core. *Is she saying she’s willing to trust me once more? Me, the man who rewarded her good grace and instruction with betrayal?*

Her trust was both freeing and heavily binding. There was nothing left to stop him—except for himself. He couldn’t take that defining step forward.

If he was going to be really honest with himself, he was scared. To this day, he lived in the shadows avoiding the light as best he could. He believed that was a part of the job, and it suited his personality just fine. But officially joining the Spirit Priestess would force him into the limelight.

It’s not that he didn’t want to. But he had committed far too many crimes to thoughtlessly jump at the dream dangling before him. Restore his reputation? Wasn’t it too late for redemption?

Nauseating sweat trickled down the back of his neck. *How many of the people*

here would survive if this ever reached THAT man's ears? Oswald opened his mouth to make excuses, but the girl beat him to it.

"I won't regret it." Confidence burning in her eyes, she gave him a reassuring nod. Her dainty hands wrapped around his and she pulled him away from the abyss of unnecessary, depressing thoughts.

"Let's do this together, Oswald!"

THOSE remaining at Elminage watched the Spirit Priestess party descend the hill into town while waving back at them. Once they were out of sight, they could finally openly talk about them. Headmaster Grindieda folded her arms at her chest and spoke in exasperation about her apprentice.

"Good heavens, I am utterly disappointed in my apprentice's cowardice."

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! My sweet Nichika!" Ini wailed at a deafening volume and sunk to his knees. "We are to be apart for a short duration once more! YOU ARE ALWAAAYSSSSSS in my THOUGHTSSSSSS!"

Watching him aroused Melissa's curiosity. "Lord Ini, Lord Ini! Are you really okay with what just happened? Those two are definitely going to get chummier as things go on, you know?"

Her word choice made it sound like she was worried, but her tone gave away her hope for things to develop further between her friend and her eccentric master. Yet the man embodying all things gold cut down her hopes without a second thought.

"Nah, that won't ever happen."

"Why not?"

Grindieda shot a warning look at her granddaughter who puffed out her cheeks like a pouting child. But, secretly worried about her apprentice and his misconduct, she repeated the question.

"Why not, Ini?"

"The reason lies with the deep darkness within her. Though she doesn't realize it herself," Ini chortled as he rose to his feet and elegantly swept his hair

aside. “Besides, priestesses must be pure at all times. That man isn’t a match for her.”

Melissa looked completely unconvinced, but then she suddenly took off running in the direction of the school. “We can’t be wasting time talking here! I have to go around telling everyone about the savior priestess traveling with a witch carrying a golden feather!”

“Ooh, good thinking. We should support them the best we can since we can’t go with them.”

“The Witch’s Council shouldn’t be able to get their hands on Oswald as easily now that he’s become a member of the Savior Priestess’s party.”

Thunderstruck by her grandmother’s nonchalant comment, Melissa skidded to a halt before the castle gates.

“Oh my spirits!” she shouted, glancing over her shoulder at the hill.

“What now? You are being improperly loud,” her grandmother sharply scolded.

Excitement getting the better of her, Melissa talked at lightning speed, spitting in the process. “I just remembered! Didn’t you call that man in all black Oswald? That’s right! It’s him!”

The déjà vu she’d been experiencing since she first saw him in the pub finally had an answer. Refreshed, she drew on the answer from her memories.

“I saw his face hung up in the trophy room alongside the other students who have gone down in Elminage history as top student for their year! I memorized his face because he was otherworldly in the good looks department!”

She failed to put the two together because there was such a huge disparity between the gently smiling butler and the young boy who turned his ice-cold eyes toward the camera, but they were too similar for it to be anyone else.

“But in all the years he attended Elminage, only the year of his graduation did someone else unseat him from his top student spot.” Melissa tilted her head at that oddity. “Did something happen that year, Grandmother?”

Whether she liked it or not, memories of that time flooded Grindieda’s mind.

Expression stiff, she quietly replied, "...It's true Oswald surpassed every record in the Witch's Department since his enrollment, securing excellent marks every step of the way. You can safely call him a prodigy."

"Then why?"

"He made a grave mistake during his graduation exam."

The incident led to him dropping out of school right before graduation. After that, he hid within the Forest of Fathomless Deception and had become a heretical Rogue Witch.

For how smart he was, he should have never been so arrogant. No, perhaps his arrogance stemmed from his genius. Had she spoiled him for those exact same reasons? The incident had happened years ago, and still she couldn't forget the eye-watering stench of rot that hit her when she opened the door to his laboratory. Nor did a day pass where she didn't hear the first cries of that ghastly lump of meat squirming in the iron pot.

"That child stained his hands with the greatest taboo we are to never even speak of."

"You don't mean..."

Every young future witch to enroll in Elminage had three fundamental rules pounded into them from day one:

1. Every deal, once made, must be fulfilled no matter how trivial.
2. One must never forget to respect the spirits.
3. Never try to bring back the dead.

"Oswald attempted to revive the dead."

AFTER leaving Elminage Academy for Gifted Witches and Wizards behind, the group headed for the town gate at the bottom of the hill. Wolfie, who'd been sleeping like a log, happily frolicked ahead of the other two, the golden feather from Ini bouncing on top of his head.

"Lookie look! I got a pretty gold feather too!" he exclaimed, alternating looks

between his master and Nichika with a smile that showed his pink gums. “Now everything’s back to normal!”

Nichika stole a peek at Oswald. “Rather than being back where we started, it’s more like Oswald is in my employ now, right?” she confirmed, her voice brimming with hope.

As far as she understood, Ini and Grindieda, the Spirit Priestess Project sponsors, released Oswald to her as an escort. Cheeks twitching at her question, Oswald shoved her head from behind. Nearly falling on her face, she tripped two steps forward and narrowly caught her balance.

“Ooph!”

“Don’t be silly. We’re back to being master and apprentice. The world will stop rotating before I serve under you.”

“What the heck? You’re the loser who one-sidedly ended our contract! Are you implying you’ll never stand on equal footing with me no matter what I do?” she argued vehemently.

Wow, it’s been a long time since we last bickered like this...

“I’ll gladly do so the day you surpass me at something,” he haughtily declared before she could revel in nostalgia.

“Oh my word! Do you ever stop looking down on people?! If you’re going to act like this, I’d prefer you to switch back to butler mode!”

“Your wish is my command, my lady.”

Nichika’s careless remark in the heat of the moment flipped a switch in her master. He caught her right hand in his, stopping her from moving forward, and reverently kissed her knuckles.

“I shall accompany you to the ends of the world as long as you so desire it. As I live and breathe, I shall become your hands and feet. For my greatest joy in life is to offer myself up to you and die for your sake, my lady.”

“—!”

His passionate oath set her body on fire and her cheeks flushing. The gentle brunette butler had his own appeal, but flattering her as the frigid witch in all-

black had a destructive power on a whole other level. She came dangerously close to saying, “please do!” and had to convince herself it was all an act.

“S-Stop it! I can’t stand it! Butler mode is too much for me!”

“It is a butler’s job to look after his incompetent mistress.”

“Don’t insult me in that buttered-up tone!”

“My lady could be the model for idiocy.”

“I asked you to quit it already!” she snapped at him for layering his disparaging remarks in flattery.

“Ha!” he snorted and released her hand from his grip, finally returning to his usual demeanor. “Don’t get your panties in a twist. I’d rather die than go through that stifling farce again.”

“Good. I hope you never do...” Nichika concentrated on quieting her rollicking heart.

“Ah,” Wolfie uttered in the middle of watching them with a toothy smile. “I just remembered that someone who knows where the next Great Spirit is will be showing us the way there. That’s what the headmaster said.”

“Really? Are they waiting for us somewhere?”

“Yep. She said they’ll be waiting for us at the town’s gate wearing the same gold feather as me.”

Then they should be able to see the person soon. The trio swept their gaze around the area and stopped when they spotted someone waiting a little ways ahead.

“Oooh! You’re here. You’re here. You’re late!”

Unkempt dark-green hair came into view first. A gold feather glittered in the chest pocket of the young man with snakelike yellow eyes.

.....

A woman living in the neighborhood reported a fire in the corner of a city apartment early last night.

The fire was extinguished approximately two hours later, but the entire apartment believed to be the source of the fire completely burnt down.

The woman (38) living alone in the studio apartment was out at the time and has been reported safe. The police are investigating the cause of the fire, which is currently believed to be due to a short circuit.....

.....

Next in the news.....

Interlude: In the Fog

Chapter 5: Girl, Isolates

THEY departed Elminage and walked to their next destination. Everyone had been in good spirits during the morning, but their mood was dampened by the pounding hot sunrays as the day went on. The baking heat was particularly harsh on Wolfie with his furry body, and he was the first to lie down complaining.

“So hoooot.”

Nichika stopped next to him and poured water from her bottle into a bowl for him to drink. This magic bottle was yet another new invention of Oswald’s that kept liquids cool at all times.

‘Magic bottle’ sounds like a clichéd ad until you realize it really uses magic. Smiling wryly to herself, she placed the bowl on the ground for Wolfie.

Drinking cold water seemed to rejuvenate the wolf who sprung up on all fours. “Thanks! You aren’t hot, Nichika?”

“It’s still manageable for me.”

The beating sunshine definitely caused her to sweat, but most of Arcanshiel was permeated by dry heat with low humidity. It was within tolerable levels for Nichika who had suffered through Japan’s sticky, suffocating summers her entire life. She was impressed that her discomfort was reduced significantly just by the absence of moisture in the air.

At the moment, there was one thing that bothered her more than the heat.

“Cute Nichikaaa! Gimme water too. Waaaterrrr.”

“Oomph!” Someone suddenly leaned all their weight on her back, knocking the bottle from her hand which she caught a second before it hit the ground. She shot a miffed look at the culprit dangling over her shoulder. “Quit that. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“Aww. But this is my form of skinship.” Chuckling, the young man brought his lips so close to her ear they practically brushed the skin there as he whispered in a low voice. “I’d be equally happy if you gave it to me by mouth.”

Getting the chills, Nichika slammed her hand in his face and pushed him off her. “Did you not just hear me ask you to quit it with this crap?!”

“Ahahahahaha! You’re redder than a cherry! I could just eat you right up—you’re so cute!”

Nichika scrubbed her ears and shot the scariest glare she could manage at him, but it had zero effect on the brazen witch.

Their guide from Elminage turned out to be their frenemy Lambert. Since their skirmish in Lolo Village, Nichika struggled with trusting the oddball further than she could throw him. But he had given her very good advice after Oswald ended her apprenticeship, and it was thanks to him that she didn’t lose Oswald’s companionship, which perplexed her as to what his real objective was. Wasn’t he originally supposed to be an assistant to Professor Logical, a member of the Witch’s Council and the Five Eldra Steorra?

She had outright asked about it when they departed Elminage together, to which he gave the most indifferent, jaw-dropping answer:

“I switched sides. You guys seem more entertaining.”

How easily he betrayed. She was further surprised to learn he had already spoken with Ini and joined the Spirit Search Corps before her negotiations with the headmaster.

His true motives were unclear. *He’s not trustworthy*, Nichika determined as he sidled up to her.

Lambert played with a strand of her shoulder-length hair. “Man, you have beautiful hair. Hey, did you know that some people believe magic is stored in a person’s hair?”

Nichika knew precisely why this clingy man hung all over her. She flinched from the black shadow that had appeared behind him. But Lambert prattled on as if he didn’t notice.

“I bet it’d taste delish. Just kiddin’!”

THWACK! THWACK!

Nichika pressed her hands to the back of her violently smacked head. Lambert stumbled forward from the same blow, though his reaction was definitely exaggerated.

“Get walking. There are people behind you.”

An extremely disgruntled Oswald was the culprit. Nichika retreated from his fear-inducing subzero aura. Either unable to read the mood or doing it in spite of it, Lambert foolishly waved his hand about.

“You cad you! You can’t go smackin’ girls ’round like that. I’m ashamed to call you my upperclassman!”

“She’s guilty of the same crime by blocking my way.”

“Ohoho? Angry? Did we rub you the wrong way somehow? Hmm?”

Yep, Lambert only flirted with Nichika in order to get a rise out of Oswald. He was welcome to start a fight, but only if that didn’t involve her in the fallout. Oswald shoved past them and looked over his shoulder a few feet ahead.

“Hey, guide, you actually know where the spirit lives, right? I swear if you’re taking us to the Witch’s Council I’ll—”

“You’re soooo untrusting. Aren’t we buddies, ol’ pal?” Lambert made the peace sign and then shoved his hands in his pocket under Oswald’s freezing scrutiny. “Okay, okay, don’t look at me like that. I’m just joking,” he said, some of the amusement fading from his voice. “I’m from Windy Village.”

“Windy Village?” Nichika repeated the name she had never heard before.

Does the Great Wind Spirit live there?

Lambert turned to her and stroked her cheek with a grin. “Yep! It’s awesome. All the residents can fly. And a big aerial race should be goin’ on ’round this time of year.”

“Umm...erm...” His touch was too gentle to harshly reject and too friendly to openly accept, flustering her.

“Whew! It suddenly cooled down!” Wolfie nonchalantly observed, happy with the sudden chill, not realizing that the air temperature had dropped significantly around Oswald. Blue mana birds flew angrily around them.

Just how much does he hate Lambert?! Nichika shouted on the inside, giving her head a small shake. *Sure, his frivolous teasing is hecka annoying, but Oswald has dealt with worse. What makes him hate Lambert so much?*

Cold air whished past her feet when she stayed put, lost in her thoughts. “What was that?”

The chilly air current was coming from the valley ahead, not her silently simmering master. A chill had filled the air and a white fog covered the sky, blurring the sun.

“Oh, we’re here! We’re here! We call this place Fog Valley. Getting through the valley will spit us right out in front of Windy Village.”

Lambert, who finally started serving as a proper guide, took the lead into the valley with the rest of the group trailing behind. The fog grew thicker the further they went. Nichika felt like she was swimming through diluted milk as she pulled out her lantern. She gave it a light shake and spoke to the mana in the air.

“O flames, light the path we travel!”

Chanting the correct spell brought a warm yellow light to life within. Smiling at her success, Nichika happily reported to her master.

“Look at what I did! See? It lit up like it’s supposed to!”

She had good reason to be so proud of her success. This lantern was actually the first witch’s item Nichika had created. Elminage had a class on creating simple witch’s items, so she constructed the lantern during their break earlier. She formed the frame by tying together twigs she found on the ground with hemp string, and then she inserted a white round stone in the center that light mana loved. And finally, she simply asked the fluttering light mana gathering around the stone to do her a favor. That was all there was to her creation, but it worked surprisingly well. The lantern illuminated everything around her.

Oswald’s brows snapped together as he assessed his apprentice’s first work.

“What’s with that shoddy frame? The mana is escaping left and right,” he pointed out the flaws.

“Ugh. I felt bad locking them in...”

The lantern she learned about in class trapped mana in a glass frame. This time she crafted one where the mana could freely come and go as they pleased, making it remarkably dimmer than the glass version.

Disgusted, her master narrowed his eyes on the inefficient product and handed down a harsh evaluation. “You couldn’t sell that if you tried.”

“It’s not for sale! Just an experiment—hey!”

Startled by Nichika’s loud voice, the last mana butterfly resting on top of the round stone flew away. Dejected, her shoulders slumped.

“Shucks. They all left.”

Lambert laughed as Oswald pulled out an official witch’s lantern. At his command it sparked to life, illuminating the area in blindingly bright light. Compared to that, Nichika’s had a long way to go.

Placing one hand on his hip, their guide casually warned, “Be careful as the road ahead is narrow and treacherous.”

“Don’t fall again.”

“I won’t...try to fall.”

Leave it to Oswald to poke at her weak spot. Nichika had no retort considering her last visit to a ravine led her to marvelously fall into the river. For now, she settled on hugging the rock wall whenever there was an area she could fall off.

As the one with the lantern, Oswald led the way into Fog Valley with Wolfie and Nichika directly behind him, and Lambert drawing up the rear. Eyes locked solely on Wolfie’s fluffy tail bouncing in front of her, Nichika took careful steps.

“.....”

No one said a word as they kept a wary eye on their surroundings. Knowing she was incapable of sensing any monsters roaming about, Nichika

concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. But her mind started to wander as time went on.

How much time had passed since she was flung into this world? It was anyone's guess if time flowed the same in both worlds, but if the passage of time was similar at all, she'd be counted as a missing person at this point. Things wouldn't be so convenient as to give her back her lost time once she went back, would it?

Mom must be worried sick. With that thought, Nichika felt astonished she hadn't thought much about her mom until now. Culture shock and all the excitement she was experiencing in this new world was no excuse for such a lack of empathy.

There's Miiko too. I'm sorry for not thinking of you.

Nichika tried to think of her younger sister, but her memories were foggier than the thick fog blanketing her surroundings. How could she not remember when they were such close sisters? She frantically attempted to draw on an image of what her sister looked like, but all her efforts ended in futility. Shock and panic coursed through her, but another piece of her quickly offered comforting excuses to dull her mounting trepidation.

Don't panic. You're just tired. So much has happened and your mind is a jumbled mess. Work hard to get back home as soon as possible.

She gave up on remembering her sister and settled for organizing the current situation. Until now she had only managed to collect the fire spirit. Wind, earth, and water remained. Lambert was showing them to where the wind spirit was, so that would take care of that one, but even then, that'd only account for half. The road ahead was long.

Once I fulfill my duties as Spirit Priestess and revive Goddess Yuna, I'll ask Ini to do something about the Fake Lover parasite. And then I'll return to my world. Nichika's heart lurched. *Wait, if I safely go home, will I no longer be able to come back to this world?*

Her heart started pounding a frantic beat in her ears. Faces of everyone she had met since arriving in Arcanshiel popped into her head. What if memories couldn't be carried over from world to world? Was that why she couldn't clearly

remember things about her mother and younger sister?

Nichika suddenly thought of the dreams she often had in the past. In those dreams, she was playing with someone and adventuring, but the contents became a blur whenever she woke up.

“No!”

She gave her head a jarring shake to chase the unsettling thought away. Nothing good would come of thinking about such things now. Clearing the objectives before her came first. She could worry after that.

“...Uh? What the?”

That she had a problem hadn't occurred to her until then. Wolfie's swaying tail had disappeared from in front of her. She looked forward then backward and had no luck finding a patch of green hair or the yellow lantern light.

“Oh, come on. Quit teasing me guys,” she called to the fog, a half smile tugging at her lips.

But there was no sarcastic remark from her master, no cheerful wolfish howl, nor a flirtatious comment coming from the young man who always implied something with his words and actions. The girl had become isolated in the fog without realizing it.

Sheer willpower stopped her from falling into a panic. Chaos would ensue if her shouts lured monsters to her. Raking her eyes over the whited out surroundings, she racked her brains until her eyes spun.

Should I fly past the cloud cover on my broom to look for everyone? Bad idea. I won't see anyone through this thick fog. Then should I proceed through the valley and wait for them at the end? No, that won't work either. There's no telling how many exits the valley has, and I don't have the skill to fly full speed for long distances.

Something sticky touched the back of her neck while she was debating what to do.

“Eek!”

She locked up and couldn't move. *Is someone behind me...?* Whoever it was

wrapped an arm around her waist. That solved the mystery for her—only one person touched her that way. Relieved her allies were closer than she thought, Nichika berated the culprit.

“Lambert! Save your practical jokes for someone else!”

“.....”

The culprit held their silence as they ran their hands all over her body from behind. Nichika was scared stiff.

“S-Say something already.”

“.....”

“Come on!”

The fog thickened to such a density she couldn’t see her legs anymore. *Did I get the wrong person?!*

“QUIT THE CRAP...!” Mustering her courage, Nichika tried to shake off the perpetrator when something sticky touched her thigh. The hands crept up her skirt like a creepy-crawly, drawing a scream from her. “Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

In the spur of the moment, she ripped the magic orb from her belt and held it in front of her. The pedestal instantly transformed into a staff and she shrieked at the top of her lungs.

“I don’t care what you do, just give me WINNNNDDDD!”

Despite her rough command, or rather because of her desperation, a large number of green mana butterflies flurried together around Nichika, blowing violent winds in every direction around her. The fog cleared in just that spot, and sunlight shone down from overhead.

“Uhh?”

The situation finally came into full view.

STICK! ROLL!

STICK! ROLL!

STICK! ROLL!

White, semitransparent creatures clung to her clothes and every limb in large quantities. Their *mochi*-like bodies had the smooth shape of a *daifuku*, and their glossy exteriors were jiggly like Jello. Tears filled their round and adorable black eyes, and their constant squeaks of “Pii! Pii!” sounded as if they were seeking something from her.

“Wh-What’s the deal with you guys...?”

She picked up one of the creatures that were the perfect size to make into a cushion. The cool, squishy texture of its body made her want to kneed her hands into it like a stress ball.

“Kororo!”

“Petan! Petaaa!”

“Ick! Hey...!”

The horde reattached itself to her, knocking her to the ground. She was about to drown in the mysterious creatures when she heard a familiar voice from overhead.

“Oh! Oooooi!”

Nichika looked up at the top of the cliff where Wolfie and the others were staring down at her. Finding hope, her whole face lit up.

“You guys!”



Unfortunately for her, the others each offered very unhelpful comments upon seeing her buried in a pool of monsters. Wolfie was the first to speak with his wagging tail wooshing through the air.

“Nichika, are those your new friends? That looks like fun!”

“I’m not having fun here! Hurry and save me!”

Oswald slid his way down the cliff, stoically noting, “...I didn’t know you had that kinda niche foreplay fetish.”

“I so DO NOT! How did you come to that conclusion after seeing the mess I’m in?!”

Lambert dealt the ultimate finishing blow. He said the most ridiculous thing yet with a boyish grin. “Slimes can do the trick, but if I could choose, I’m far more aroused by tentacles—”

“YOU ARE ALL PERVERTS! PERVERTS I SAY!”

RESCUED at last, Nichika stared hard at the monsters that had attacked (?) her. She didn’t know if they understood human language, but she put a question to them anyway.

“You weren’t trying to hurt me, were you?”

The dewy-eyed slimes lined up in front of Nichika and stared eagerly at her. Something about them reminded her of small forest animals, and Nichika adored animals. Her heart did a little flip.

“They’re...kinda cute.”

“Petacolons are timid monsters that flee as soon as they see people. Though these guys aren’t running for the hills, huh?”

“Petacolon?” Lambert’s casual mention of the monster name stuck out to Nichika for some reason. Tilting her head, she contemplated the word with her face scrunched up. “I feel like I’ve heard that word before.”

“You’re imagining it,” Oswald suddenly interjected, breaking his silence up till that point. He glanced at the horde of petacolons and dismissed them with

disinterest. “We don’t have time to play with those balls of jelly. The fog is rolling back in. Let’s hurry.”

“There you go being heartless again...”

These white bean bun balls were definitely seeking help. Part of her was absolutely reluctant to leave them without trying. Nichika grabbed her master’s sleeve, stopping him from walking away.

“Let’s look into what they want first. Okay?”

“I’m with Nichika on this!” Wolfie chimed in.

“Y’know what they say: the good you do for people is the good you do yourself, buddy,” Lambert threw in for good measure.

Oswald heaved a long sigh. “They’re monsters, not people...”

Three against one. The odds were stacked against him. Determining it’d waste even more time if he argued, he relinquished the point. Wanting to wrap things up quick, he crouched and poked one of the rotund petacolon.

“Oi, round, squishy thing. What’s worrying you? Did someone trash your hunting grounds? Did your natural enemy show up? Or are your problems all made up by a certain goody two-shoes who can’t keep her nose out of other people’s—and monsters’— business?”

“I can *too* keep my nose out of other people’s business!” Furious, Nichika pulled back her fist to punch him, when she finally remembered what bothered her about the monster’s name. “Oh my gosh! I just remembered! You kept calling me a petacolon around the time we first met. How do I look anything like these things?!” she questioned, holding one of the limbless, nonhuman creatures next to her face.

Her friends compared her to the round blob for a few moments before giving their opinion.

“You look exactly alike,” her master said flat-out.

“Maybe your daydreamy gaze is similar,” Wolfie unhelpfully added.

“You give off the same aura,” Lambert offered, thrusting the knife that landed the final blow on her self-esteem.

“Oh my gosh!” Shocked and depressed, Nichika let the petacolon slip from her hands and fell to her knees in the dirt. “Th-This is what I look like to others?!”

“Petapeta! Korororo! Petakorororo!”

The white jelly buns bounced around Nichika to cheer her up. Their adorableness soothed her weary heart, but she still felt conflicted about their resemblance.

“Oomph!”

The hopping mob of petacolons suddenly started pushing her. Afraid of being swept away, she stood and followed the river of blue toward several giant boulders. She walked right into something bouncy when she stepped around the largest boulder.

“Augggh!” Whatever she walked into bounced her onto her bottom. The others showed up shortly after and gaped wordlessly ahead. “Oh no, what is it?”

She dragged her gaze upward and was lost for words.

Through the fog she faintly made out a large translucent, putty body that towered higher than the eye could see. Moreover, there was more than one. All the giant shadows she thought belonged to boulders were actually giant petacolons several dozen times the size of a normal one.

Mouth hanging open, Lambert kept his eye trained on the shiny ball of a creature and asked, “Hey, bud, what do you think we have here? A mutation?”

“No, more likely a matured version...or so I’d guess, but have petacolons ever been recorded as growing to giant size?”

From the sound of it, the giant petacolons were unusual even by this world’s standards. Lying here and there around the clearing, the giant petacolons inflated and deflated, but didn’t move. Whereas their smaller versions bounced and rolled around without ever staying still.

“Are they sleeping?” Nichika whispered, afraid speaking too loudly would wake them.

Her efforts were wasted by Wolfie who fearlessly pranced over to wake them.
“Gooooood morning! It’s morning time!”

He jumped up on one of their big bodies and pushed his front paws into its jiggly belly, only to be bounced backward.

“Hyaaaah!”

Wolfie tumbled into another giant petacolon, shooting him into yet another and another like he was the ball in pinball. The wolf soon vanished beyond the wall of giant, sleeping petacolons. Nichika reached out her hand in the direction he rolled, Oswald sighed, and Lambert pointed and buckled over laughing.

“Aaaah, there he goes...”

“What’s my stupid familiar doing now...?”

“Ahyahya! Lil’ Wol is awesome!”

Oddly enough, the giant petacolons didn’t wake despite the activity. Their eyes remained comfortably closed.

“I see now. You want us to do something about this,” Oswald asked the horde of small petacolons. They looked pleadingly up at him with tears in their dewdrop eyes. Entering investigative mode, Oswald rubbed his chin and voiced his observations. “Were they fed a sleeping tonic?”

“Why’d anybody do that?” Lambert asked.

“The why can come later. Let’s try to wake them.”

At Nichika’s suggestion, they each went to a different petacolon and tried every method they could think of to wake the sleeping giants.

First, they shook the blubbery balls. Didn’t work. Then they slapped and punched it, which had the effectiveness of hitting solid Jello. Nichika shouted at the top of her lungs right next to hers. Her screams vainly echoed through the valley. Oswald tossed ice-cold water on it from his magic bottle. The liquid absorbed into the petacolon in an instant.

“What is with this thing? It absorbed the water faster than anything I’ve seen before...” Nichika observed.

“That’s an amazing new discovery. By drying and flattening out the petacolons I can turn them into an item that absorbs the humidity from people’s rooms—”

“What horrifying ideas are you coming up with now?!” Nichika loudly rebuked her master’s chilling plan, and concentrated her energy on their next option.

While not the friendliest of ideas, she tried warming the petacolon up with fire.

“...It’s coming to a boil.”

“Look at it bubble.”

The giant petacolon was still asleep, its face the picture of calm, despite the fact that the water inside it was boiling. They had tested so many things on the round monster and still it slept. Just when their options had been exhausted they heard Wolfie howling in the distance.

“Heeeey! Guys! I found something funky over here!”

Chapter 6: Girl, Speaks her Mind

THE pinball's—or rather—Wolfie's voice came from beyond the boulders. Nichika and the others noticed a honeyed fragrance wafting in the air on their way to him. They were blanketed in the comforting allure of sweet, sweet sleep.

“Eek!”

Nichika was on the verge of giving in to her sleepiness when the sound of something heavy hitting the ground shocked her awake. She turned around to find Oswald down on one knee, clinging to a boulder with his right hand.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?!” She rushed to his side.

“So tired...” he moaned, pressing his left hand to his forehead.

“Get a grip! I know you love your naps, but there’s a place and time for that!”

She shook him by the shoulders until he could no longer hold up his own weight and heavily slid to the ground. Lambert began swaying on his feet a slight distance from them.

“Ahaha. You’re so lame...buddy...”

“Lambert!”

He collapsed to the ground too. She raced to him, rolled him onto his back, and heard him snoring away.

“Uhhh...?”

Irresistible sleepiness crashed down on her in violent waves. Nichika bit the inside of her cheek, staving it off as best she could. Mind a little clearer, she noticed a purple haze mixed into the white fog.

Hold it together, Nichika. If you pass out here, who will wake everyone up?

Motivating herself to keep moving, she used her staff as a walking cane and pushed ahead one unsteady step at a time. Before long the purple haze

thickened into a familiar ominous shade.

“I knew it...this...isn’t...normal...”

It’s that color. The ill-omened, poisonous purple that’s devouring the world and made the Fire Spirit go crazy. Pressing her sleeve to her mouth, she approached the source while trying to inhale as little of the haze-infected air as possible. After a while she came upon her other friend.

Wolfie!

The sound asleep wolf was lying with his belly up in the middle of the road with snot bubbles coming out of his nose.

I must be close then.

Large boulders were scattered around the rocky area. The haze seemed to be emitting from atop the largest boulder there. Dragging her numb legs, she managed to clamber her way up. Her eyes bulged at what she came face to face with on top: a flower bud hanging its heavy head.

Including the stem, it came up as high as her knees at most, but its strong gray roots wound tenaciously around the stone boulder. The partially open bud shared the same sickening shade of purple as the haze it spat out in pulses.

“...!”

Extreme drowsiness whisked her consciousness away on a wave. How lovely it would be to curl up and sleep.

Ear-piercing cries from beyond the haze pulled her back just as her mind was ready to fly away.

“KOROROOOO! PETAROROOO!”

The petacolons were calling her.

Remembering why she came, Nichika stomped her feet against the hard stones, compelling her sleepiness into anger.

“...the hell...are...doing...?!”

Magic converged in the staff handle she gripped, transferring the fire mana within the magic orb into her. Crimson dyed her wide-open eyes, and the red

butterflies symbolic with Nichika danced around her.

“Don’t...spew...that...noxious...gaaaaaaaaaaaaas!” she roared, bringing forth a burst of hellfire. She scooped it up with the staff and slammed it down on the venomous flower. “BURN BABY BURN!”

The area turned into an instant sea of fire. Was the blasted plant fire-resistant? It didn’t so much as wilt under the raging inferno. But after a while, the roots began to scorch, and it writhed like a living creature. A mighty shake racked it from the roots to its bud. She braced herself for what it had in store for her next, but it lost all color and crumbled.

“Did I...beat it?”

Extinguishing her flames, Nichika flopped back onto the boulder and panted. There was a sudden clang of something hard hitting rock. She looked to see a purple crystal where the flower had been. The color rapidly faded before her eyes and then it finally cracked in two.

She grudgingly stood back up and walked over to check on it.

“Awww, darn. How could you do that?” an unfamiliar voice groaned above her. “Do you know how much mana I wasted to create that? You’re awful.”

Nichika spun around. The mysterious person wore a robe that melted into the white fog and sat on a boulder swinging their legs like a small child.

Alarmed by that familiar attire, Nichika curled her fingers around the staff and yelled, “You’re the kid who attacked us in Cherry Blossom Kingdom!”

This was the same child who had stolen the magic wind bullets from Princess Yura and shot Wolfie in the alley.

Unfazed by her accusations, the child hidden under the white robe merely tilted their head. “Hm? Oh, I get it. So you did see me back then.”

The boy, at least they sounded like a boy, giggled, his mouth curling in a guiltless smile. He shrugged and mocked her in a cutesy voice that sounded like tinkling from handbells.

“You’ve got it wrong when you say ‘attacked us.’ I was only after you. What happened to that little wolf wasn’t what I was going for. He got hurt all because

he tried to protect the *likes of someone worthless like you.*"

His biting remark sent pangs of pain stabbing at her chest. She didn't know why, but it was clear the boy hated her. *Did I do something to offend him without knowing it?* She decided to ask him about it outright.

"Hey, did I do something to you? I'll apologize if I did."

"Wow, annoying," he spat, stopping her from saying more. The boy pointed at her from above, his lips twisting in a derisive smirk. "Annoying. Annoying. Annoying. There you go making a face like you're all pure and righteous like bottled water."

"I-I wasn't—"

"Your attitude makes me sick."

Nichika broke into a cold sweat at the blatant disgust in his voice.

The boy hopped off the taller boulder onto hers and thrust his finger at her chest. This time he dropped the repugnance exuding from him and opted to persuade her in a gentle whisper.

"Drop this whole revive the Spirit Goddess farce. Why not quit while you're ahead and smash that magic orb?"

"I can't. Ini asked me to do it," Nichika told him in a quivering voice. How did he know about her mission? She wasn't in the right state of mind to even consider it.

He suddenly started cackling. "Ini! That swindler! Pfufufu! Ahahahaha! I knew it! So I was right!"

"...!"

The boy turned up his intimidation level and warned her in a hostile, low voice. "This is your first and final warning. I will destroy you if you continue helping that fraudster. Disobey me and I'll smush you, tear you from limb to limb, and torture you until you tearfully beg me to please kill you."

Nichika's knees knocked against each other under the crushing pressure. Desperate to stay in control, she shakily asked, "Who in the world are you...?"

He turned off the intimidation like shutting off a stream of water by twisting the faucet and returned to his friendlier tone. “Me? Let me think... Guess I’ll go with Phantom for now.”

The boy—Phantom—took a step back and spread his arms. The bottom of his robe fluttered softly. Smiling with only his mouth, he left these final words: “Next time you meet Ini tell him: ‘I still haven’t forgiven you. And I will never ever forgive you for all eternity.’ ‘Kay?”

“Agh!”

A violent wind ripped between them. Nichika instinctively squeezed her eyes shut. By the time she could squint again, she was the only one left on the crag.

“Phantom...”

Yet another random visitor swooped down when Nichika was about to work through what had just happened.

“**Bacawk!**”

“Whoa!”

A large eagle flapped its wings over her head. Nichika threw her arms up to cover her face.

“My precious Nichika! Are you all right, sweetie?!” echoed a nauseatingly familiar voice.

“Huh?” She jerked her head toward the eagle that landed on her shoulder. A single golden feather shined in its massive wings. Thinking it couldn’t be him, she asked to be sure. “Is that you, Ini?”

“You look safe to me.”

“You can shapeshift?”

“No. I’m simply borrowing the eagle’s body to talk with you,” the eagle eloquently explained, its sharp eyes burrowing into her. **“On my way back to the Celestial Realm from Elminage—no, never mind. That doesn’t matter! More importantly, did someone attack you? Where are you right now?!”**

He overwhelmed her with the seriousness in his normally giddy voice. She

decided to honestly tell him what had happened from meeting the petacolon all the way to her encounter with the boy called Phantom.

“Hey, Ini, who was that boy?” she asked, worry coloring her voice after she summarized everything for him. “He seems to hate your guts. What happened between you?”

Phantom’s tone made it sound like his hatred ran deep. Ini held his silence. Tired of waiting, she pressed him harder.

“Say something. He said he’ll stop Yuna’s resurrection. Why is he getting in our way?”

“I’m sorry, Nichika. I still can’t tell you anything about this matter.”

Unconvinced and unhappy with his cop-out, Nichika opened her mouth to argue, when he shouted loudly over her.

“HOWEVER! Please believe me when I say there is absolutely nothing wrong with the journey you are taking! You’re the only one who can prevent the world from being devoured by dark mana!”

“You’re full of crap, Ini,” she accused, her blind trust in him until this point wavering. “But I also don’t feel it’s right to allow that dangerous haze to have free rein over this world...”

Did he notice her waning trust? The eagle lifted its head and plucked the gold feather out of its wingspan, effectively ending the conversation. **“You just have to collect the spirits without thinking. I swear I will tell you everything one day.”**

Once the feather hit the ground, the eagle returned to being an unspeaking bird.

OSWALD awoke from shallow sleep and forced open his heavy eyelids. The unchanging white fog brought a frown to his face, but he blinked when he realized Nichika was sitting very close to him.

“Morning,” she greeted, her expression hard.

“This isn’t a comfortable bed.” He ran his hands over his body in search of

damage as he sat up. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted the smaller petacolon mob bouncing around the moving big blobs. He spoke while looking at them. “What happened? I assume you figured out the cause since we’re all awake?”

Several long seconds of silence stretched between them. Finding it odd that she didn’t answer, Oswald shifted his questioning gaze back to Nichika. She was squeezing her hands on top of her lap with an unbelievably rattled look in her eyes. When she finally did speak again, it was in a grave voice.

“You know, you’ve called me thoughtless and stupidly carefree so much I’d be a millionaire if someone gave me a penny every time. But I’ve always thought things through in my own way.”

“Nichika?”

“But maybe you really were right all along. I didn’t think too much when I readily accepted Ini’s request. Was that the right choice? Was I being stupid?”

All of the tiny insecurities growing inside Nichika joined hands and became one massive lump of worry. Once doubt came into the picture she couldn’t escape it. Sinking in a world of uncertainty, her trembling voice accelerated.

“What’s true? What kind of things am I forgetting? Who was I? What will happen once I collect all the spirits? Does Goddess Yuna even exist?”

The doubts wouldn’t stop piling on. Her hands trembled on her lap, and her tears splattered on her thighs, splashing onto the nearby rocks. *Maybe the ground I’m sitting on right now doesn’t exist either. Even the man I’m complaining to could just be a figment of my imagination.*

“Can I actually go home? What the hell is Arcanshiel? Who are you, Oswald? What if all of this, every last detail, is just some elaborate dream of mine—”

Something strong struck her head, knocking her back. Flailing her arms, she managed to stay upright. Eyes wider than the two moons, she watched as Oswald brought down his finger to flick her for the second time. His displeased, low voice cut through the foggy air.

“Worm for brains! Don’t go making people a figment of your imagination.”

His second flick hit the mark. It hurt enough for her to see stars, as usual. Tears welled in her eyes as she held her hands over her aching head. Her master pointed at her.

“Is your pain an illusion?”

He seized the bow on her mantle and pulled her to him.

“Mmmnn...” Her lashes fluttered while she willingly accepted the kiss.

After a long moment, he freed her lips and exhaled. “...Is the way you feel when we do *this* an illusion too?” he asked in a quiet, husky voice.

Nichika didn’t know how to answer him. Mild irritation flared in his blue eyes only inches from her face. A roguish grin soon accompanied those devilish eyes, followed by his absurd declaration.

“I don’t like being relegated to nonexistence. I’ll sear myself onto your soul.”

“Huh? What are you say—”

She nearly gave in when he wrapped an arm around her waist, but she shoved a hand in his face and pushed him away before she was swept up in the moment.

“I always tell you there will be none of that!”

“Why not? Aren’t I just someone you dreamed up? Who cares what a hot illusion does to you, right?”

“Fine! I’ll acknowledge you’re right! Sorry for calling you a part of my dreams!”

Face flushing, she turned her back on him and held her overheating head in her hands. The crushing anxiety she felt moments ago had been stamped out by the raging tumult of emotion he caused her. She placed a hand on her thrashing heart and used her brain.

It’s no use overthinking. It’s not an issue of him being real or not. The moment my feelings became this way, I...

She glanced over her shoulder to where her master was waiting with a mischievous grin. He threw her own words right back at her in a teasing tone.

“You’ve got tofu for brains. What’re you doing wasting time with adult worries? What happened to that favorite theory of yours? Wouldn’t you rather take action first, think later?”

Yeah. My feelings haven’t changed since that time.

Cheeks puffed out, she pouted before bursting out laughing. Refreshed, she stretched her hands as high as they could reach.

“You’re right. I won’t come any closer to the answer wasting time thinking about what I don’t know.” The light of determination reignited in her newly opened eyes. “The only thing I can do is keep moving.”

“And I’m stuck moving with you.”

Oswald stood and walked off to wake the other two.

“.....”

Nichika stared at the black back ahead of her then quickly averted her gaze. Only the petacolon at her feet noticed the red hue staining her cheeks.

BEEP!

Ini ended his connection with the eagle. His expression was grim, and he didn’t move from where he stood for a long while. He gave his head a light shake and started down the celestial corridor made of white mineral. His feet eventually brought him to a room and he pushed open the old door. The interior was shrouded in darkness except for the light reflecting off the stark floor from the glass tubes lining the walls.

Ini advanced deeper within until he reached the end of the room. He raised his gaze up to what was housed there.

A woman was floating in a huge glass tube filled with clear liquid. Long hair floated around her stark naked body. Beauty and godliness defined her facial features, but her eyes were firmly closed.

Ini ever so gently rested his hand on the glass tube as if just her presence within made the machine sacred. The corners of his lips curled slightly as he spoke to her.

“Yuna, it seems I’ll never find forgiveness from that child. I’ll probably be hunted to the ends of the world. Aah, but even if that’s so...” He leaned his forehead against the glass and whispered as if in prayer. “...I will gladly sacrifice everything if it means I can hug you again... Though I know saying so angers you.”

Her eyes didn’t flutter open even at the heartbreak and sorrow permeating his voice.

Only the sound of popping bubbles droned on endlessly in the silence.

“HMM...”

Nichika nudged Wolfie awake and they regrouped with Lambert who showed up from beyond the white veil. All together again, they set off to make their way out of the valley. The petacolons showed them a shortcut, so the rest of their journey should have been easy sailing, but Nichika was too busy glowering and groaning at the crystal pieces in her hands to enjoy herself.

“Something doesn’t add up.”

After the wicked purple flower withered, the crystal at its core drained of color, turning gray. On closer inspection, she noticed deliberate messy lines marring the surface, which nagged at her. She pushed the two halves together and inspected it closely.

“...?”

“Nichika, you’ll trip if you stare too hard at that thing while walkin’,” Lambert warned with a wry smile.

“Maybe she’ll pay more attention if she falls off the cliff again,” Oswald heartlessly supplied.

“I won’t fall!”

“Oh yeah, you already fell once. You lack the intelligence for learning your lesson.”

“GRRR—!”

Geez! He's a genius at rubbing people the wrong way!

"Hey, hey! Those scratches look like picture letters from down here," Wolfie observed with interest, looking at the crystal from below. His observation stopped Nichika from throwing a snide remark back at Oswald.

"Does it?"

"I can't read it. Maybe Master can?"

She flipped over the crystal and the three of them stared down at it. Now that Wolfie pointed it out, the scratches did look like letters if viewed through the distortion in the center of the crystal. In other words, Nichika had been looking at it upside down.

Reading what it said shocked the words right out of her. Unaware of her reaction, Oswald inclined his head, a puzzled look on his face.

"...No, I've never seen these letters before. There are only three and they look difficult to decipher."

"I can't make sense of 'em either. What 'bout you—Nichika?"

The crystal trembled in Nichika's shaking hands as Lambert's question went unanswered. She read it. The three letters spelled the word for sloth.

The problem was, those letters were Japanese kanji.

"H-How?"

What in the world did this mean? Why were Japanese letters carved into an item left behind by the boy cloaked in a white robe? Not even Cherry Blossom Kingdom, the one place with a similar culture to Japan, used the Japanese writing system. Nichika kicked her brain into high gear to figure it out, when someone suddenly yanked on her ear, causing her to shout.

"Ow! Ow! OW!"

As expected, it was Oswald who rescued her from drowning in thought.

"Why don't you explain it to us before you start forcing the rats in your brain to turn those wheels?" he demanded without a shred of guilt for pinching her.

"Fine! I will! Just stop hurting me!" Nichika rubbed her red ear as she

considered suing him for assault. "It looks like letters from my world."

"It does?"

"Well, I think so...at least."

She couldn't say for sure because the lines making up the letters were so sloppy they looked like an earthworm squirming through dirt. Someone could write with their non-dominant hand and it'd still look better than what was carved into the crystal.

"Oh yeah. I forgot you were summoned from another world, Nichika," Lambert said, only just now remembering that tidbit about her.

"So? What's it say?" Oswald pushed.

Nichika ran her eyes over the crystal again. She slowly read the letters aloud, confirming each one. "*Sloth*...I think."

"Sloth?"

That's weird...

Nichika had naturally read it out loud in Japanese, yet Oswald heard it in his own language. Strange as it was, Oswald began hypothesizing with the information she gave him, so she set that suspicion aside for the time being.

"You could call the petacolons sleeping the day away a form of slothfulness. Basically, they were doing exactly what was carved into that crystal."

True enough, the haze the purple crystal spewed could be said to have caused slothfulness in those who inhaled it. Everyone present became dead tired the moment they breathed the corrupted air.

Nichika thought of a particular piece of knowledge from her world and decided to share it with the others. Reluctant over how to breach the subject, she balled her hand in front of her chest and carefully picked her words.

"Hey, do you guys mind hearing me out for a minute? There's something called the 'Seven Deadly Sins' in my world, and sloth is among the seven."

"Seven deadly sins?" Wolfie repeated the curious sounding words.

Nichika drew on her vague knowledge. "I don't remember the nitty-gritty

details because I only ever read about it in books... Uhh, what were they again? It has to do with people's desires. So you've got sloth, right? And then there's greed, lust, jealousy...and I'm forgetting the rest."

She dug through her mind for the remaining sins but came up short and hung her head.

"In other words, there's a chance other magic crystals pertaining to each sin are out there?" Oswald summarized for her.

"I think it's a possibility," she affirmed with a nod.

As long as she was going to continue collecting the Great Spirits against Phantom's wishes, they were undoubtedly going to clash during the journey ahead. Her theory was still within the realms of guesswork, but it never hurt to be wary.

"The seven deadly sins, huh? First I've heard of it," Lambert said, folding his hands behind his head.

Oswald looked back at his apprentice. "What if the kid in the white hood calling himself Phantom comes from the same place as you?"

"What?" Her jaw dropped at the reality she never considered.

"Didn't you call it *Japan*? Phantom used a writing system that doesn't exist here and even knows about this seven deadly sins thing. It's a real possibility, don't you think?"

"Phantom is...Japanese?"

Then was he summoned here like I was? By who? For what purpose?

"Next time you meet Ini tell him: 'I still haven't forgiven you. And I will never ever forgive you for all eternity.' 'Kay?"

His parting words echoed in her head. A boy with knowledge from her world had appeared to prevent Yuna's revival. Indescribable worry flooded Nichika's heart at this new discovery.

Act 6: Fly Awaaaaaay!!

Chapter 7: Girl, Makes a Call

ONLY after walking for close to a whole day did they finally pass through Fog Valley. A cool breeze started to blow once they drew closer to their destination, whipping up Nichika's hair and mantle. The white fog hiding her feet from view cleared, giving way to a prairie flush with green. Nothing else caught the eye aside from the walled village looming in the center of the basin surrounded by a mountain range. Winds coming down from the mountains raced through the tall grass. No other land let her visually experience the wind like this.

"Woo! Finally got throuuuughh. Haven't tasted this wind in a while."

Arriving behind Nichika, Lambert cupped his hands over his eyes and looked out over the carpet of green stretching into the horizon. Nostalgia softened his mischievous expression into something more human.

"Does this area count as part of Windy Village?" Nichika asked.

"Mm, I guess so? We don't really make our borders clear, so you kinda put me on the spot askin' for specifics..." Lambert shrugged. "Don't quote me on this, but you can probably consider this basin as Windy Village."

Oswald stepped out of the foggy veil next to Lambert. He took one look at the gorgeous scenery and dispassionately stated the facts. "This basin is a natural fortress protected by mountains. Windy Village doesn't have any noteworthy natural resources, and none of the surrounding countries have a good enough reason to trudge up the mountains to attack."

"Wow, pal, you don't sugarcoat things, do ya? Fine, I admit my hometown doesn't have any local specialties and is located in the sticks." Wry smile in place, Lambert pointed to the town in the center of the prairie. "But please humor me and stop by this place without any noteworthy resources. Windy Village is entertaining as a sightseeing destination."

THE winds intensified as they neared the village. But rather than an unpleasant gale, the breeze cuddled up to them like a puppy. Nichika looked up to where green elements taking the form of butterflies blended into the endless blue sky.

“Look at all the wind mana!” she exclaimed, holding down her wildly dancing hair. “I can see why people think the Great Wind Spirit lives here.”

“I see them too! So manyyy!” Wolfie frolicked after the butterflies. One landed on his nose and he became cross-eyed staring at it. Oswald didn’t share in his excitement.

Fed up with the wind blowing his black cloak into his face, he yanked it off, rolled it into a ball, and chucked it on the ground. “Annoying pests!” he bellowed at the vast sky. “Why are you only picking on me?!”

“Ahaha! Your hair has been swept completely out of control!” Pointing and laughing at her master only turned his face more sour.

Oswald ran his fingers through his hair and rubbed it around until it looked like a bad case of bedhead.

“They sure love my upperclassman,” Lambert pointed out with a suggestive grin. “Go figure.”

Nichika thought about why it’d be obvious for wind to love Oswald and then she recalled what Wolfie had told her.

“Oh yeah, isn’t wind mana obsessed with beauty?”

“AUGH!”

A gust of wind charged Oswald, knocking him hard onto his back. He writhed in agony on the ground. Laughter from the wolf and two humans summoned a dark ugliness within the witch. Head tilted down as far as it could go, he sat up, muttering curses.

“I can use *that* to shut the damn wind mana up... No, I’ll obliterate them with it... I’ll turn every last birdie to cinders.”

“Save the villainy for something more productive. Come on, I’ll help you up.”

Nichika offered him her hand with a conciliatory smile.

“Ya just have to grin and bear it a lil’ longer, buddy,” Lambert encouraged beside them. “They won’t pick on you as much in the village.”

Oswald swung his gaze toward the far away gate, calculated the approximate miserable distance it’d take to get there, and exhaled his despair.

BY the time they arrived at the walls surrounding the village, Nichika’s hair had become as much of a windswept bird nest as Oswald’s. Even Wolfie looked more like a giant, walking scruffy furball than a wolf. Shaking out his fur didn’t help much either.

Sighing, Oswald wearily muttered, “We’re finally here... This is the first time I’ve wanted to murder wind.”

“C’mon, cheer up. You’ll scare the villagers if you walk in there looking like a serial killer on the prowl.”

Wolfie spun around in front of them when they were within a stone’s throw of the walls. He howled and asked, “Hey! Master! Master! You’re all going into this village, right? Can I go for a run through the prairie? Just lemme know later if I can come inside, too!”

He bounded in the direction of the tall, swaying grass without waiting for an answer.

“Ah, there he goes. He doesn’t have to do that,” Lambert said discreetly to the others, correctly guessing why Wolfie suddenly decided to run off. “Windy Village doesn’t discriminate against the Long-eared Tribe.”

“Wolfie always acts cheerful, but I think it bothers him more than he lets on...” Nichika replied, concern for her furry friend clouding her face.

Wolfie had been ostracized and tormented by the people living near the forest where he lived with Oswald. His innocent joy over becoming friends with Nichika was burned into her memory. Interacting with people was still a sore spot for him.

Of course, Oswald had to go and ruin the emotional moment with his

nonchalant dismissal. “Nah, he just wants to frolic. That peabrain doesn’t have the intelligence necessary for overthinking things.”

Nichika was about to argue with him, but swallowed the first words that came to mind. She went with giving him a taste of his own medicine instead.

“My bad. Someone as soulless and thick-skinned as you would never understand.”

Oswald blinked at his apprentice’s improving backtalk. Improving, yes; better than him? Not in a million years.

“Ha!” he crossed his arms and flatly shot back, “Possessing a soul that’s easily hurt will only drag you down.”

“There you go spouting nonsense again! Stubborn goat!”

“Who are you calling a goat?!”

“Aaaaaaah! Stop! Stop! You’re givin’ me a headache. Let’s go inside already,” Lambert interceded, causing the glaring duo to whip their heads away from each other.

Combing through his knotted hair with his fingers, Oswald knocked on the guardroom door. “Good day to you. My friends and I are travelers. Is it possible for us to apply for entry into your village?” he asked with faked pleasantries.

“Sure thing.”

There was a click and the guardroom door swung open. The bearded guard broke out in a big smile when he noticed the green-haired young man waving behind the traveler.

“Hm? Oooh?! Hey, is that you, Lam?! Aren’t you supposed to be at magic school? Did they finally kick you out?”

“Hey there, ol’ man. Long time no see. I’m on voluntary leave from school. Y’know, so I can help save the world.”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! Good one!” he laughed it off like a joke and invited them inside the guardroom.

Lambert turned and started off in another direction since he didn’t need to fill

out anything as a resident.

“I’ll go on ahead and get the ball rollin’ for ya guys inside. Please come once you’re finished here. You can ask for directions from that ol’ guy.” With that, he left with the wind.

The remaining two were shown inside the guardroom. The good-humored guard slipped two documents out of the wall cubby while he struck up a conversation.

“I take it you came to watch the race?”

“What race?” Nichika asked.

“Oh?” He didn’t hide his surprise as he placed the papers on the table in front of them. “That’s not what you’re here for? Then you’re in luck. The Grand Race held only once a year is happening tomorrow. You should watch. Oh, you only have to fill out your name and put a check that you agree to our rules. Don’t worry about the rest. Really. Nobody’s gonna check it over anyway.”

“Is this race like a marathon or something?” Nichika ventured while completing the awfully lenient entry sheets.

“Hardly! Miss—lemme see, Nichika? This is Windy Village. There’s only one thing worth racing with here.”

“What’s that?”

“Enjoy discovering the answer with your own eyes. Trust me, it won’t take you more than a few seconds to figure it out.”

Once they finished, they asked where Lambert went and departed the guardroom. Nichika turned back to the guard who saw them to the door and asked for a favor.

“One last thing. A talking wolf should be coming by later today. He’s with us, so would you be so kind as to tell him where we went?”

“A talking doggy, huh? Don’t get those every day! Your message is safe with me!”

Maybe the guard didn’t think too deeply about things. But Oswald was unusually baffled by him seeing them off with a hearty smile.

“What a stupidly peaceful village... They shouldn’t let someone like me in so easily,” he insisted, dead serious in expression and tone.

“Master, that’s not something you should say about yourself,” Nichika contended, following him through the dark stone passage leading into the village. Her eyes spread wide open at the scenery beyond the sunny exit. “So this is Windy Village!”

It looked like a village straight out of a fairy tale. Cutesy homes with colorful walls and triangular roofs made of dazzling white plaster lined the red brick road. The houses had an unusual amount of floors for this world—most had more than three stories. Towering apartment buildings higher than the eye could see were scattered throughout as well. A soft breeze blew through, and the windmills installed everywhere were spinning.

And there was one decisive difference between Windy Village and all the places Nichika had visited before: residents zoomed by on brooms.

“Wow! Everyone is so good at flying!” Nichika enthused, awed and a little envious.

A woman riding a broom smoothly flew to her house’s veranda on the second floor while holding a paper shopping bag. Shockingly, about half of the people in the area were traveling by broom. One particular question rose to the forefront of Nichika’s mind when she saw a man fly by.

“Huh. Men can fly with brooms, too?”

“Aren’t they embarrassed?” Oswald’s heavy brow slanted in strong disapproval.

“Whatever do they have to be embarrassed about?” a sonorous voice boomed in answer behind him.

Startled, Nichika turned to find someone standing on top of the bulwark they had just passed through. The sun was directly behind them, skewing their features in the shadows, but from their voice, it appeared to be a man with long, flowing hair.

“Roses?”

Nichika caught one of the dark-red flower petals falling from the sky and raised an eyebrow. The villagers stopped going about their business and turned to pay their respects to the mysterious person.

“Lord Sylmia!”

“It’s Lord Sylmia!”

“Oh my, he’s as lovely as ever today!”

Squinting, Nichika tried to make out what this Lord Sylmia or whoever he was looked like. Mint-green, thigh-length hair fluttering in the wind behind him, he kissed the rose in his hand and struck a polished pose.

“I am...beautiful.”

“Ooooooooooh!”

On a completely different frequency from the cheering crowd, Nichika’s jaw dropped and Oswald scowled with utter disgust.

“Hah!”

The strange man jumped off the bulwark with a shout and landed without a scratch. Rose petals danced around him, making Nichika want to ask what kind of cheap theater show he was putting on.

Garbed in clothes seemingly made to flap in the wind, “Lord Sylmia” presented a rose to Oswald and pushed his hair up off his face in his cheesiest move yet.

“I am beautiful... And I naturally love all beautiful things. Beauty is a gift granted by God. You can be proud of your good looks.”

“Don’t come any closer, narcissist.” Oswald slapped the rose away.

Undisturbed by his rejection, Sylmia turned to Nichika next. “Welcome, cute little lady. Right now you are a pretty bud, but your beauty will someday bloom into a breathtaking flower. I can tell.”

“U-Um, hello?” Nichika hesitantly greeted with reddening cheeks.

Stars twinkled in Sylmia’s deep green eyes as he pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and swooned. “Aaaaah! Marvelous! What a splendid day today

is turning out to be!”

“?!”

Sylmia threw his arm around Oswald’s shoulder, flicked back his cape, and struck a pose. Cries exploded from the street. Far from being a fan of the limelight, veins popped on Oswald’s forehead.

“What the hell is the deal with this nutjob?!” he raged.

“B-Beats me.” Nichika instinctively stepped away before she got pulled into the craziness with him.

“Oh, there you are! I was lookin’ all over because you weren’t at home. Sheesh.” A young man she was becoming all too familiar with ran around the greengrocer’s festive vegetable display.

“Lambert! Make that meeting with the Wind Spirit happen NOW. I want out of this freakish village ASAP!” Oswald shouted, engulfed in the crowd that broke out in song and started dancing in the streets.

Their guide just laughed. “Silly Oswald. He’s right next to ya.”

“Come again?”

Doubting his ears, Oswald looked to his left. His eyes made contact with the narcissist who winked and stuck out his tongue.

“That there’s the village chief and Wind Spirit, Sylmia.”

Right as Lambert finished talking Oswald put everything he wanted to say into his fist and slammed it into his collarbone.

“**AHA!** Ha! Ha!” Wind Spirit Sylmia laughed like a stormy gale after clearing the area of people. “I never would have guessed that Lam’s guests included the Spirit Priestess~!”

He didn’t look much older than Oswald, and frankly, didn’t seem one bit like a spirit. Flowers didn’t stop blowing around him as he gave a refined bow.

“Allow me to formally introduce myself. I’m the Great Wind Spirit Sylmia. May our relationship be ever beautiful.”

“Yes, I hope it will be! My name is Nichika. It’s an honor to make your acquaintance!”

The gorgeous spirit chuckled at the girl bowing to him in a panic. “You’re a different type from Yuna.”

“You knew Goddess Yuna too, Lord Sylmia?”

“Tch, tch, tch!” He wagged his finger. The air swirled with the movement. “Now there, save your questions for later. Doing something ill-mannered like chatting in the street offends my aesthetic. Why don’t we enjoy a long talk over a splendid cup of tea at my palace?”

“Haah...” Nichika and Oswald sighed.

And so the group headed to Sylmia’s palace. As they walked through the colorful streets, an emotionally drained Oswald weakly grumbled his complaints.

“I can’t take it. My body viscerally rejects his type.”

“Ahaha...”

He must’ve mentally associated the hyper and overly obnoxious wind spirit with the very similar golden celestial Ini.

“Hey, what is that?” Nichika asked, stopping when she spotted something strange in the middle of the road.

She pointed to the three green crystal balls floating next to each other at a head’s height. People were standing on each side, leaning forward with their heads thrust into the balls.

“Oh, that?” Lambert responded, hands folded behind his head. “It’s a thingamajig this dude created that allows you to talk to people far away.”

That explanation brought a modern invention to mind. “A phone!” she exclaimed.

“*Fown*?” Lambert sounded out the peculiar sounding word.

Sylmia walked up behind him with a confident smile and took hold of Nichika’s hand. “It’s not a *fown*, but my pride and joy called a Wind Whisper!

You should give it a whirl since we're here! Come! Come!"

He led her to the crystal balls and gave her head a gentle push inside one. It looked like rock-hard crystal from the outside, but once her face made contact with the cool surface, it sucked her in as if she were dunking her head in water. Yet she could still breathe. It was a strange feeling having her head submerged in a water ball and breathing just fine. Sylmia's instructions outside the crystal sounded like they came from the other side of a stone wall.

"Think of the name of a person you want to talk to and where they are. The wind mana will assuredly carry your voice to them!"

"U-Uhmm, who should I pick?"

Nichika thought of all the different people she had met since coming to this world. One particular girl stood out among the rest.

"Yeah, I'll go with her!"

SHE was valiantly attired in uniform for military training that day, much as she was every day. She turned her hawkish gaze on the uniformed men and women of the Magic Gun Corps and fired off instructions.

"Keep your eye on the target! Keep your elbows down and in to support its weight! Relax your neck and let your cheek fall naturally to the stock!"

Bangs resounded in the training ground where the white sand dazzled the eyes under the unrelenting sun. This year's recruits were quite skilled. Mass production of the magic wind bullets purchased from the Witch of the West was proceeding as planned. They didn't have to worry about being easily invaded now.

The mutating monsters are worrisome, but the North's recent silence is equally unsettling. Being prepared never hurts.

She took a break from instructing the troops to retie her hair that had been drastically shortened during a certain incident.

"Princess Yura!"

The general princess of Cherry Blossom Kingdom warily scanned the area for

who said her name. That familiar voice caused her perfectly shaped brows to knit.

“Miss Nichika?” she uttered the name of her former guest.

“This is so awesome! It actually works!” the girl’s jubilant voice responded amid a gentle breeze.

“Wh-Where are you?!”

Years of serving in the military made her very uncomfortable not being able to see the other party.

Picking up on Yura’s restlessness, Nichika laughed apologetically beyond the wind.

“I’m currently in Windy Village. A contraption here is allowing me to project my voice to you. I have something to ask you.”

“Windy Village?”

Yura searched her memory using that village name as a keyword. Now that she thought about it, there was rumor of a technology in Windy Village said to exponentially extend the oscillation distance of air, effectively sending voices to distant lands. She had relegated the information to nothing more than hearsay, but it turned out to be real.

“You surprised me. That’s a magnificent piece of technology,” she responded, honestly impressed with what they had accomplished.

“Sorry. I wasn’t trying to startle you.”

“Would it be possible to import that technology to my kingdom? I’ll buy it at top coin.”

“What? Ah, okay...yes...I understand...umm...”

Yura was only half serious when she asked, but Nichika started talking to someone else about it on the other side of the wind. Several minutes passed before she returned to the conversation with Yura.

“I’m sorry. From what I understand, this contraption requires the Great Wind Spirit’s power to operate. He said it won’t work anywhere but here.”

“Aw, that’s a real shame.” Yura laughed behind her hand and moved to the garden arbor. She leaned against the red railing and fixed her hair while she chatted with Nichika. “I’m glad to hear you’ve successfully met the Great Wind Spirit in Windy Village. Are things going well?”

“Yes! Thanks to all your help!”

“Rumors of you are slowly making their way here as well. People are talking about the Spirit Priestess who’s traveling with a raven-haired witch.”

The information put out by Elminage traveled through Lolo Village to Cherry Blossom Kingdom. And the information brought by travelers quickly spread throughout the land. From here, word would be carried by travelers boarding the large-scale aviation Whales to Seaside Blue Port, and spread westward from there. As ruler of one of the countries plagued by the increasing dark mana, Yura was grateful to Nichika.

“My people have been delighted by the news. There’s been so little good news lately, what with monsters growing more aggressive by the day.”

“Things are getting that bad?” Worry permeated Nichika’s voice.

Yura moved away from the balustrade to where she could overlook the city. Women armed with guns kept careful lookout from atop the watchtowers encircling the city walls. She watched them as she explained the current situation to Nichika.

“They haven’t breached our walls yet, but our biggest struggle lies in being unable to leave without armed guards. The children are sick of being cooped up. They want to play outside again.”

“I...see.”

The increasingly more aggressive monsters were attacking people now. Even the nocturnal species had started brazenly appearing during the day. Should things continue at this rate, it would eventually lead to normal citizens being unable to travel to other cities without extensive protection.

Hoping to change the dark mood she created, Yura cheerfully asked, “Is the mighty witch doing well?”

“All too well! I think he’s a perfect example of the saying ‘bad boys have all the luck.’ His personality is as twisted as ever, he’s a big pervert, and lazy to boot—YEOW!”

A dull thud was carried to her on the wind. Yura giggled. It appeared this master-apprentice duo hadn’t changed since she last saw them. She thoroughly enjoyed their banter going on beyond the wind as she waited for the perfect moment to interrupt them.

“Now that that’s settled, didn’t you have something to ask of me?”

“I did?” Had she forgotten her original objective? There was a pause before she cried, “Oh yeah!”

Cherry Blossom Kingdom’s princess couldn’t restrain the bubble of laughter at Nichika’s typical response. As usual, this girl from another world had a way of bringing peace to others. But Yura’s laughter apparently went unnoticed because Nichika got to the point in a hard voice.

“Princess Yura, do you still have the arrow fragment that was stuck in the Great Fire Spirit?”

“You mean that abominable arrow? You stepped on it and it broke.”

The incident involving some heathen controlling the fire dragon that protected Cherry Blossom Kingdom was still fresh in her mind. After Nichika destroyed the arrow, Yura meticulously collected and analyzed the splintered pieces, but the thick, nauseating purple aura had vanished without a trace. She had carefully stored the pieces that had become nothing more than junk just in case.

“Did you happen to see strange letters scribbled on any of it?”

“Letters? Now that you mention it...”

Yura recalled a report from a subordinate who was involved in the restoration work. She had examined the mysterious characters scrawled on the arrowhead for good measure, but could not decipher it either. Hand on her chin, she pondered Nichika’s question and gave her a truthful account.

“There were three letters.”

“That’s what I’m after! What did it say?”

“They are unreadable. My subordinates are currently looking into it.”

“I can probably read it.”

That was a surprise, but how could Yura explain what letters she couldn’t read looked like with words alone? Hot wind suddenly caressed her cheek while she was racking her brain for a good idea. A serene, rumbling voice whispered in her ears.

“Yura, I shalt explain for ye.”

“HELLO? What’s going on?”

Princess Yura was speaking with someone on the other end of the call. Nichika strained her ears to pick up on the conversation and practically leapt out of her skin when the wind line switched to someone else.

“’Tis been a while, child.”

“Great Fire Spirit!” Nichika cried in response to that rumbling voice.

“Oooh!” The wind spirit acting as the conduit for her voice rudely butted in on the conversation. “Why, if it isn’t my kindred spirit, Gaagaa! Long time no chat, my friend!” he delightfully exclaimed.

“...Sylmia.”

They were old friends, apparently. Not that it was strange with them both being a member of the Four Great Spirits, but Nichika struggled with the weird name Sylmia used when addressing the fire spirit.

“Why Gaagaa?” she asked Sylmia over her shoulder.

“His name is Ghazan, so he’s Gaagaa. Don’t speak yet. I’ll make it so everyone can hear you.”

The Great Fire Spirit has a name, too? I didn’t know. While Nichika regretted never asking for his name, the green crystal ball swelled like a balloon, engulfing the rest of their party.

“That handles that.”

“Nichika, behold the magic orb.”

“Okay.” At Ghazan’s request, Nichika removed the magic orb from her belt and held it in her palm. Flaming letters danced into the swirling lights contained within.

“Those are the letters inscribed upon the arrow that struck me.”

He can send me visuals through the orb! Extremely impressed by this new mode of communication, Nichika read out the string of letters only she could decipher.

“‘*Ra-th*’ ...It’s supposed to mean wrath. I knew it. It’s the same sloppy misspelling as the flower crystal that put the petacolons to sleep. The arrow was Phantom’s doing, after all.”

“Is that another one of your deadly sins?”

Oswald frowned as he peered down at the magic orb with her. His expression grew more puzzled by the minute because he couldn’t decipher the text.

Nichika studied his side profile as she broke down the information. “Yeah, it literally means to be vengefully angry. And if you think about it, the Great Fire Spirit had gone on a raging rampage for no reason. I’m pretty sure we’re onto something here.”

“Phantom?” Ghazan’s suspicious voice inquired from the other end of the wind call.

That gave Nichika the chance to talk about the boy in white and his plot to interfere with her mission. She also shared information on the various things that they had discovered since departing Cherry Blossom Kingdom.

After hearing everything, the general princess and Emperor of Flame were ready to wage war. An angry voice sliced through the chilly air.

“Crush him on sight next time.”

“I second that. Immediately liquefy thine enemies who stand in thy way. My flames shalt always be at thy disposal.”

“O-Okay, cool it, guys. Let’s not jump the gun,” Nichika entreated, nervous they were about to tell her to slaughter the child next.

Were they naturally aggressive because of their close relationship with fire? Not that Nichika didn't understand how they felt when they had gone through a lot because of him.

After that emotional bout, the pair from Cherry Blossom Kingdom advised her to be extra careful and ended the transmission. The rest of the group in Windy Village left the green ball's sphere with grim faces.

Lambert rubbed under his nose as he summarized the facts. "You've destroyed Wrath in Cherry Blossom Kingdom, and Sloth in the petacolon valley, so there should be five more of these sin things left, right? But those things don't give off a smell. Maybe it can't be detected unless you're close to where the item is activated?"

"Hmph. As long as I'm in this village I won't allow such ugliness to be brought in!" Sylmia struck a confident pose.

Oswald's exhaustion showed in his long sigh beside him. "I don't care. If we're done here, can we get a move on? People are gathering around us."

Another crowd was forming around the Wind Whisper portal. Nichika placed a hand on the green ball, reluctant to part from it.

"Aw, there are other people I want to talk to. Like Mihm, Makina, Melissa, and...and...and—"

"Let's move."

"Aaaaaaaah! You big fat, meanieeee!"

Dragged away kicking by the mantle, she held her hand out longingly for the crystal ball until it was long out of sight.

"WHAAA?! So you aren't willing to lend me your power then?!"

Sylmia's Palace. A palace in name only, his home was a normal house located in the residential district. Nichika's upset voice resounded through the comfortable living room.

Sylmia continued to smile away and sip his black tea despite the loud ringing in everyone's ears. "Now, now. Don't be hasty. I haven't said I won't cooperate

with you. I simply don't think it's very fun to just hand you my power without you earning it."

"What does fun have to do with anything?"

We're trying to revive the Spirit Goddess. He definitely doesn't seem to care much. Nichika glared daggers at him.

Offended, Sylmia pursed his lips. "Gaagaa only accepted you after you saved him, right? It's not fair for me to be the only one who hands it over without a condition."

"You aren't a child. Please don't throw a childish tantrum."

Forgetting she was dealing with the noble king of wind, Nichika flat out lectured him as she would Oswald. She was contemplating how to persuade him, when Sylmia flashed a sly grin and handed her a broom that was hanging on the wall.

"Without further ado, here you go."

"I don't get it."

Is he asking me to sweep? I guess I can do something small like that. Nichika was about to accept, but his next declaration knocked her off her chair.

"I'll acknowledge you as priestess if you win tomorrow's race riding this."

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

Sparkles in his eyes, Sylmia spread his arms to an imaginary crowd. "The Spirit Priestess elegantly soaring through the blue sky! Aah, how truly beautiful and touching that shall be!"

"Stop right there! Please don't put the cart before the horse!"

"Elegant, beautiful, and touching, huh?"

Nichika glared at Oswald muttering under his breath and pleaded with the wind spirit. "You are asking the impossible, Lord Sylmia! I, umm...can sorta fly, but my technique is, uh, unique. Put simply, it's like I'm on an out of control stallion?"

She paled as she pictured all the times her broom tried to buck her off like a

horse. A race would have a whole crowd of people watching. What if she plummeted to the ground upside down in front of all those people? No, she could still save face if she hit the ground. The real nightmare would be charging through the audience, knocking people over!

“Oh my gosh! I knew it! I can’t! It’s a danger to all involved!”

Sylmia pretended not to hear or notice her absolute panic and horror, and simply smiled. “Don’t worry. I’ll assign Lam as your assistant.”

Lambert, who had been leaning against the wall with nothing better to do, quickly stifled his yawn. “Me? I guess I can help.”

“No, no. This is a problem beyond just assigning me help!”

The problem was with the rider herself. She tried to make him understand that basic issue, but Sylmia slipped away like a passing breeze.

“Oh dear! It’s almost time for my meeting about tomorrow. I’m looking forward to your performance. Buh-bye!”

“Wai—”

With those final words, the Great Wind Spirit disappeared in a gust of wind. Nichika’s outstretched hand fell limply to her side.

“Seriously, why don’t the people of this world ever listen to what others have to say?!” she wailed.

Chapter 8: Girl, Has Nightmare

“COME right on in. Don’t mind the mess.”

Determining it was only a waste of breath to complain after Sylmia left, Nichika followed Lambert to the workshop downstairs.

She couldn’t tell from the outside that Sylmia’s house had been built on a slope, and although the workshop was underground, bright sunlight shined through the large windows, warmly illuminating the generous space. Brooms of varying shapes and sizes hung on the walls, and the smell of freshly cut wood filled the air. Nichika closed her eyes and deeply inhaled that woody scent.

“Smells so good...”

“Brooms are whittled down and adjusted here,” Lambert explained. “Now where’d that measuring tape go?”

“Didn’t know you had a hobby like this,” Oswald remarked, entering the room a few steps behind them.

Lambert sheepishly scratched the back of his head. “I couldn’t mention it at school. You know how it is. Outside this village everyone thinks it’s taboo for men to mount a broom.”

He grabbed the measuring tape off an old desk and began taking Nichika’s measurements. Height, shoulder width, arm length, the distance from her wrist to her fingertips. Nodding to himself, he wrote down the numbers.

“I can whittle off a huge chunk for someone of your size,” he cheerfully told her. “You can look forward to bein’ a lightweight competitor. Ah, but if I take too much off, you’ll lose strength and durability for what you gain in speed...so this part of the broom has to go like this and this has to be done this way.”

Craftsman Lambert marked up the broom received from Sylmia with black charcoal. Nichika’s cheeks dimpled at the first real signs of fun he seemed to be having since they met. Not wanting to disturb him, she waited for him to stand

from the desk before speaking.

“You really love it don’t you. Adjusting brooms.”

“Hm? Mm, you think so?” He sounded uncertain, like he had never really thought about it. “Yeah, maybe I do.”

Lambert fetched a saw from the cabinet and started the adjustments by cutting down the excessive handle and shaft length. He proceeded to remove the brush bristle in accordance to the changes he made to the length.

“It’s been my hobby for Spirits knows how long. Guess ya could say fiddlin’ with it for fun gave me a knack for it,” he explained, his hands going about the work without second-guessing his next move. “Just hope my intuition for these things hasn’t changed since I last took on a project like this.”

“Are there rules for what changes you can and can’t make?” she asked, running her fingers along one of the beautifully carved brooms on the wall.

“Absolutely,” he answered while carrying over several different types of wood file tools and rasps. “First of all, the broom must be the exact model specified by the tournament committee. You’re free to whittle it down as much as you like, but ya can’t add anything extra. Contestants are riding on the wind, so the key is to reduce weight as much as possible with the rider’s size in mind, but take it too far and you’ll weaken the frame so much it could snap on you like a twig. You’ve also gotta take wind resistance into account too.”

He prepared the general shape by shaving down the wood with a rough rasp. The texture gradually changed until the surface smoothed out.

“Oh and wind mana love all things beautiful, so the prettier the broom, the more of a speed boost they’ll give ya.”

Lambert chiseled a gorgeous design into the wood without drawing up a sketch first. Nichika was fascinated by his magical handiwork.

“Wow! You’re amazing, Lam! You could do this for a living!”

A faint smile touched Lambert’s lips at the way her eyes shined over his detailed openwork. Meanwhile, Oswald watched him work over his shoulder and pulled something from his pocket.

“Have anywhere to put this?”

“...What’s that?” Nichika asked, her distrust on full display for the black tubular object in his hand.

“Can’t you tell? It’s a booster,” he answered with a straight face. “It absorbs wind and fire mana to create explosive propulsion power.”

“Weren’t you listening?! I am just said that adding anything extra is against the rules!”

“This thing is seriously amazing. I pointed the nozzle toward a rock wall during the test phase and it erased everything behind me when I took off.”

“Don’t make your apprentice race with such a dangerous object!” she shot him down as usual. This time, though, it actually upset him.

“Tch,” he clicked his tongue. “Think you’re in a position to follow the rules? Your journey ends here and now if you don’t win tomorrow’s race.”

“Th-That’s...”

Nichika didn’t know what to say when he thrust reality upon her. If he outright asked if she was confident she could win, the honest answer was no. That being said, she didn’t want to cheat. She hung her head and muttered under her breath.

“I’ll never be able to forgive myself later if I win by cheating.”

Oswald sighed and turned his back to her. “Still playing the heroine after all we’ve been through? Go ahead and do it fair and square. Just don’t come whining to me later.”

With those final stinging words, he left the workshop.

“...Did I make him angry?” she asked sullenly after he’d gone.

“Beats me. But I think my upperclassman there might’ve been lookin’ out for you in his own way.”

She felt a little guilty after hearing that. *I’ll apologize when he comes back.*

But Oswald didn’t show up even after the day gave way to late night.

“I think I might’ve ticked him off for real...”

A gloomy cloud hung over the girl sitting in the corner of the workshop hugging her knees. Grumbled complaint after complaint exposed her emotional turmoil.

“I know I’m being overly optimistic, even for me, but I feel like I’ll just be dragging Goddess Yuna’s name through the mud if I attain victory by cheating.”

Lambert clearly heard her mumbles while he was making the final adjustments to her broom and gave his opinion without looking at her. “Naw, you’re better off not cheatin’. Sylmia hates cheaters.”

He placed the broom on his shoulder and thrust it forward, squinting to make sure the handle wasn’t bent.

“By the way, can I ask? You and Lord Sylmia aren’t...father and son, are you?”

“Not by blood. I used to be an orphan, and now I’m his adopted child,” he answered in his usual laid-back way. Her heart dropped.

Fidgeting with the uncomfortable mood she’d caused, she timidly apologized. “Um...I’m sorry.”

“Why’re you apologizin’? I couldn’t care less ’bout that kinda thing.”

He looked at her and laughed without a care. He lifted the accessory hanging from a leather strap at his chest and lowered his eyes to the distorted silver motif there.

“By the time I’d become self-aware, I was livin’ in a filthy back alley. This is the only clue I’ve got, but I’ve never stopped believing I’ll find my birth parents someday.”

“I see...”

Grinning to lighten the mood, he placed the broom on the desk and popped his stiff shoulders.

“But maaaaan, I had it rough at the time. I was living in a place called Shasta that’s far to the south from here. Pickpocketin’ was ’bout the only way for a snot-nosed brat to survive.”

“Ah, umm, that...” *That must’ve been tough.* Nichika couldn’t say something so unsympathetic, so she panicked as she searched for the right thing to say.

She was so easy to read, Lambert could barely contain his laughter. “You either say exactly what’s on your mind or can’t say anything at all, huh?”

“Ugh. I have good reason for that...” She had come to watch her words since Oswald made a fool of her every time she spoke without thinking. Pushing her fingers together, she turned her gaze out the window. “I can’t say I understand your pain.”

“Yeah,” he nodded. “That’s the right choice. This pain is mine alone.”

“But I can be on your side and encourage you. Let me know if there is ever anything I can help you with!”

Lambert quietly gasped and then, for some reason, flashed a sarcastic smirk. “...You mean it?”

“...?”

Of course she meant it. What he did in the past was water under the bridge now that he was helping her. She wanted to return the favor.

“Is it more troublesome to have someone worthless like me helping you?” she quietly asked, gazing up at him from under her lashes.

“Naw, I’m thrilled by the offer. Really.” Keeping his eyes from meeting hers, he forced them back to the original topic. “Ah, right, you wanted to know how I got adopted, yeah? Wind magic has been my only real talent for forever now. Sylmia saw potential in me and took me in. Said he’s gonna make me his successor.”

“Wait, does that mean you will become the Great Wind Spirit someday? Humans can become spirits?”

Nichika was stunned by that unexpected tidbit. She’d been completely under the impression that the Great Spirits were either born that way or were chosen among powerful magic spirits.

Lambert brought over a polishing cloth and began rubbing varnish on the broom. “There are several types of spirits: those who are formed by a group of

mana coalescing into one body, ritualistic items that've been worshiped for centuries gaining sentience, a soul with an unbending will to live ascending after death, and so on. Sylmia ascended after death. I heard he was originally a bird that nested in this area."

"A bird...?"

He must have been a strikingly colored and extremely attractive bird. As Nichika started imagining what bird he was, Lambert picked up a different file and worked on the other side.

"Anyways, it's late. Tomorrow's the real deal and you won't have time to practice. Get to sleep and recover what little stamina ya can."

Sure enough, it was so late the date was about to change. The village lights beyond the window were flicking off one by one. But Nichika was reluctant to leave.

"But you're not done—"

"I'll handle the rest. Or what? Uneasy leavin' it in my untrustworthy hands?" He threw the same line back at her.

Smiling wryly, she shook her head. This was as good a time as ever to leave it to him.

"I guess I'll go ahead and get some shuteye."

"Use the room at the far end of the second story. The washroom is right across from it."

"Thanks. Goodnight," she said softly and left the room. She tilted her head outside the door. "Huh?"

Lambert had been acting strange ever since they arrived in this village. She assumed he wasn't misbehaving because his adoptive father was around, but that didn't explain why he wouldn't look her in the eye and stared uncomfortably at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

Is he worried I'll embarrass him in front of everyone? Ugh, that's likely...

Coming to that conclusion, she decided to hit the sack like he suggested and hopefully decrease the odds of an epically embarrassing loss by even a little.

THE young man who remained in the workshop stared at the broom in his hand with a tormented expression. Adjustments were almost complete. Even the special *adjustment*.

“Heeeh, so that’s the trick?”

Lambert whirled toward the young voice that suddenly spoke behind him. When did he get there? A boy hidden under a white hood poked the brooms on the wall and watched them swish. He should’ve been an unexpected and uninvited visitor, but Lambert answered him without question, guarded as he was.

“I didn’t leave anythin’ out.”

“Cool. Show me.”

At the boy’s request, Lambert slid his finger through the air, activating the seal carved into the broom. Green light coursed through the surface of the handle, cleanly breaking it into several pieces that clattered on the hardwood floor.

“The broom will fall apart during tomorrow’s race at a single command from me,” the two-timing culprit stated without inflection over the clattering wood, his face blank.

“Fabulous! All this just for the small price of—”

A sharp whittling knife came within an inch of Phantom’s throat, ending his teasing. Lambert’s narrowed eyes glinted sharper than the blade, an unspoken threat that he’d cut anyone who got on his bad side.

“You will pay me my due, yeah?”

“Oh! So scary-wary! I was gonna pay you in full without the scare tactics.”



Something appeared in front of the boy who raised his hands in surrender. It was an accessory very similar to the one hanging from Lambert's chest. Phantom curled his fingers around the leather strap and confirmed the contents of their deal.

"A clue on your birth parents, was it? Finish off that annoying Spirit Priestess and I'll tell you what I now."

"Hmph," Lambert snorted and pocketed the knife.

Phantom watched him with amusement and pushed his buttons for the heck of it. "Though I've gotta hand it to you, you surprised me with how easily you turned on her. I made the right choice striking up a bargain with you in that foggy valley or whatever you people call it."

When Lambert awoke in Fog Valley, the first thing he saw was this boy cloaked in a white robe sitting on the rock above him. The boy introduced himself as Phantom and said just the right things to wheedle his way past Lambert's wariness.

"You pretend to be friendly, all the while keeping company with some nasty, dark emotions under that mask. How do I know? Because I'm cut from the same filthy cloth."

The strangely compassionate Phantom somehow knew about Lambert's desire to find his parents. And he glibly offered him an irresistible deal.

Clenching the leather strap at his chest, Lambert told himself, *This is a risky bet, but even so...I...*

Spying his hesitance, Phantom's lips curved into a sly smile under the hood. "Tell me one more time. What is it you desire?"

Lambert lifted his head. Insanity and hatred flared in those snakelike yellow eyes.

"I'm going to skunk out my parents—and slaughter them."

Nichika had arbitrarily imagined him having this emotional reunion with his parents, but she was so off from the truth it was laughable. Truth was, he had a vague memory of the time he was tossed aside. His old man punched him,

kicked him, and spat on him, then threw him out of the moving wagon. That humiliation was still vividly etched into his memory to this day. His mother looked scornfully down on him when he reached out to her for help. It was then, in those young days where he was driven to the brink of despair, that Lambert made an oath.

“My life will finally begin once I get my revenge on them. The Wind Spirit can rot in hell. Got nothin’ to do with me. Everything exists only as a tool to prolong my life.”

Phantom trembled in the pleasing negative emotions oozing from him. Now *he* was going to be a useful tool, just like the reports said.

“Go ahead and convert your negative feelings into dark mana,” he whispered sweetly, pressing a fist-sized magic crystal against the back of Lambert’s hand. The light-gray ore instantly turned a suspicious purple. A satisfied smile pulled at the corner of his lips. “*Jealousy?* Nicely made.”

The boy melted into the background. Was he still partially there? Only his voice that reminded Lambert of wind chimes remained.

“Take care of the rest as we discussed. I’ll plant this magic crystal. Knock that priestess outta the sky right before the goal line.”

“I will.”

“See ya later.”

At last Phantom had completely disappeared. Left behind, Lambert shook his head and plastered a smile on his face. The bright and friendly voice of “Lam” resonated in the workshop.

“Now then, I better finish up this adjustment lickety-split and hit the hay.”

Only his dead eyes betrayed the smile on his lips.

“Or else I won’t see my parents.”

NICHIKA was flying. She soared comfortably over Windy Village with Lambert’s specially made broom.

Hey, I've got this in the bag flying this well!

Now she didn't have to worry about embarrassing anyone during the race. She could rapidly ascend, dive, make sharp turns, and even pull off acrobatic flips in the air! She was so happy she was humming—but then she heard a disturbing snap.

"Wha?"

A second after she started to worry, the broom under her vanished. She fell upside down.

"No way! Noooooo! Why?!"

The ground rapidly approached her face. She squeezed her eyes shut and—

THWUMP!

"—!"

A jolt to her back shocked her awake. The sunlight streaming through the windows and chirping birds informed her of reality. She hadn't fallen from her broom but the top of her bed.

"What an ominous dream..."

Of all the days to have this nightmare, it had to be today? Clasp ing a hand to her catapulting heart, she got a hold of herself and washed her face. She descended the stairs and saw a head of green hair sleeping face down on the parlor table.

How late did Lam stay up to help me?

She tiptoed past him into the next room.

LAMBERT, who worked on the broom until dawn, woke up to a mouthwatering smell. Drowsy, he sat up and stretched like a cat. Nichika walked in from the adjacent kitchen and casually greeted him.

"Good morning. I borrowed the kitchen. Sorry for not asking first."

A white plate was placed in front of him. A hot fried egg with the yolk melted to perfection jiggled on top of crisply toasted bread. The girl sat down across

from him with another plate and dipped her head in apology.

“I’ll go out and replace the ingredients I used later.”

“Naw, you don’t have to. Food’ll only rot with just me and Sylmia ’round.”

Lambert picked up the toast wondering how long it’d been since he last ate breakfast. He was astonished there were even edible ingredients in the house. *That Wind Spirit doesn’t cook. Heck he doesn’t even need to eat.*

“Let’s eat! Mmmm! I’m in heaven! Eating bread fresh out of the oven is hands down the best thing ever!”

Mixed feelings stirred within Lambert as he watched the girl blissfully chomp on her breakfast. Throwing his fake smile back in place, he handed her the broom leaning against the wall.

“Here ya go. Thanks for waitin’.”

“Yay! Thanks a bunch. Wow, it’s even lighter than it was yesterday.”

“Yep. I’m proud to say it’s my best work to date.”

So is my addition, he added mentally.

Utterly unaware of what he’d done, Nichika beamed at him. “Really, thank you so, so much, Lam. I might even win thanks to you!”

Her innocent gratitude pricked at his chest. He was shocked to learn he still had a heart, but he shoved it under the rug and suggested, “Go show it off to my grumpy buddy. That grumpster didn’t return until three in the mornin’.”

“That late?! What in the world was he doing? For goodness’ sake.”

“This and that, I’m sure. You know how pent up his frustration is.”

“Whaaa?!”

Just a little baiting sent the girl storming from the room as planned. Relief settled over him as he munched on the egg toast.

It was delicious by all accounts, but a bitter taste spread through him nevertheless.

Chapter 9: Girl, Gets Frustrated

NICHIKA bolted from the living room, ran up the stairs, and threw open the door opposite her room. Planting her hands on the doorframe, she launched into a lecture.

“Hey, Oswald! How many times do I—” *Have to tell you to stop playing around at night!* She swallowed the rest of that insinuation, her eyes rounder than the sun. The reason could be summed up with one word: the man sleeping on the bed was *naked*.

She pulled the door shut behind her, then after a few minutes, slowly cracked open the door and stole a furtive peek. Relief washed over her once she confirmed there wasn’t another person in bed with him—a naked woman to be exact.

Thinking about it calmly, he’d never bring a woman into someone’s home. He’s more likely to stay at a hotel...

Dryly laughing off her wild thoughts, she swept inside and loudly drew up the curtains. Sunlight flooded the dark room, lighting up the dust particles floating in the air.

“Oswald! It’s morning! Breakfast is on the table. Wake up, sleepyhead!” she shouted to rouse her master from sleep. He was not a morning person.

Moaning, Oswald rolled over to escape the sunlight. He wasn’t even close to waking up yet. Nichika couldn’t resist observing this rare display of weakness on his part. Medium-length bangs covered his eyes and framed his straight nose and thin lips.

His face is the only part of him I give a ten out of ten. If only he had a halfway decent personality to match... Oh, his hair’s sticking up.

Though she internally mocked him, she couldn’t stop staring. Her eyes trailed a path from his manly Adam’s apple to the well-defined collarbone following his straight neckline, and then her gaze naturally traveled lower—

*Gah! What the heck am I doing?! This makes me no different from a pervert!
...Then again...I don't get many chances to check him out...*

Swallowing hard, she placed a hand on the bed and leaned over Oswald. Being this close caused her to notice one oddity she never picked up on before.

What's this?

Was the morning sun causing the long eyelashes framing his closed eyes to look white? She reached over to sweep the bangs off his face.

“?!”

He suddenly captured her outstretched arm and pulled her into the bed.

“Hey! Oswa—”

Her pulse skyrocketed as he clutched her to him. She ended up with her face pressed against his rock-solid chest, his manly scent softly encompassing her.

Oh gosh. Oh gosh. Oh my gosh!

He was totally still half asleep. She knew she needed to smack him awake, but her body refused to move. He cupped a hand behind her stiff head and buried his face in her neck.

WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!

“...Don't go...never again...” His husky voice brushed her ears, sending delicious chills through her. Except— “...ka...”

“What?”

The sound of someone else's name brought reality crashing down on her.

“Rikka.”

“—!”

Blood rushed to her head like water reaching a rapid boil. She vigorously lifted her unrestrained hand, and—

A wonderful sound resonated far and wide, reaching the road outside bustling with people excitedly preparing for the race.

“I can’t believe you! How could you mistake me for another woman?!”

“.....”

Oswald tiredly shoveled his breakfast into his mouth next to his ranting apprentice. A bright-red hand mark decorated his white cheek.

Buckling over with laughter across from him was Lambert. “That’s bad even for you, buddy,” he said while wiping his tears. “Where’d ya go last night?”

“I only went to have several drinks at the bar...”

“Hmph. And then you went flirting around? How nice for you,” Nichika accused in a barbed voice.

Oswald faced her anger with confusion. “Huh? What are you mad about?”

“Nothing!”

Nichika stood with her plate and marched into the kitchen. She shoved the dishes into the sink and began aggressively scrubbing them.

It doesn’t matter one bit, not even a little, absolutely not at all, who that man sleeps with! Or who he mistakes me for! She tried to convince herself. Why am I telling myself this? This is so dumb!

She was perplexed by the unknown emotions taking her for a ride. It was almost as if she wasn’t thinking like her usual self. Slowly exhaling, she dried her hands and stomped back into the parlor.

“By the way, where’s Wolfie at?” she asked her master who was still in the middle of breakfast.

“He never came?”

“What?” Nichika had assumed Oswald had gone to get him. Unsettled, she looked out the window. “Did something happen to—”

“He’s fine. He’d say something through our contract if he wasn’t.” Unconcerned, Oswald yawned and tossed the last morsel of food into his mouth. “I can summon him if it comes to it. Don’t worry.”

“But...”

“Let him be. Anyways, shouldn’t you be more worried about today’s race?”

“Ack! I forgot. Lam!”

Wolfie’s whereabouts bothered her, but she had her own mission to attend to. Except, Lambert, who’d been in a trance all morning, didn’t respond when she spoke to him. Assuming he didn’t hear her, she tried again and finally got him to turn toward her.

“Huh? Sorry. What was that?”

“Isn’t it almost time to go? I was hoping you could show me the way.”

“Aah, yeah. I should.”

He was still not acting like himself. Nichika found it puzzling, but grabbed her broom and headed to the race venue without questioning it.

THE Sylmia Cup was the largest broom race hosted by Windy Village. The number of tourists swarming to watch the huge event held only once a year seemed to double every year.

The main venue was the large square right next to the village’s front gate. Confetti danced in the wind, and excited children ran around with pinwheels. Food carts and other entertainment filled the area, and joy was in the air. Meanwhile, Nichika stood there looking whiter than a ghost.

“Wh-Wha-What am I doing?! Why do my nerves have to kick in now of all times?!”

She had good reason to lose her nerve. After all, the other contestants were loitering around the main event tent, and every single one of them was drop-dead gorgeous. Even their costumes and hairstyles were breathtaking. Nichika suddenly felt very out of place.

“With this many people around, no one will notice a rare animal has slipped into their ranks,” her master reassured.

“Yeah, yeah! I get it! I’m just a petacolon!”

Nichika stomped her feet at his spiteful reassurances. She shoved back her desire to snap back and tell him to enter the race instead. Knowing him, he’d blend right in with the good-looking group and no one would be the wiser. She

puffed out her cheeks while arguing with him, when a hand reached out and yanked her to the side, knocking her off balance.

“Hey, you! You’re the last-minute entrant, yah?”

“Beg pardon?”

Nichika looked to see a stout woman with a red face puffing for air. Before she could ask for the lady’s name, her plump hand fastened around Nichika’s wrist and she proceeded to drag her away.

“Lord Sylmia told me about you. You’re still not dressed? You won’t make it to the start line if you don’t get changed, pronto.”

“Whoa! Um! Please wait!”

“Yes, yes. I’m removing your unnecessary accessories! How could you bring a magic orb with you? That’s an instant disqualification.” The middle-aged woman swiftly removed all of Nichika’s personal possessions and shoved them into Lambert’s arms. “Here, Master Lam. Hold on to these for her. Come along, little lady!”

“Waaaaah!”

Letting out a pitiful cry, Nichika was carted off to the changing area inside the tent. Lambert watched her go before handing all her stuff over to Oswald and turning on his heel to leave.

“Best if ya hold on to this for her.”

“Why?”

“I’ve been asked to handle some other work by the committee. See ya.”

With that, Lambert disappeared into the crowd.

TOSSED into the changing tent erected beside the headquarters, Nichika was dazzled by the plethora of costumes hanging inside. Crimson dresses, deep sea green tuxedos, ceremonial clothes with long flowing sleeves, and traditional garments lined the racks. There were even different styles of clown clothes that made her question who in the world would choose to wear them.

“W-Wow.”

“Don’t dawdle near the entrance, dearie. Hurry in. Let me see, for a young lady like you this dress with a revealed back is nice—no, you should go for this one that accentuates your overall cuteness...”

The woman in charge of costumes picked out pieces with a pro’s eye. She rolled up her sleeves and began throwing large piles of clothes to the side.

“Now we’re talking! All the contestants this year brought their own outfits. You’re about the only one making use of our collection.”

“I am?”

“Not that I blame them. They can prepare more lavish outfits with their own money...”

Ten minutes later, the older woman nodded with satisfaction at Nichika attired in a cutesy, frilly, and puffy peach-colored costume. Frankly, to Nichika, it looked like she was wearing a clichéd magical girl outfit.

“Looks like we have a winner.”

“Isn’t this a little too frilly? How do I put it...? Exposing this much skin is embarrassing.”

Embarrassed by the oddly translucent material making up the skirt, Nichika pulled down its hem in a bid to hide her thighs. The older woman heartily laughed off her concerns and gave her back a small push.

“It’s a festival out there. Showing a little skin never hurt anyone! Off you go!”

“Wah! Aah!” Nichika was pushed out of the tent and nearly fell over, but spun around with the momentum of catching her balance to thank the woman. “Thank you so much for your help!”

“Good luck! I’ll be cheering for you from the ground!”

Nichika returned her wink and thumbs-up with an appreciative smile. Resolved to face whatever came her way, she hopped on her broom and took off.

“Wow...!” A little girl who saw her pink skirt fluttering in the sky raved all

about it to her mom. “Mama! That girl is so cute! She looks like a fairy princess!”

“She does. Want to cheer for her?”

“Yeah! Good luck, fairy princess!”

Nichika waved and ascended to the air stage doubling as the start line. She landed on the white block, and a staff member sprinted over to her. He wrapped a cream-colored leather wristband around her wrist and spoke at hyper speed.

“Please hurry. You’re the last to arrive. You don’t have any magic items on you, do you? Okay, okay. Let me examine your broom.”

He half snatched the broom from her and passed it through a silver box. A beep sounded and the lamp turned green.

“No extras have been added. You’re good to go. Head over there.”

Broom in hand, Nichika moved to the edge of the stage where the competitors stood in their starting positions. Eye-catching decorations adorned the start gate, and when she looked over the side of the stage, she saw the whole audience staring up at her. She scanned the multitude of faces for a man in all-black.

“What’s with that getup?” a beautiful woman in a short blue dress snorted at her. “This isn’t a dress-up party.”

Her rude attitude irked Nichika, but she was too overwhelmed by the woman’s perfect body and how she rocked her tight outfit to come up with a smart comeback.

“U-Um, I hope we can have a good race...”

Responding with humility shut her up. The woman huffed and looked away. Just past her a blonde bombshell was viciously arguing about something with the handsome young man in front of her.

These people are s-scary...

A flourish of trumpets blared through the village, signaling the start of the race and cutting through the strangely toxic mood.

“Thanks for waiting, everyyybodyyy! Everyone in the world wishes to see a Windy Village broom race once before they die. And our largest pride and joy, the Sylmia Cup, is about to BEGINNNN!”

An enthusiastic voice boomed from beyond the village walls, and then something large flew in. On top of a winged pedestal was a little man with glasses decked out in a golden suit holding a microphone. Sylmia stood next to him in a flamboyant costume. Cheers erupted from the crowd when they saw him.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I, Clogg, the boring rank and file employee at town hall, shall be serving as announcer again this year! It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say I’m slaving away at town hall just for this day—Oops, forgive the slip of tongue. I’m just kidding. Really, section chief!”

The crowd exploded with laughter at the angry “hey!” that rose up from somewhere below. Lifting up the same leather wristband as the competitors, the announcer explained the rules.

“Alrighty, you probably don’t need the reminder, but here are the rules! This wristband acts as a marker. All of the contestants are wearing one. They have to run it through the various checkpoints set up around the village, and the first person to touch the wind orb on top of the clock tower wins! Man, is it simple! It’s because of its simplicity that you can see the difference in flight skill!”

Nichika took a good look at the band on her right wrist. Ten bead-sized black orbs were arranged in a line. They’d likely light up at every checkpoint.

“Incidentally, the markers have the ability to draw in wind mana to drive away other mana! In other words, attacking your rivals with fire and water isn’t allowed!”

The announcer’s explanation helped Nichika get her head in the game. This race was purely about competing with wind mana. She’d be vulnerable without her fire magic, but she didn’t have room to complain.

“Okey-dokey, that’s enough with the boring rules! How about a word from our sponsor, Lord Sylmia!”

The Great Wind Spirit accepted the microphone and stepped forward. The crowd stopped their raucous cheering and silently waited for him. He slowly opened his mouth, letting his words ride on the gentle winds.

“I am...beautiful.”

Both master and apprentice, on the surface and in the air, fell forward a little at that ridiculous line. More than used to the Wind Spirit’s catchphrase, the residents grew even more excited. Enthusiasm erupted from every end of the village.

Sylmia continued his speech with a dignified expression. **“And the world is beautiful. You who try your hardest to live through each day are also a beautiful sight to behold. Even I, who have lived for hundreds of years, have yet to grow tired of gazing upon the brilliance of your lives.”**

If trying your hardest to live through each day makes you beautiful, then does that mean some small part of me has that brilliance too? Nichika squeezed the broom in front of her chest.

“Now show me everything you’ve got in you!”

As soon as those closing words were said, the contestants around her mounted their brooms.

“Please go to the start line,” a staff member instructed when she was too surprised to do anything.

“What? Already?!”

A second after she hastily hopped on her broom, the start gate flung open.

“Fly Awaaaaaay!!”

A great chorus that shook the ground roared through Windy Village.

Chapter 10: Girl, Enters a Dead Heat

“OUTTA my way!”

“Whoa!”

Nichika followed the contestants who took off immediately, but someone suddenly rammed into her from behind, nearly knocking her off the broom. Looking up, the beautiful woman in the blue dress was flying away laughing at her. Wind mana flocked to her beauty, giving her an extra boost to the front of the race.

“Grrr!” Rightfully angered, Nichika burst through the gate and held her right hand out in front of her. “O wind mana, lend me your strength!”

Glowing butterflies fluttered over and became one with her broom in a flash of green light. Given an instant boost, Nichika overtook the middle group and trailed right behind the riders in the lead.

“Alrighty, they’re almost upon the first checkpoint, Spectacles Bridge!”

Listening to the live commentary got Nichika to look down at the bridge built over the waterway running through the village a slight distance ahead. A thin green light was stretched under the overhead structure shaped like a pair of spectacles. She flew on the tail feathers of the pacesetters who shot through the checkpoint without slowing down. A ping sounded from her wristband when she passed under the bridge. The orb furthest to the left lit up.

“So this is how you pass through the checkpoints,” she noted out loud as she orbited over the village. The route was marked by green lights that made it easy for her to find her way around without following the others. She hurtled through the next wall of light stretched across the sky, lighting her second wrist orb.

All of a sudden the man and woman flying right in front of her started quarreling. Not wanting to get pulled into it, she kept her distance by a few feet. Still close enough for her to see their good-looking faces twist and distort

as they cussed each other out.

“Stop getting in my way, ugly hag!”

“I dare you to say that again, swine! It’s a joke having to fly behind a filthy pig in human clothing!”

Simply sweeping her eyes over the nearby sky revealed they weren’t the only ones arguing. Everyone at the head of the race was flying while badmouthing each other. They were all so good looking that Nichika was extremely disappointed to see their ugly side on full display like this.

What’s wrong with them? They’re not acting beautiful or graceful at all.

The wind mana felt the same way. Green light sputtered from their brooms and they lost all speed. The arguing contestants’ brooms slowly dipped toward the earth.

“Blast it all! It’s all your damn fault!”

“What the spirits’ blight is going on here?! This isn’t how things work!”

The louder they fought the more wind mana scampered away. Five of the contestants plummeted into the waterway.

“Oooh, this is a bolt out of the blue!” the commentator bellowed at the critical moment. **“Our top favorites for winning today’s race have quite literally dropped out!”**

The turbulent shift in contestants had the crowd on the edge of their seats. Now was her chance. Nichika psyched herself up and moved to take the top spot. But before she could, a windblast smacked her from behind, knocking her forward on the broom. She managed to maintain her balance with an eagle’s grip on the broomstick and scoot back into position.

Catching her breath, she looked over her shoulder at a girl around the same age as her with hair tied in screwdriver pigtails by a gaudy hairpiece, hot on her tail. The girl’s sexy dress was practically sliding off her petite figure. She summoned another gust of wind to knock Nichika off. Nichika angled her broomstick diagonally down to escape the burst.

“Hey! Isn’t attacking each other taboo?!” Nichika shouted against the wind.

“Don’t be foolish! That was just an accident. You do know what an accident is, don’t you?”

She doesn’t have to cheat. With her pretty face, she’s got more than an advantage over me.

“It’s not fair!” both girls yelled at the same time.

“Don’t cheat when you’re so much prettier than me!”

“How dare you wear cuter clothes than me!”

Nichika’s speed dropped significantly when she screamed back at the blonde beauty. Snapping back to her senses, Nichika stomped out her unshakeable desire to argue and forced her broom in a different direction.

“Come back here! I’m not done talking to you!”

She flew headlong into the residential district without looking back at the hollering girl. Nichika was so deeply embroiled in battle with the nasty emotions bubbling inside her that she didn’t hear the audience’s cheers.

This isn’t right. How could I be blinded with jealousy—wait, this is ‘jealousy?’

Hoping her hunch was wrong, she strained her eyes. Shockingly, a thin purple haze had managed to coil around her without her notice. And that wasn’t the worst of it. Why, a layer of haze so thin it was almost unnoticeable hung over the entire village.

“No way! When did this happen?!”

With one hand firmly planted on her broom, she peeled off the haze clinging to her and regained a modicum of calm. No doubt about it: this mysterious purple haze was a trap set by Phantom. Getting another bad premonition, she flew over the crowds and observed them from the air. Her premonition was right on the money—fights were breaking out all over the village. The jealousy existing in the darkest reaches of the heart had become the dominating emotion for everyone present.

“Uggh, if only I was beautiful enough to enter this race, I could’ve won...”

“You always piss me off! You act all high and mighty just because you have a little more money than me!”

“The married couple next door always has so much fun. Compared to them, my husband is a real lout!”

Nichika searched for the magic crystal while she kicked the checkpoint light stretched between the four-story house walls. The source drawing out these negative emotions had to be somewhere.

“The race has reached the halfway point, but... please listen to my complaints!” The announcer abusing the microphone to morosely spill his dissatisfaction proved just how bad things were getting. **“Last month my childhood friend got married... His wife is damn beautiful, I tell you... Dammit... I want to get married, too!”**

No one was listening to the announcer anymore. Fistfights were breaking out throughout the village, and brawls were going down in the streets.

“What in the world is going on?!”

Baffled as she was, Nichika couldn’t stop the race. She ran her hand over the checkpoint a few inches off the ground and passed through another point under the banner in the shopping district. Returning to the residential area again, Nichika spotted a black shadow on the roof ahead of her.

She called out to that person for help. “Oswald!”

Her master tossed a small bag up to her as she flew past him. She caught it midair and continued flying on to the next checkpoint as she checked its contents. A hairclip she’d used before was inside.

“This is the one from that time...!” Nichika quickly clipped it into her hair.

“That narcissist!” an unhappy voice echoed in her head with some static noise. **“His whole, ‘As long as I’m in this village I won’t allow such ugliness to be brought in!’ was a load of crap! All hell is breaking loose down here.”**

“This is so cool! Could we always use this hairclip to communicate?”

“I improved it last night in a bout of drunken genius. I based it on that wind communicator. And sure enough, it’s letting us make use of wind magic even during the race as I’d hoped.”

I seriously wish you wouldn’t invent things like this while drunk! Nichika drove

away the envy welling up in her over her own crummy witch inventions.

“Anyways, we’ve got bigger problems!” she shouted while keeping her speed up. “There’s a magic crystal hidden somewhere in this village!”

“I figured as much. There’s no other explanation for this mayhem.”

Nichika kicked out both legs to hit the two checkpoints set up on opposite walls. The seventh orb on her wristband lit up.

“Can’t you see anything from above?” Oswald asked.

“It’s not as easy as you think...”

Nichika purposely flew off course to get a better view from above. She gasped—a wind orb attached to the top of the clock tower in the center of the village was coruscating purple.

“I found it?! Hang on, that’s the goal!”

Of all the places, Phantom had to place it there?

“Take another look inside the bag. There’s something else in there for you,” Oswald instructed, his calm matching his apprentice’s terror.

“There is?”

She hastily fished around inside it until she pulled out a black tube. It was the booster Oswald suggested she attach to her broom yesterday.

“I closed off the vent to block the propulsion energy,” Oswald explained before she could yell at him. And then he dropped the most absurd thing on her yet, **“Pulling the red lever should make it explode in exactly a minute.”**

“E-Explooooooode?!”

The tube slipped from her sweaty hand and she fumbled to catch it. Descending, she passed through the eighth checkpoint.

“You’re done with that orb once you touch it. Blow it to bits!” her master instructed, a sharp edge to his voice.

“Okay!”

This was the one time where she knew she wasn’t in a position to argue with

him. *I have to reach the wind orb first before I or anyone else gets caught up in this terrorist act—er, in the blast!*

Faster! Carry me faster!

In answer to her silent prayers, vivid cobalt green consumed her eyes, and her broom blasted off. She zoomed past the two fighting contestants in the lead so fast they fell off their brooms, and plunged through the ninth checkpoint.

“Oooh?! Someone is finally at the goal! Ladies and gentlemen, you don’t want to miss this!” the announcer bellowed, brought back to the moment by how close the race was to a close.

The villagers stopped cursing each other out and looked up at the sky. A girl trailing a cloud of green light rocketed over their heads. Excited cheers slightly pushed back the purple aura.

All that’s left is to get to the top! To the clock tower’s spire!

Nichika arrived at the bottom of the tall clock tower and shouted at the top of her lungs. “Everyone, get awaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

She summoned a windblast and blew away everyone around the goal.

That takes care of that!

Nichika confirmed everyone’s safety at the last minute and pulled the bomb lever. Then she made her steep ascent up the clock tower, skimming her broom within inches of the wall.

Just a little further. Little further...

The orb creating the vortex of green and purple was in sight. She reached out her right hand to touch it—

“Wha?”

Her broom suddenly stalled a hand away from the orb. She looked down just as her broomstick crumbled under her.

“N-No way! Why?!”

The girl thrown into the distant sky without a ride was freefalling with the bomb that had begun its countdown.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

THREE minutes before Nichika’s screams peeled through the village, Lambert was watching her zipping through the streets like a madwoman from atop the ramparts. Dangling his feet off the side of the wall beside him, Phantom whistled.

“Wowwie! You go girl! Go, go, go! If I’d known it was going to turn out like this, I would’ve placed bets. She only entered at the last minute. She’s the dark horse of the race.” He placed his index finger on his lip in a childish gesture before continuing in the most innocent voice, “But no point in betting on someone you know is gonna fall to their death.”

“.....”

Lambert calmly followed Nichika with his eyes. Regret and hesitation were absent from him. The girl he had talked to for days and laughed together with during their short journey simply didn’t matter compared to the loathing he felt for his parents.

Phantom saw Nichika finally arrive at the bottom of the clock tower and figured out what she was amusingly up to.

“Aha, look at that. That girl’s carrying a bomb. She’s probably planning on blowing up the magic crystal with that, but she’s got no idea she’s going to fall right before she reaches the goal.”

Lambert’s hand froze at his side as he watched her scale the side of the tower. His accomplice peered at his face with a goading grin.

“What’s wrong?” he cooed. “You didn’t go and do something lame like become attached to her, now did you?”

“Hardly.”

Lambert raised his hand in front of him once more and closed his fist in the direction of his target. The broom instantly disassembled in the air, throwing the girl to her death.

“All right, I kept my end of the bargain. Tell me where my parents are.”

Lambert closed in on the hooded boy, not even paying a backward glance to the falling girl. But Phantom only chuckled and pulled a deformed accessory out of his pocket. He blew on it and the metal charm turned to sand.

“What the?!”

“Sorry, I lied. Truth is, I don’t know who or where your parents are. I simply created an accessory that looks just like the one you seemed to care so much about.”

“You little snot!” Lambert lunged for him the moment he realized he’d been played.

Phantom agilely sidestepped him and cackled. “Ahahahaha! I had quite a lot of fun. Nice doing business with you. Buh-bye.”

“Wait!” Lambert grabbed for the boy who vanished into smoke, but his hands vainly hit the stone wall instead. “...Bastard...!”

He immediately put his anger to use. In this very moment, he hated Phantom more than anyone else in the world. The ultimate revenge against the bastard who betrayed him was—

“Ha! You underestimated how sick I really am, Phantom.”

The vengeful young man jumped on the railing and off the high wall with a fiendish smirk.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Falling into a panic as she literally fell, Nichika tried to grab hold of the tower even though she knew it was pointless. Two or three of her nails ripped off, but she was so distraught the pain didn’t register.

I’m gonna die!

Just as death seemed like a reality, something caught her in the air. Nichika’s eyes snapped open when she didn’t go kersplat.

“Oswald!”

Gritting his teeth, Oswald gripped a broom in one hand and her in the other.

It was the broom she had left behind.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Master!”

Tears filling her eyes, she tried to hug him, but he yelled at her with a frightening face. “Throw it already!”

“Throw what?” For a moment, she had no idea what he was talking about... and then she blanched when she saw the bomb swelling in her hand. “Oh my god. Oh my god.”



“Throw it!”

“Where?!”

“Anywhere! I’d rather die than commit lovers’ suicide with you!”

But a crowd was gathering in large numbers below them. Throwing it overhead with poor timing would only end with it exploding as it fell down on them.

“How much time is left?! Ah!”

Something zipped past Nichika. The person who grabbed the bomb on the verge of exploding looked at them with empty eyes. Master and apprentice yelled his name at the same time.

“Lambert!”

“Lam! That thing’s dangerous! Throw it! Quick!”

“Sorry,” he muttered and changed course. He rushed toward the top of the tower before she could stop him. And then— The wind orb blew up with the young man beyond Nichika’s outstretched hand and heartrending scream.

Chapter 11: Girl, Gets Grossed Out

WINDY Village's big race ended in chaos. The villagers came to their senses and apologized to each other for the shameful way they had acted during the race.

Nichika landed in that awkwardness paler than a ghost and sucked in a shuddery breath when she saw a black object tumble on the ground. The charred lump that no longer looked human was barely alive. What used to be a chest feebly rose and fell, and fragments of the wind orb pierced through scorched hands.

The need to rush to his side and the repulsiveness of what appeared by all accounts to be a dead lump of flesh weighed heavily on the two sides of her mental scales, preventing her from making a decision.

What is that? Is it really the guy who always has a carefree smile?

Is it alive? Is it still alive? Or is it just carbon?

A person? A thing? What is a person? What makes something a person?

Bile rising in the back of her throat, she retreated a step, and then she heard it, between the wheezing gasps for breath—her name.

“L-Lam!”

The scales tipped. Squashing the fear churning her stomach, Nichika scrambled over and kneeled beside the carbonized body. Her hands shook like a drunken sailor and she struggled to bring herself to touch him.

I can't. It's too disgusting. I don't want to touch him.

Flesh had burned off, exposing bare, white bones and the nauseating stench of charred hair, skin, and fat wreaked havoc on her nose. Tears sprung to her eyes; she didn't know what to do with the maimed body before her.

She covered her mouth with both hands and muffled her cries. Were they moans of disgust or sadness? She didn't know.

How the hell am I the Spirit Priestess? If I really was such a saint, I should be able to embrace this lump of fried meat without a second's thought. Yet the utter disgust I feel is winning out. I can't be a priestess. I can't become a pure and selfless heroine like in the stories.

Something terrible and inexplicable wriggled deep inside her heart at that somber realization. *Why? Why does it feel like I've...felt this way before?*

"Eek!"

The blackened pile of meat suddenly fastened around Nichika's wrist. She screamed and tried to swing her arm loose. Yet the surprising amount of strength remaining in that charred hand wouldn't let her escape. Lambert, whose eyes had been smashed in, jerked his opposite hand over and touched what he had clenched in a death grip to the back of her hand.

"What...?"

She didn't know what he wanted and remained perfectly still. And then she heard it—a beep from the wristband. The orb furthest to the right lit up—the last checkpoint marker.

"Congratulations."

Reading his mangled lips struck Nichika hard in the gut. Lambert's hand—no, what had once been his hand—limply slid to the ground, never to move again.

"Ah...ahhh..."

Nichika's scream failed to make a sound and she collapsed to the ground.

"—!!!"

Her soundless cry conveyed more pain and sorrow than even the loudest of shouts.

OSWALD silently watched over the girl who didn't stop weeping even after an hour had passed.

"Is *that* Lambert?" a subdued voice drifted over to them from behind.

Nichika spun around as if someone had set the ground on fire under her legs.

Standing there was the king of wind spirits, his long green hair fluttering around him like a cape. She sprang to her feet and grabbed a fistful of his tunic.

“Lord Sylmia! Please! Please save Lam!” she begged, clinging to him.

The Great Wind Spirit glanced at the girl’s wristband. “You are this year’s winner,” he announced with a tight smile. “I’ll imbue my power into your magic orb as promised.”

“Excuse me...?” she wrenched out.

Sylmia held his hand over the dumbfounded girl’s forehead and whispered something in another language. A gentle green wind swaddled her in its caress. Green light twirled within her magic orb a second later.

“There you go,” he continued in an even voice. “Now you have come one step closer to reviving the goddess.”

“Wh-Why? How...could you?”

A half laugh gurgled past her lips and she stepped away from his outrageous show of calm. Sylmia maintained his cool despite the way she looked at him like he was some kind of monster.

“How could I what?”

His frigid question brought another round of tears to her swollen eyes. “You of all people should be able to tell who is lying over there!” she screamed, pointing to the singed corpse behind her. “He may have been adopted, but wasn’t he still your son?!”

“.....”

“How could you...be so...cold...” she wrung out between sobs, earning a blistering sigh from the wind spirit.

He snapped his fingers, activating some sort of spell. Wind swirled around them, creating a barrier that severed them from the onlookers. Sylmia confirmed no one could hear them, then proceeded to ask her a harsh question.

“Can you still say that knowing Lambert is the one who rigged your broom to break apart?”

“...?!”

Bowled over by that possibility, Nichika swung her gaze to the broom pieces scattered about. Each piece had cleanly come apart at the seams, which couldn't have happened over the natural course of use or from whittling it down too far.

Lambert tried to kill me? How was she supposed to take that bit of information? All she could do was reel back from the shock.

“In other words, you knew and still allowed for this to happen?” Oswald accused.

Sylmia quietly closed his eyes and nodded once. “I feel horrible for mixing you up in my gamble,” he apologized in a heartrendingly flat voice. “As you rightly guessed, I purposely overlooked Lam sneaking that magic crystal into my village.”

The wind spirit's handsome face twisted as he knelt beside his son. A single tear slipped down his cheek and splattered on the back of his outstretched hand.

“Because I had hoped...this child would find it in him to stop.”

As the one who ruled over all the wind in the world, Sylmia knew everything. He knew the hurting young man behind the polished mask Lambert kept up for appearances, about the black flames of vengeance burning deep in his heart, and how he looked down on the rest of the world.

“I desperately wanted to believe that he had, if only a little, come to care for me and this village. My hopes ended in miserable failure though,” he said, his voice coming out in a quiet trickle.

Having heard the truth, Nichika stopped crying and balled her hands into tight fists. “You didn't...make a mistake.”

“What?”

“I'm positive,” she continued in a quivering voice, “you, and everyone in this village, had become important to Lam.”

All the fear had washed away. She crawled over to the corpse and held the

marred hand that once belonged to Lambert.

“Do you honestly believe he’d risk his life to destroy the orb if he didn’t?!”

Green radiated from her wet eyes. Skin crumbled off the charred hand she clutched. She didn’t even notice as she impulsively berated Sylmia.

“Could you be any stupider?! You should’ve sat him down for a proper talk before testing him! It’s too late once the person is dead!”

Skin peeled off in flakes with each shout. New dermis formed in layers underneath. Wind mana absorbed into his body at the same time, causing it to faintly shine. His skin glowed like a firefly.

“Lam was...I just know Lam was...!”

“Stop it! Release his hand this instant!”

“Eh?”

Nichika was astonished by the changes going on around her that she hadn’t noticed. She suddenly felt like a hundred-ton brick had fallen on her back.

“You are pouring all your magic into Lam!” Sylmia warned, panicking for the first time. “Keep that up and you will drain your soul dry! You might die!”

“B-But his body is regenerating.” She stared at the corpse like she had discovered a new hope. But sadness crumpled Sylmia’s face.

“It’s a lost cause...”

At first glance it looked like a miracle, but it was a meaningless act. The somatic cells were being regenerated with magic, recreating the “flesh”, but the soul had already separated. What the girl was doing was just cleaning up the corpse.

“Please...open your eyes!”

But she couldn’t see reality now that she was blinded by false hope. Sylmia had no intention of watching the Spirit Priestess kill herself in front of him. He turned toward her master, Oswald, and sought his assistance.

“Stop her. You are that child’s master, aren’t you?”

The man cast down his gaze and gave his head a small shake. “She can’t be

stopped once she becomes like this. She's ridiculously stubborn and doesn't know when to give up. She dreams of miracles that will never happen and believes the world is filled with light. She's got a bad case of heroine syndrome."

Oswald thought of the day she told him to come with her and pulled him from the shadows into the morning light. That time things went just as she wanted—no, he allowed it to be as she wanted—but this miracle wouldn't come so easily, if at all.

"Just let her be until she's satisfied."

Though he said that, Oswald was going to stop her if she persisted to the point of permanent injury. For now, he carefully watched his apprentice pour out an endless supply of magic.

LAM! Lam!

The young man had recovered his former appearance, but his cheeks were still ashen. At a glance, he appeared to be sleeping. Nichika implored him to come back to her while thinking back on their time together.

The first time you talked to me was through Sumire at Lolo Village. You said you were going to make her throw herself off a cliff, so I thought you were the worst person in the world.

She remembered being shocked by how his casual approach to things and lighthearted comments didn't match the vulgar actions he took. He acted completely aloof even when she destroyed the medium tethering him to Sumire and fought back against him.

And then I met you, in your own body, at Elminage.

He was a strange guy who approached her without any restraint and yet just as easily backed down. She still couldn't forget the feeling of his lips brushing against hers when he stole a kiss. Though he poked fun at her, he showed her to the headmaster's office as promised.

You came to see me when I was at my lowest and gave me the push needed to

change an unwanted situation.

His smile as he pulled her into the starry night sky was dazzling. Nichika felt like she had become more of a positive thinker since he gave her a voice to get Oswald back.

“Hey, Lam, I haven’t done anything to repay you. You helped me out so much in your own way, I haven’t even thanked you properly for it yet,” she talked to him with a watery smile, desperate for a reaction.

Wind danced between them, forming a green glowing barrier.

“I still don’t know anything about you. I want to know everything, including the darkest parts.”

The young man didn’t open his eyes. Nichika’s stamina had reached its cap. Her consciousness pivoted, her vision blurred.

“Don’t you love my...magic? Is it still...not enough?”

Like a sponge soaking up water, his body absorbed her outpour of magic.

“Tell me...”

“Nichika.”

She sluggishly turned her eyes to the person softly calling her name. Oswald was looking down at her with a sympathetic gaze.

“Give it up. You can’t bring back the dead.”

Convulsing with sobs, she let her magic bleed out to him, wholly unaware the amount given already exceeded the level Lambert could’ve handled.

Wind mana gathered in droves to the fountain of magic. Nichika’s eyes rounded at what she saw. The light that had been smaller than a firefly had grown into a blinding beam. She shut her eyes against the offensively bright light.

“I don’t believe it,” Sylmia breathed. “Ascension of the soul...”

“What?” Nichika looked back just as the voice she had fervently wanted to hear reached her ears.

“Seriously, you’re too damn nice. Or should I say stupidly tried and true?”

“Ah...”

Lambert slowly opened his eyes and looked up at Nichika as if she was the most dazzling thing his dark green eyes ever saw.

“That’s why you get used by scum like moi.”

“Lam...bert!”

“Girl, you need to get your head checked. Most people don’t try to revive the person who tried to kill ’em.”

He wasn’t an illusion or a ghost. The young man she had come to know was alive and looking right at her. He patted her gently on the head. His warmth brought tears to her eyes.

“Thanks. You saved me.”

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Nichika threw her arms around his neck and cried her throat hoarse.

Even I’m capable of doing something.

Miracles can happen.

As long as you don’t give up hope, anything’s possible.

OR so Nichika had thought.

“What about that was a freakin’ miracle, you idiot!”

Nichika shrunk away from her master’s outraged shouts in her guest room at Sylmia’s house. Just shrinking down on the bed made the whole world shake and her head fell back against the plush pillow.

“Agggh. So dizzzzzyyy,” she groaned.

“You’re stupider than I thought! I can’t believe there’s actually a person in this world who’s dumb enough to pour out their magic without considering their limits. How’d I get stuck with such a reckless, brainless moron for an apprentice?”

She sluggishly pulled the cold wet towel Oswald chucked at her over her eyes.

His verbal assault didn't relent.

"Blockhead. Overconfident petacolon. Overreaching dime-novel heroine. Pretend priestess."

"You don't have to call me that many names..."

His insult parade made her feel as emotionally drained as she did physically.

After all that had happened, Nichika ended up passing out on top of Lambert. The first thing she felt when she woke up was fatigue worse than running twenty miles nonstop, and roiling nausea. Releasing magic beyond one's limitations was the same as wearing down the soul, thus her wounded soul sought rest and she became bedridden.

"Shed a few tears and say a few prayers, and you can bring back the dead? Ha! That's the kind of hackneyed plot development people write about in cheap novels."

"What are you trying to get at?"

He wouldn't stop slinging sarcastic remarks at her. Why he felt the need to be so pointed with her was simple—

Oswald thrust his finger at her forehead and slapped down his ultimate grievance. "Passing out and losing all your strength over something completely and UTTERRRRRRLY meaningless is the act of ignoramuses! MOOOROOON!"

"Don't say thaaaat!"

Indeed, all her strenuous effort to bring Lambert back to life by pouring her magic into him past her breaking point had absolutely nothing to do with his revival.

"You aren't done lecturin' her yet, ol' pal?" Lambert, the man himself, opened the door and strode inside with a washbowl filled with ice. He placed it on the sideboard.

Oswald turned his narrowed eyes on him and exasperated, "Shouldn't you be the angriest one here? It's all because of this meddlesome busybody heroine that you became a 'spirit enslaved to their body.'"

"Ugggggggh..." Nichika groaned, recognizing the massive blunder she made this

time relinquished her of the right to complain.

Apparently, Lambert would have revived as a spirit even if she had left him be. Nichika had not only healed his body back to normal, but pumped it full of magic on top of that, drawing a lot of wind mana into it. As a result, his soul returned to the original body it had a high affinity for, and so an unusual half-human half-spirit was born.

But the person in question was entirely nonchalant about it. “Yeah, but it’s not inconveniencing and I’ve got nothin’ to be dissatisfied ’bout,” he answered in the same casual manner as he had when human. “If anythin’, I’d say I’m grateful to have become a more human-like spirit.”

“R-Really?” Nichika looked to him, seeking forgiveness from his comforting words. Someone karate chopped her on the back of the head.

“Getting stupider? Becoming a proper spirit would’ve been incomparably convenient. Without a body to shackle him, he could have freely traveled anywhere he desired and become nearly immortal.”

“I am really soooooooooo sorry!” Ashamed to look at him, she buried her face in the blankets.

“It’s fine,” Lambert chuckled wryly. “Besides, it’s still partially thanks to you that I was able to ascend into a spirit.”

“How’s that?”

He sat on the edge of the bed and smiled sweetly at her with eyes that had turned green during his ascension into a wind spirit.

“You frantically called for me, right? I came back to this side following your voice.” He stroked the top of her head. It was a very affectionate touch. “As someone who only ever thought of revenge, I finally realized that I shouldn’t sadden the one girl crying for my sake more than I already had. That I had to get back to her.”

“Lam...”

“I really am sorry for betraying you and settin’ ya up. I swear I’ll never do it again.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks when he said that with a seriousness that had been absent from him before. Behind them Oswald was highly unamused, but Nichika didn't notice. He folded his arms and took this as the moment to talk to Lambert.

"So? What are you going to do now?"

"Bout that—"

"Lam!" Someone charged into the room, cutting him off with their loud shouts. "You've been here all this time?!"

"Geh!"

Cloaked in a cape of wind, Sylmia loomed over Lambert with a blue vein bulging in a corner of his beautiful face. "How could you ditch my lessons?! You may have become a wind spirit, but you're only halfway there! Prepare yourself to be trained mercilessly by me to become my future successor!"

In other words, Lambert had snuck out of his lessons to visit Nichika. His eyes spun before he made a mad dash for the window and jumped off the second floor.

"Wait right there! Do you think you can escape me?!"

Sylmia immediately followed, disappearing through the walls. The master-apprentice duo was left dumbfounded.

"...Lambert's at a serious disadvantage," Oswald quietly noted.

"D-Definitely."

The bulging curtains swayed in the bright sunlight. A peaceful breeze was blowing through Windy Village once again.

IN the end, it took two days of bed rest before Nichika was up and about again.

Most of her energy was back, so she decided to wash the laundry piled up over their travel from Elminage to Windy Village. It was refreshing to add soap to the clothes in the sink and rub them clean. She enjoyed seeing dirty things

getting cleaner. She threw a large towel over the clothes hanger to dry and clipped it in place so it wouldn't blow away. This spot was nice and sunny, perfect for a quick dry.

Nichika picked up the borrowed laundry basket and finally answered the question put to her. "...Because the name 'Lambert' is too long. Anyways, isn't it normal to call someone you're friends with by a nickname?"

She glanced over her shoulder at the tall figure lounging on the sofa with a sour look on his face. For whatever reason she could not comprehend, Oswald didn't like her calling Lambert "Lam" and had been annoying her about it an awful lot since she started doing the laundry. Her master snorted and laid on his folded arms.

"You're something else for being able to casually call the man who tried to kill you by a cute nickname," he continued in a voice permeated with his irritation. "Haven't you been calling him by nicknames since before you became friends?"

"Yeah, because I hadn't met him in person yet, and some of those nicknames weren't so nice..."

What's this guy so mad about? Exasperated, Nichika returned the basket where she found it. When she came back, Oswald had closed his eyes. Without much thought, she sat beside him and stared at his face. She looked extra close at his eyes. Last time his eyelashes looked like they were glowing silver. Had she just imagined it?

Sensing her eyes on him, his lashes fluttered open. When his eyes met hers, his perfectly manicured eyebrows snapped together.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

"I'll attack you."

Nichika swiftly retreated to safe distance. She knew he wasn't serious, but reacted just in case. Oswald languidly sat up and threw another annoyed question at her.

"You said you call friends by a nickname. That doesn't apply to me?"

Back to that topic? He sure was hung up on the whole nickname thing.

“I seriously doubt it, but do you want me to call you Osy or something?” she half joked.

“.....”

She nearly burst out laughing at the nickname she had picked for him. He noticed her trembling shoulders and the creases in his brow deepened to become a ravine.

“...God-awful nickname.”

“See? You’re the one who told me from day one to never utter your name like we’re friends. That’s why you’re Master or Oswald,” she reasoned.

After a while, Oswald stood with a sullen face. Nichika, who was checking over their travel supplies, glanced up at him. “Where are you going?”

“Off to wander around.”

“I want to come too! All my bones are going to lock up if I don’t go outside and move around. Will you take me with you?”

She had been bedridden for days. Going for a walk was a good place to start. Oswald tossed her a perfunctory glance and left the room with a curt “Do what you want.”

“Wait! Wait for me, Master!”

Nichika promptly pulled on her cardigan and ran after him.

Chapter 12: Girl, Goes on a Date

NICHIKA and Oswald left Sylmia's house and didn't make it more than a couple of feet without one villager or another speaking to them.

"Oh, aren't you this year's winner? Are you well enough to be walking around?"

"You've got some mad flying skills. This old man hasn't seen anyone spin through the skies like that since I was a wee lad."

"The clock tower's mostly repaired! Don't ya worry. We'll have it up and runnin' in no time!"

"Here, lassie, take this with you! Don't be shy. Business is booming with the birth of the new Wind Spirit Successor."

"It's a little worrying the successor is our Master Lam though."

"You can say that again! Gahaha!"

Arms full of apples, candy, and cookies, Nichika whispered to Oswald walking in step with her. "So Lord Sylmia decided to keep Lam being the culprit a secret?"

"The villagers only know that you and Lambert worked together to destroy a trap someone set to ruin the race. There's no need to specify who it was."

"That's true."

The culprit had put his life on the line to reduce casualties. No point in digging up the past and making the people miserable when he already paid the price with his life.

As a refreshing breeze blew by, Nichika glanced to her side. Oswald wasn't wearing his usual black coat today, but instead he dressed casually like the townspeople. He wasn't sporting any accessories, not even his glasses, but the simple attire only enhanced his natural good looks. Nichika strolled beside him in a cashmere dress and cardigan unsuitable for travel.

In this moment of peace, she realized that they always walked at a brisk pace to get from place to place, never letting down their guard for even a second in case a monster attacked. This may have been the first time they had ever gone on a leisure walk, with their stroll being the purpose, not a means of going somewhere.

It's like we're on a date. The moment she thought it, she couldn't stop thinking about it that way, and her face flushed.

Oswald noticed her swinging her arms like a robot and showed concern which was extremely rare for him. "What's wrong?" he asked softly.

"N-Nothing! A-Anyways, look over there! We can see the clock tow—"

She pointed to the city symbol visible around the corner, trying to change the topic...and locked up. The reason? A huge bronze statue was being built on top of the tower that had been half-destroyed by the blast.

"....."

"....."

Her finger went limp and weakly fell to her side. Both she and Oswald felt like they were looking at the most draining thing yet. Why? Because of the bronze statue's model.

"Hi there! I'm glad to see you're too moved for words!" Sylmia sauntered toward them from across the street. Nichika lunged at him and grabbed the front of his shirt.

"What in the world is that monstrosity?! What are you trying to pull here?!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Rebuilding a normal clock tower is too plain and boring for my village. Isn't it an absolutely beautiful work of art?"

The identity of the bronze statue's model? Jutting out of the destroyed portion of the tower was a humongous statue of Sylmia. If that was all there was too it, it wouldn't have been so bad—well, it was still in bad taste—but the real issue was the addition of two smaller statues. Namely, Nichika and Lambert clinging adoringly to his arms. Worst of all, Sylmia mistook her rage for uncontrollable joy.

“What happened that day was a huge incident that will go down in Windy Village’s history!” he proudly trumpeted. “And now no one will ever forget it!”

“STOOOOOOOOP IT! It’s super embarrassing!”

“They made the statue look prettier than the person,” Oswald unhelpfully put out there, tossing oil on the fire.

“Shut up! Why don’t you put up a petacolon statue instead?!” Nichika roared, face hot from embarrassment.

Just as she was contemplating casting a spell to blow the statue up, the other victim strode over to them.

“I told ‘im not to do it, too,” he commented, gazing up at the statue modeled after him.

“Lam, save me from this humiliation! I won’t ever visit this village again!” she pleaded, teary-eyed.

“Ah, well, I’ll tell the sculptor to obscure your facial features,” he placated. “Oh, and I figured out where lil’ wolf is.”

Nichika immediately quieted down to hear what he had to say. Turns out their cheerful wolf friend had gone missing ever since they parted ways in front of the village. He hadn’t responded to any of his master’s calls, and Oswald’s forced summonings were being blocked. Oswald had asked Lambert to look into it while Nichika was resting.

“A merchant who left the village happened to pass by lil’ wolf,” he continued reporting with unusual seriousness. “Sounds like he was dognapped.”

“D-Dognapped?!” That unsettling word drained the color from her face. Nichika held her hands to her cheeks and began freaking out. “Oh no! What can we do?! That boy is overly friendly with strangers and has such a cute face. Some evil person fell in love with him and took him away!”

“I don’t think he’s that cute.”

“He’s cute to me!”

She glared at her master for making an unnecessary comment. Tears misted her eyes. Worry that she may never see him again flooded her thoughts. But

Lambert's investigative skills were better than she could have hoped.

"So 'bout the dognappers, it turns out it was a girl with vibrant red hair and a morose young man with a plain face. Seems like they were headed north of here to Brownie Village."

"Let's hunt them down, Oswald!" Nichika proposed on the spur of the moment.

Oswald sighed. "What kinda trouble did he get himself into this time?"

NICHIKA and Oswald, back in their travel clothes and ready to go, were at the village exit opposite the gate they had entered. Villagers came to see them off and gave them lots of farewell gifts, but Nichika politely rejected the ones she couldn't carry. Among those that she handed back with a twitching smile was a small replica of the clock tower's new statue.

"Guess this is goodbye for now," Lambert said with a grin, jumping right to the farewells.

It hadn't been long since he'd become a spirit, making him too unstable to travel with them. Sylmia shared in private that although Lambert didn't show it, he was struggling with the parts of himself that were no longer human.

He properly faced Nichika and said his goodbyes with a sad smile. "Stay safe, Nichika. You'll probably be okay with my pal on your side, but still."

"I will. Good luck with your training—wah!"

He brushed up her bangs and pressed his lips against her forehead. Heart thudding in her ears, she opened her eyes and found kindness reflecting back in his intense green eyes.

"Will I see you again?" his lonely voice rang close to her ears.

"O-Of course!"

"See you later, then."

Lambert patted her on the shoulder on his way to see Oswald. Pressing her hands against her forehead, Nichika turned her back to the others. Otherwise

they might see how red her face was.

I just can't seem to build up a tolerance. No, it's not my fault. It's the fault of this world being full of good-looking people galore. Brooding, she stared at the road ahead.

The straight path was drawn into the mountain range opposite of Fog Valley. The sky was blue, and wind mana pranced through the meadows laughing. When she held up the magic orb, red and green lights swirled alternately, creating a fascinating color.

I'm halfway there now. Only halfway? Already halfway?

Dangers like she experienced in this village may be lurking down the road ahead. She had to keep moving regardless of what waited.

It will be okay, Nichika. You will definitely be okay.

Forcing her lips into an optimistic smile, the girl harbored both vague apprehension and hope for the future.

KEEPING his gaze trained on her back, Lambert made his intentions clear with Oswald. "I'm coming after you guys once things are settled here."

Though he spoke with his typical playfulness, there was an awfully sincere undertone. Oswald folded his arms and answered him with the exasperation he felt.

"You don't have to feel that responsible for what happened, you know? She was never angry at—"

"It's what I want," Lambert said over him.

"....."

Oswald sucked in a breath when he sensed the hostile glint in those green eyes. "You..."

"I've come to seriously want her. She's the first person to ever face me head-on. So..." Grinning, Lambert smacked the man in black on the back and declared war. "Please be sure to thoroughly protect my precious woman."

NICHIKA had been soaking in her hope for a bright future until she was flicked in the back of the head and yelped. The expected culprit stalked past her.

“Get moving.”

She ran after him, turning around one last time to bow to the people seeing them off. “Thank you so much for everything! Goodbye!”

The villagers called out encouraging words of “Do your best” and “Come back anytime!” Nichika gave one last big wave before looking forward and running off. She rushed to catch up to her master who briskly walked off without looking back. He didn’t even try to wait for her or slow down.

“Wait for me! I know you’re worried about Wolfie, but give me a second to catch up!”

She finally reached him and still he only slid a perfunctory glance her way and made no attempt to match her slower pace. Confused, she probed him to see what his problem was.

“What now? What’s got you so grumpy?”

She settled into walking a few paces behind him in silence since he didn’t answer her. She searched for anything to talk about and went with the first thing that popped into her head.

“Oh yeah, weren’t you the one who said only women ride brooms? But you still came to rescue me on one. Thank you.”

“.....”

She braced herself for the snippy comeback that never came. Getting extra worried, she walked a little closer and barely caught him saying something in a low, threadbare voice.

“What do you...think of Lambert?”

“Who? Lam?” Puzzled as she was by his abrupt question, she answered him honestly. “Hmm. We met in the worst possible way so I was definitely scared of him at first, but it turns out that he’s funny and kind.”

His charming and endearing smile came to mind. His sharp, narrowed eyes had softened since they met too.

Nichika smiled and spoke of the young man in her thoughts. “He’s got a bit of what you might call bewitching charm? He looks like a punk kid, but he’s surprisingly mature and thoughtful on the inside. The complete opposite of you.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear call me childish.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she snapped back.

Oswald started walking even faster. Irrked by the way he walked without thinking one bit about her pace, she threw a sarcastic remark right back at him.

“*NOBODY* said you’re childish though?”

“Zip it and walk in silence.”

“Aaaah, I really wish Lam had come with us. Then I could have...”

The words she accidentally let out in the heat of the moment brought her master to a dead halt in front of her. He slowly turned and flayed her with eyes registering subzero in the frigid department. Oswald enunciated each word amid the nervous tension sparking between them.

“And then you could have *what?*”

“L-Like I was saying, I could have explained my special circumstances to him and had him do ‘*that*’ for me in your—hey! Why are you coming toward me?! Don’t come any clos—mmph!”

He grabbed her collar and pulled her into a deep kiss, devouring her lips. He insistently explored her mouth, and when he finally released her, the strength went out of her legs and she sunk down.

He wiped his mouth and sneered, “Say what you want, but you know you can’t be satisfied by anyone other than me.”

Oswald walked off, leaving behind the sexiest smile yet. The girl, who incoherently muttered under her breath for a while, finally got a hold of herself and shouted at his broad back.

“That part of you is what’s so CHILDISH!”

Apparently, Oswald was also considerably influenced by the magic crystal. In other words, he was “jealous” of Lambert.

But the bickering master and apprentice didn’t realize it at all. The noisy duo loudly argued for a while afterward. The startled birds soaring through the blue sky flew in the opposite direction to avoid them.

AFTER seeing the travelers off, Sylmia jumped over the village’s protective walls and used his unparalleled communication ability to send his mind to a distant land. Locating his desired conversation partner, he spoke without warning.

“By the way, Gaagaa, I wanted to talk to you about something that’s been bothering me.”

As for the person he spoke to, he held his silence for a long moment before drolly replying, “**...Sylmia, did ye never learn to greet before cutting to the point?**”

“Who needs greetings when you’re as close as you and me?”

“Ye risk giving me a heart attack by sending just thy voice into my head without prior notice.”

“We don’t have hearts. Nahahaha!” the Great Wind Spirit chuckled without a care in the world. He couldn’t see the Great Fire Spirit, but he didn’t have to see him to know he had one of his big claws pressed against his forehead about now.

Understanding that chiding the wind spirit would get him nowhere, Ghazan urged him to get to the point. **“So? What is it that bothers ye?”**

“Right. You know that Nichika is trying to revive Yuna, yes?”

“I granted her my power only after hearing why she needed it. So, yes.”

“According to my son, Ini’s the one who instructed her to do it.”

They were both familiar with that name. It was the last name the fire spirit

expected to hear.

“...Ini? The weird one who trailed behind us and was repelled by Yuna?”
Ghazan confirmed, doubt lacing his rumbling voice.

“The one and same little Ini who fell obsessively in love with Yuna and became her hardcore stalker.”

Forcing that memory out of the dark pit where he had sealed it silenced the fire spirit. It was the kind of memory none of them wanted to remember, but Sylmia kept digging it up.

“That creeper who rejoiced when she punched him, and not only crept out Yuna, but also Lulu.”

“Enough. Do not utter another word. Please do not remind me of him.”

“Nostalgic, isn’t he? He was beautiful so I couldn’t hate him.”

“Ye always just watched as a spectator from atop the trees! Meanwhile I was playing arbitrator every single time. Grrr. Now that ye bring this up, ye always did—”

The wind spirit stopped his friend before he could launch into a lecture about the olden days. “But that stalker had quite the outrageous amount of authority for a creep. Though we never did hear the full story about him from Yuna.”

“.....”

“After everything was said and done, he took Yuna away with him to the Celestial Realm. What do you think happened between them during that time?”

Ghazan didn’t have the answer to Sylmia’s question. **“I do not know,”** he answered in a grave voice after a long pause. **“We hath merely maintained the balance in this world as she requested of us, and now even that balance has been put in jeopardy...”**

“It has. Have you noticed it yet, Ghazan? How our powers are gradually weakening?”

“Does this mean that the world was only in balance because Yuna managed it from above?”

“Great, isn’t it? We only noticed now that she’s gone. At this rate, I might not be able to maintain my human form for long. Aaah, if that time comes, how my fans will fall apart lamenting my loss!”

The Great Wind Spirit chose now of all times to break the serious mood with a joke. Ghazan was stunned speechless. Sylmia tilted his head at the lack of reply.

“Hello? Hello? Anybody there? Strange. Did my wind whispers get cut off?”

Dealing with this man tires me out. Ghazan brought their conversation to a close in a voice that betrayed how he felt.

“In any event, unlike I who cannot move from this place, collecting information is the ‘wind’s’ forte. Notify me immediately if ye learn anything new.”

“So you can hear me!”

Sylmia childishly puffed out his cheeks like someone hundreds of years younger than him, but went ahead and took over the duty of collecting information as requested. In the back of his mind he thought of an old ally—of the Great Earth Spirit who ruled over the land.

“Guess I’ll start by contacting good ol’ Gnocky.”

“Weren’t ye originally the one responsible for keeping all of us ‘Joyful Servant Corps’ in touch? Hasn’t it been ages since we last spoke with Gnockoak?”

“That’s not true. I only recently spoke with him seventy years ago.”

“Unbelievable...”

ON the road, the master and apprentice had more or less stopped bickering. Nichika glared at Oswald and got one last cutting retort in.

“You really are the enemy of all women.”

“Not my problem.”

The mountain road was leaps and bounds easier to traverse than Fog Valley. They had descended the gently sloping hills and stopped to meet a wagon

coming down the road.

“Hello. Fine weather we’re having today,” Nichika cheerfully greeted the middle-aged man. She was always the one who struck up conversations with strangers while Oswald watched.

“Hello there, young lady. Sure is a fine day. Coming from Windy Village?” The friendly man halted his horse and wiped his forehead with the towel wrapped around his neck. From his straw hat and sun-kissed skin, he appeared to be a local farmer.

“Yes, we are. Is this the correct route to Brownie Village?” she asked with an engaging smile.

“That it is. Keep on this road until you come to a three-way intersection. There’s a sign showing which road leads where, so you should be able to figure it out on your own, but you just have to go straight to get to Brownie Village.” The farmer flashed a toothy smile and pointed down the long road he’d come from.

Since she had him here, Nichika decided to collect what information she could. “Did you happen to see a girl with red hair and an unmemorable young man shadowing her?”

The red-faced farmer laughed heartily and floored her with an inconceivable bit of information. “Of course I saw ’em. As I understand it, the girl is the Spirit Priestess Nichika and the young man with her is the brilliant witch aiding her in her holy journey. They walked past me quite some time ago, so they’ve probably already arrived at Brownie Village.”

“Pardon?”

“Huh?”

“Rubbernecks are flocking from all over to see the big celebrities dropping by that tiny village. If you’ll excuse me now. I’ve gotta get back to the farm. Safe travels.”

Nichika returned the farmer’s wave and watched his wagon go.

“Uh, what did he mean by that?” she asked, incredulous.

“You got me.”

They were about to find out exactly what the farmer meant whether they wanted to or not at the next village.

Act 7: Imposter Holy Maiden

Chapter 13: Girl, Whets Appetites

“WELCOME to Brownie Village: The Village with Holy Savior Priestess Lady Nichika!”

Under the cloudy gray sky, a huge, over the top banner hung from the village gate. The person being advertised by it gaped up at it.

Disgusted, her master prodded, “Close your mouth. You’re outdoing yourself in the looking stupid department.”

“I just got here, right? This is the first time I’ve ever come here, right?”

Dumbfounded, she passed under the banner with her name written in sparkly paint and entered the village. Red terraced fields sloped down hills as far as the eye could see.

Oswald plucked a leaf and twirled it between his fingers. “This is a klehna leaf,” he explained. “Boiling it down creates a red pigment used in dyes.”

“Cool. Does it taste good as tea?” Nichika asked the exact question that popped into her head, earning a pitying look from her master.

“You can also use it as a decorative element in dishes, but it was wrong of me to expect a classy response from you...”

“Ugh. I’m not as much of a glutton as that makes me sound. Back home some people dye textiles naturally with tea, so that’s what made me think it was edible. Okay?” she babbled as they descended the sloped plane. A large mansion came into view at the bottom. Excited screams reached halfway up the hill.

“It’s awfully loud,” Oswald said, leery of the noise.

“Really is. Are they having a concert or something?” she joked. She walked around the building and felt her jaw drop.

Hundreds of villagers crowded around the stage erected in front of the mansion. On the stage was a girl with bright-red hair tied up in pigtails, raising her hands with a shining smile.

“Hello, everybody! You have my heartfelt thanks for gathering here today for ultra-hyper-super-duper cute me!”

Cheers exploded from the overexcited crowd, shaking the air. The red-haired girl, dressed like a high school idol, winked and struck a cutesy pose.

“It’s time for the first song! Here comes ‘Searching for the Great Spirits Isn’t Easy-peasy ☆!’”

Nichika was only joking, but it turned out they really were having a concert. The pretty girl sung and danced to the orchestra’s up-tempo song. Every time the real Nichika heard the audience’s cries of “Lady Priestess, I love you!” and “Nichika-wichika is too cute!” she smacked Oswald’s arm.

“What’s going on here? I mean it. Tell me what I’m looking at right now!”

“.....”

Incomprehensible. One look at Oswald’s face told her exactly what he thought. She grabbed his sleeve and pulled him to the front of the swaying crowd. Obviously she didn’t recognize the girl.

“Nichika is the Spirit Priestess,” the girl said during the interlude. “Please support me during my arduous journey!”

She pretended to cry as she broke into a dramatized speech. “I have overcome a great many trials to get to where I am today. I even went through heartbreaking goodbyes...but I will never give up! Not until the day I save the world!”

Enough was enough. Reaching the peak of embarrassment, Nichika pulled at her hair and screamed, “OH MY GOD! I can’t watch this any longer! It’s just too ridiculous!”

“Oi, stop it, stupid.”

Nichika broke free of Oswald’s restraint and jumped over the fence onto the stage. The imposter stepped back in fear of the sudden concert crasher.

“Wh-Whatever is your problem? You may be my fan, but it’s a no-no to come up on stage with me!” she chided in a spoiled, girly tone that only angered Nichika more.

“Like HELL I’m your fan!”

The orchestra stopped playing and the audience attentively watched to see what was about to go down. Nichika slammed her right foot on the stage and gave it to her straight.

“Quit the crap! Where do you get off stealing someone else’s name?! And you just had to go and say it along with that embarrassing speech... How do you expect me to introduce myself from now on?!”

“Whatever are you talking about? Whoever in the world are you?” The fraud feigned innocence.

Blood rushing to her head, Nichika wailed emotionally. Yes, she made the mistake of screaming in front of all these people. “Don’t you get it?! I’m the real Spirit Priestess! I’m Nichika!”

Silence fell over the garden concert for but a fleeting moment before explosive laughter cracked the air. The second Nichika realized she was being laughed at, her face turned deep red.

“Wh-Why...?”

“You shouldn’t joke about such things. I am the genuine Spirit Priestess Nichika,” the imposter announced, then turned to her adoring fans. “Isn’t that right, everyone?” She confidently pointed to herself, her eyes tearing up from laughing too hard.

Now that she came this far, she couldn’t turn back. Nichika clenched her fists and argued. “No, you’re not! I’m Nichika!”

“What part of you is anything like a refined Spirit Priestess?”

Backed by the crowd, the imposter waved her hand up and down Nichika and triumphantly mocked, “You can’t be with that plain, round face!”

STAB!

“Not with that grimy, dull hair and stumpy figure!”

STAB! STAB! STAB!

“And to top it off, you have the charisma of a rock. Though that’s offensive to rocks.”

“Grrrrr...!”

True enough, the fake was pretty, poised, and had all her curves in the right places. She was tall and slender like a model. The type of girl Nichika never wanted to be compared to.

The red-haired beauty placed her left hand on her hip, pressed the back of her right hand to her lips, and let out a clichéd snobbish villainess laugh. “Ohohoho! What rural village did you crawl out of, pleb? Lame. So lame. You’re so super-duper-extraordinarily-outrageously LAME!”

Nichika, who had willingly gotten on stage with this pretty girl, sank to her knees. Nothing about her stacked up against the imposter. The world is unfair when it comes to granting good looks.

“You think you can represent yourself as a heroine with those looks? Funny girl!” The fraudster grinned cunningly and divulged into a very poor act. “Oh no! Could it be you purposely caused this ruckus so you could assassinate innocent little me, the Spirit Priestess? Kyaah! I’m so scared! Help me!”

“What? Hey!”

Brawny village men clambered up the side of the stage in response to the imposter’s phony screams. They had Nichika pinned before she could run.

“You’re a nasty piece of work, trying to kill our savior!”

“I am not! I—” Nichika desperately tried to explain herself, but the imposter shouted over her.

“I see you have a staff. You must be a wicked witch. Take it from her!”

“No!”

Nichika turned blue when they confiscated the magic orb from her belt. For a brief second, she considered letting loose and hitting them all with a burst of magic, but feared it’d turn into something she could never undo if she accidentally killed someone. Shaking her head, she called for help.

“Oswald, help me!”

The black back stealthily slinking through the crowd to make his escape froze in place. Her master glanced at her once then ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

“Heartless jerk!”

“That man is her accomplice! Catch him!”

And just like that, both master and apprentice were tossed in jail.

“**YOU** really, truly, absolutely, positively did something utterly worthless!”

“Yahh, yahh! Ih haahts! Uyaaah!”

In the dark, cold prison cell, Nichika was pushed up against the wall with her cheeks pinched by a furious Oswald. He let go of her cheeks with a crisp snap, causing her to fall onto the pile of hay.

Arms crossed, her master let her in on a truth that never occurred to her. “As long as I was safe, I could’ve come to rescue you later.”

“Oh yeah!”

“Hare-brain...” Sighing, he commenced examining every nook and cranny of the cell. Crouching, he touched the stone wall. “None of that matters until we escape,” he said, putting aside his annoyance for the time being.

“Can we escape?”

“Leave that to me. I’m used to breaking out of jail.”

“How many times have you been put in jail?!” Nichika quipped loudly. She took a good look around their cell.

It was more like a remodeled barn than a jailhouse. The walls were made of cut stones and the floor was just bare, hard dirt. The only window was protected by a solid grate on the outside, and the setting sun shone behind the cloudy sky. Nichika shoved to her feet and began inspecting the cell in hopes of finding something that could assist their escape.

“Anyways, why do you think that redhead is imitating me?” she asked the

biggest question plaguing her.

“Just goes to show how famous and important the Spirit Priestess has become,” Oswald answered with his back turned to her. “It’s not that strange for people to exploit it for what it’s worth.”

“What about her weird concert?”

“Yeah, I’ve got no idea.”

What’s the benefit of acting like an idol and gathering groupies? I don’t get it...

“Aggggggh! Now what?” she groaned and buried her face in her hands. “I’m going to become the fake at this rate. They took away the magic orb, too.”

“Why not just throw all your responsibilities on that faker? Give her the staff and be done with it,” he suggested so casually her head shot up.

“Don’t even joke about it! I can’t go back home if I don’t fulfill my mission!”

“Do you really have to go home that bad?”

“Bad, bad, bad idea. The world is in a pinch. Besides, it’s my motto to finish what I start—wait, what?” Nichika lifted her gaze from the dirt floor. That brooding black back was silently examining the stone wall without glancing her way.

Is that his way of asking me not to leave?

What did his face look like when he said it? What did he mean by those words? Ba-dump! Ba-dump! Her heart paraded so loud she feared he could hear it in their quiet cell.

“U-Umm...” She worked up the nerve to ask when the stone in his hand moved.

“Yes!” Oswald jiggled the stone around, not caring that his apprentice was banging her head against the opposite wall. “I was right again. Wherever there’s a wall where the stones have been slapped on top of each other without much thought, there will always be one that’s loose.”

“...I hate you,” she cursed under her breath and peered at the loose stone

over his shoulder.

The stone wobbled unstably and looked easy to pull out with some effort. From there they could remove some of the surrounding stones to make a hole big enough for a person to crawl through.

While Nichika was thinking about unhelpful things such as how it felt like they were playing Jenga, Oswald was thoughtfully rubbing his chin between his fingers.

“The guard only comes by once every thirty minutes, so he won’t be here for a bit. I’d still like some extra headway time, though...”

“Before they find out we escaped?”

“Yeah. I want to stall the guard here. Now to find what I can draw their attention with...” Oswald paused and stared at Nichika. Getting nothing but bad vibes from that intent look, she slowly stepped away.

“Wh-What? G-Going to make me do something weird again?”

“.....”

Oswald offered a small smile in place of a response. Chills snaked down her spine.

“Eeek! D-Don’t come near me!” she shrieked to keep him at bay.

“Aw, come now. Don’t say that. You haven’t had your *medicine* yet, have you?”

“I still have some candies left, so I’m goo—ooph!”

Her back hit the stone wall. She had nowhere left to run. Oswald rested his left arm on the wall next to her face, and inserted his leg between hers, effectively cutting off all escape.

“Ah...”

His pretty blue eyes reflected the dull sunset, creating an enchanting color. The man gazed into the girl’s captivated eyes and he whispered in the sweetest, most tantalizing voice next to her ear.

“Moan as sensually as you can.”

Twilight enhanced the shadows. Nichika's eyes bulged so wide they could've fallen out. Oswald chuckled and stroked her supple cheek. She quivered under his touch. His hand trailed a path down her smooth skin to her neck and cupped the back of her head. Her cheeks stained scarlet and her tightly shut eyelids fluttered from that simple touch.

“Hiyaah...”

Dropping a light kiss on the nape of her neck drew out a stifled moan. He captured the hand she tried to cover her mouth with and pinned it against the wall.

“You don't have to hold it in,” he assured in a sultry voice.

But Nichika swung her head back and forth, fully conveying her hesitance. Seeing her reaction made him think.

His apprentice seemed to be embarrassed or ashamed of sexual pleasure. He wasn't sure if that was due to her character or the teachings of this Japan she said she came from. The number of times he had touched her since they met exceeded what could be counted on both hands, and yet she resisted him every time.

Even though you're totally into it, too.

Sure, she resisted at first, but as he went on she always melted in his arms. For a sadist like Oswald, he couldn't deny cajoling her out of this stubbornness brought him a unique kind of pleasure. Of course, if she really rejected him or made it clear she didn't want him to, he let her go. It's just that she never did completely push him away.

After keeping her in suspense with his feathery kisses along her neck, he brought his face close enough their foreheads almost touched.

“By the way, what were you trying to ask me before?” he enticed.

Her eyes snapped open, but she dropped her heated gaze to the dirt floor, careful not to look him in the eye. He gently pulled her head closer and let his husky, low voice tickle the side of her ear.

“What I said means exactly what it sounds like. You don't have to go back to

your world. Stay with me forever.”

“I”

Aiming for that momentary drop in her resistance, he buried his face in her neck. The girl’s distinct rosy scent tickled his nose, and he tamped down the impulse to devour her right here and now. Not yet. It wasn’t enough for her.

Softly running his hand over her abdomen, he promised, “I’ll do something about the seed rooted in your stomach. Stay with me, smiling without a care in the world.”

“Without a care in the world? That’s not very nice...”

He wrapped both arms around her, preventing her from sliding down the wall as she melted with his touch.

“W-We can’t,” she breathed. “Now’s not the time for this...”

Contrary to her weak protests, she twined her fingers about his neck and pressed herself against the hard wall of his chest. He deeply indulged in her sweet, cherry blossom colored lips, focusing on all the sensitive spots. He slanted his mouth over hers again and again, and she moaned.

Making out with her brought him inexplicable pleasure he associated with dirtying a freshly cleaned shirt right out of the laundry. The girl in his arms was too pure. She shone so bright she lit up the world around him. Dirtying her until she fell to his level was the only way someone as filthy as Oswald could touch her. Between their kisses exploring each other’s mouths from different angles, the lack of oxygen in Oswald’s brain made him absently think, *Drown in your pleasure and fall to my level...*

Shallow. Deep. Long. Short. Through their various kisses, Nichika got the hang of it and returned his kisses in kind. All reason melted away with her pleasure, and her enraptured moans echoed off the cold jail walls. The silver thread connecting them snapped.

“R-Really?” she panted.

“Hm?”

Nichika lifted her head just as he was putting his hand under her jacket.

Oswald stopped and asked what she was seeking confirmation of with his stunning blue eyes.

Out of breath and quivering from her exertions, she clarified in a raspy voice, “You need me, not the Spirit Priestess?”

Her heart-stopping eyes begged him to need her, and her expression was the most arousing thing he had ever seen. Cheeks awash in heat with her desire for him, the thin, translucent tendril slipping from the corner of her lips came down her chin, onto her soft, white chest.

“Oswald...”



The man who had succeeded in maintaining self-control all along was floored by the sudden rush of desire pulsating through him. He wanted her. Oh, how he wished to go through with this moment. But the logical half of him yelled to keep the desire at bay. Going through with what they both wanted in this moment wasn't what he set out to do. Oswald bit down on his cheek, shoved his hand in his pocket, and pulled out an item shaped like a bird.

"Of course you. *I want you.*"

With that final word, he killed the switch. He gently pushed away the wide-eyed girl and was relieved to be away from the sweet, tantalizing scent of her.

Suddenly freed of his touch, she questioned him with all the confusion she felt. "What the heck is that?"

Oswald looked over his shoulder with a wicked smirk, instantly transforming from a man indulging in lust to a shrewd witch.

"NIGHT dutyyy ain't eassyyy, either! Dammit! Hiccup!"

Under the moonlight, the silhouette of a tottering man swayed. A resident of Brownie Village, he shouldered the baton handed to him in front of the guardhouse—aka the storage shed used as a makeshift guardhouse—and took a swig of the flask he secretly brought from home.

"Ain't fair! Where does she get off bein' all bossy? Who do she t'ink bringsss 'ome the bread! Baaaaaah!" The man watched the last drop hit his tongue and kicked the sand.

Today just wasn't his day. He had come home from a good night out drinking with his pals only to be nagged by his angry wife into grudgingly doing chores—granted, her anger was entirely his fault—and when he came back exhausted from tending to their klehna fields with a killer hangover, she was all over him again. Then when he decided to just sleep off the day, he remembered he was on watchmen's night duty today. Grumbling curses under his breath, he slogged his way through his rounds with zero motivation.

"Stinkin' night duty. I missed out on sweet Nichika's concert, too!"

The word in town was that the holy maiden who had come to stay with them since the other day was actually on a journey to save the world! Only yesterday the guard had decided to go see one of the concerts she was putting on to raise funds for her perilous venture. He had gotten so drunk he'd forgotten all about it.

"Won't ya save me toooooooooo, Holy Maideeeeen?"

His drunken babbling faded into the night sky. He then spotted the lone building at the foot of the hill. The stone prison set on the outskirts of the peaceful village was rarely used, but the torchlights indicated they had someone locked up for once. Remembering that the prison was a part of his patrol route, the man staggered downhill.

"RAWR!" he roared for the heck of it. "You prisoners behavin' yerselves?!" He approached the stone building swinging the baton. And then he heard it—a stifled moan. "Ooh?"

The moaning came from a young woman whose seductive sighs could be heard intermittently outside the prison. He was about to pull out the bolt when he heard extra heavy breathing and even louder moans of "Aah! Aaaahnn! Not there!"

The man gulped, his hand freezing on the bolt. *Oh yeah, they said something 'bout having locked up a young man and woman traveling together...* Smiling to himself, the man circled around to the back of the prison.

"Heh, heh, heh. Ain't it nice to be young."

He tried to peep inside, but a rag had been hung over the window inside, blocking his view. But the cries and panting were growing more frenetic, turning him on.

Here I thought I'd be stuck on a boring ol' patrol duty, but this is pretty stimulating. The ol' lady back 'ome has been 'olding out on me, too.

The man crouched in the bushes with his back to the window and began noisily removing his belt.

“LOOK at that. He’s started comforting himself. Stalling the guard was a complete success.”

“Yuuuuuck! I see nothing! I hear nothing! You can’t make meeee!”

Oswald was observing the drunk’s shameful act from the grove across the small river. Splotches of red suffused Nichika’s cheeks as she kept her back turned, her hands clamped over her ears, and shook her head with a vengeance. She nearly fainted just imagining that her moans were being used as material for some creep’s enjoyment.

Still watching the man, Oswald explained the witch’s item he used with a straight face. “The Echo Bird is a simple item that parrots what it hears. It’s the perfect tool for such an occasion as this.”

“Please don’t explain it. Let’s just go already!”

Nichika exploded to her feet and marched into the grove. She hit the bank on the other side in no time. She stomped her way up the incline shouting her outrage into the wind.

“What a jerk!”

Nichika was overwhelmed by the humiliation of being deceived by him yet again. Their entire makeout session had been a complete act. His sweet words, loving touch, and even his husky voice—all of it was fake!

“Stay with me forever.”

“...GAH!”

Willpower forced back the tears stinging her eyes as she looked back down the slope she stormed up. She yelled at the black shadow keeping a safe distance behind her.

“Why didn’t you explain your plan to me beforehand?! Demon! Devil! Brute! Pig!”

“Don’t you know the saying, ‘deceive your friends before deceiving your enemy’? Besides, what advantage is there in explaining it to you first? We can’t expect much out of you in the acting department.”

“How rude! I can do it if I—”

“Do it, then.”

She didn't expect him to actually ask her to do it. After making a face like she was trying to solve the hardest math problem in the world, she exhaled a single sound.

“A-Ahaan.”

“PFT!” Oswald buckled over laughing, his entire body shook.

Offended, Nichika clenched her fists at her sides. “Hey! You're the one who told me to do it!”

“PFFTT! Kukuku! Stop...I'll die of laughter...” he got out between laughs.

“—!!”

Nichika stomped several steps over to him and punched him in the back. But her poorly done sound effect had him roaring with unstoppable laughter, he didn't even care.

“I hate you!”

Oswald turned his eyes full of tears from laughing too hard on the girl's angry back as she marched ahead of him. She really was a delight to tease. One poke and she sang back with retorts. He wondered when it was he last laughed this hard and his face soured when he realized he had never buckled over laughing before.

“.....”

Though he was out to deceive her into getting into the mood, were the sweet words he whispered in her ear truly just an act? What about the desire that surged through him for her? Or the loving affection he felt when she clung to him?

...It can't be real...right?

For better or worse, Oswald stopped thinking about it. He convinced himself that he got too into his role. He hurried after Nichika and suddenly had the unexplainable urge to pat her on the back of the head when she sullenly refused to look at him.

“Whoa?!” she cried out in surprise.

He didn’t hold back from roughly messing up her hair as if he were petting a big dog. “Don’t be mad,” he said in the same tone he would if he were addressing a child who was pouting in the corner after being scolded. “It’s partially your fault things turned out that way.”

“I know that. I’ll be careful next time...so—quit it, would you?!”

Oswald instinctively captured her hand when she tried to bat him away. When he stopped and closely studied her face, she groaned and turned red to the tips of her ears, their makeout session fresh in her mind. A part of Oswald found her reaction adorable—against his wishes.

“You’re just a toy.”

“Excuse me?”

That’s why he made himself clear. He needed her and the world to know that he would never become serious about this little girl. He needed to tell himself that.

“You’re my *toy*. A pet. Don’t get the wrong idea.”

“Now that’s one thing I’ll never do! And then you’re going to say you’re just keeping to your end of our bargain.” Nichika peeled his hand off her wrist and glowered at him.

That reminded Oswald of the day they gambled on whether or not they would form a master-apprentice relationship.

“One of these cards is the ace of spades. The other is a joker. I’ll bring you with me if you draw the ace.”

Truth be told, this shrewd man never intended for it to be a fair gamble. Taking advantage of the fact she couldn’t see the cards, he held up two jokers. He wanted to punch his past self in the face. He had nearly let go of the most interesting toy he had ever come across.

Lips curving into a smile, he asked, “Hey, Nichika, does the world move how you want it to?”

“What?”

Otherwise there was no other explanation for why the joker had transformed into an ace. Did she have the gods'—specifically, Ini's—divine protection or something?

The girl gave it some thought before quietly replying, "...I don't quite understand the intent behind the question, but things are going smoothly for me on the most part except for one thing."

"One thing isn't going your way? What's that?"

Cheeks staining red, she shot him a killer glare and huffed, "Not saying! You're the only person I'll never, EVER tell!"

"Huh?"

"End of conversation! Less talking, more walking!"

Why am I the only person she won't tell? A little annoyed, Oswald hurried after her and tenaciously pestered her about it.

"Oi, wait! How could you hide something from just your master? It's something you will tell others, but not me?"

"You're annoying. Don't act like my master only when it's convenient to you."

"Why are you acting so funny today?"

"You're the one acting funnier than me!"

Luck was about the only explanation for why none of the villagers noticed the odd couple loudly bickering in the fields.

"**THE** imposter is staying here, right?"

They returned to the stage where they had been arrested that afternoon and stared up at the large mansion behind it. Their appearance, hard expressions and all, were covered with smoke that constantly changed color. As usual, it was the effect of Oswald's Elusive Ball.

Confirming no one was around, Oswald placed his hand on her shoulder and urged her ahead. "Let's go."

Chapter 14: Girl, Schemes

CLOUDS drifted over the blue moon, scattering shafts of light over the red fields. Oswald enacted their plan as the tepid winds played with the hem of his jacket. The elusive ball masked their presence extremely well, but it didn't turn them invisible. Risk of discovery increased with every move, and speaking was a dead giveaway.

So master and apprentice decided on a set of hand signals. Oswald signaled for Nichika to come after he checked around the corner. Her quiet sprint over was ruined by slipping on a pebble. She flapped her arms and narrowly managed to avoid the epic fail of falling flat on her face.

Relieved, she looked up to find her exasperated master rubbing circles in his temples... That wasn't one of their predetermined signals, but the meaning was clear. She stuck out her tongue and received a flick to the forehead.

Now was seriously not the time for them to start a fight.

They made sure no one was around before slowly opening the front door and slipping inside the mansion. A dim and dark corridor split to the left and right. They snuck up the wide staircase directly in front of them and headed to the deepest section of the west wing. Fortunately, they didn't pass anyone on their way to the guest room on the second floor. After confirming that no one was there, they quickly slid inside and exhaled.

"We snuck in surprisingly easy," Nichika whispered. "I thought there'd be more servants."

"Doesn't seem like the place is cleaned much... Maybe they don't have the means to employ servants."

They chatted as they searched high and low. Nichika didn't even fuss about them breaking and entering. She would have stoutly refused rummaging through someone else's house before, but now she moved without even questioning it. Wolfie being taken prisoner—at least, that's what she thought

had happened—was a piece of it, but it was also a fact that her master was slowly rubbing off on her.

Nichika swept her eyes around the room for the second time. It was a typical fancy room with a luxurious canopy bed, sofa, and table set. Did the other door lead to a washroom? She pinched what she found while examining the exotic red rug and held it up for Oswald.

“Oswald! Look at this.”

It was a tuft of stiff, tough brown fur. Oswald frowned at the familiar color and texture.

“Isn’t this Wolfie’s fur?” Nichika asked, almost positive it was.

“...Those guard furs are definitely his.”

Then that settled it: the fake Spirit Priestess had kidnapped Wolfie, after all. Why hadn’t he run away though? Could he not get away? And why wasn’t he in the room?

The questions racing through Nichika were interrupted by the echo of footsteps coming down the corridor. From the sound of it, there were probably two people walking in this direction.

“N-Not good!”

“Hide!”

Obeying Oswald’s quiet instruction, Nichika crawled underneath the bed. The door clicked open when she opened her mouth to complain about him shoving her head down.

“Oh my spirits, you are one persistent nag! You have wholly ruined my perfect after-bath mood.”

The first thing Nichika saw from under the bed was long, slender legs ending in a pair of classy white mule slippers. The feet shuffled across the floor with the same annoyance heard in the girl’s voice, and the mattress springs squeaked. Dust rained on Nichika and Oswald’s heads.

“I understand, my lady, but what will you do if that girl was the real thing?!” Another pair of feet followed that pathetically whiny male voice.

Oswald shoved Nichika's face into the floor when she opened her mouth to cry out upon spotting the four tawny, furry legs trotting into the room after the man.

"Hm? Did you hear something?" the fake priestess asked on top of the bed.

"Please do not change the topic, my lady!"

"Like I've been saying, we don't have a problem. Even if that girl is the real deal, what can she do from prison? Besides, we have her staff." There was the whirring sound of the magic orb attaching to the staff, followed by the girl's entranced voice. "Hehehe. I got my hands on the perfect item right after securing a dog. What power it holds... Perhaps I should stop earning chump change now and become the real deal."

"Lady Angelica!"

Angelica? Nichika's eyes went round at that awfully familiar name. *Could it be? It couldn't, right?*

"Haah. I should have forcefully dragged you to Elminage instead of letting it come to this... All hell will break loose if His Lordship finds out."

The butler's melancholy grouching caused the pair hiding under the bed to bring a hand to their aching heads. Who would have imagined that the two people they had disguised themselves as to enroll in Elminage had stolen their identities outside of school? What an ironic coincidence.

Infuriated, the spoiled young lady stomped her feet. "Shut your trap! Who in their right mind would ever enroll in that boring school?!"

Nichika was trying to figure out the next best move, when Wolfie broke his silence and began snuffling.

"Huh. Could this smell be...?"

Nichika stiffened under the bed. Their wolf friend was an acknowledged genius at incorrectly reading the situation. He was extremely capable of barreling toward the bed, wagging his tail. Praying he didn't, she stayed perfectly still.

"Didn't I order you not to speak without permission?!" Angelica's critical voice

sliced the air, stopping the wolf from coming any closer. “You must not want to eat again!”

“Noooooooo! Anything but that! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Please fowgive meeee. I can’t take another day without foood!” Wolfie whimpered.

Nichika sympathized with the whimpering wolf. *Okay, so he was threatened into not running away.* The way Oswald pressed his hand against his forehead conveyed his internal oath to “whack some sense into that dork later.”

“Fine, fine,” Wolfie murmured, his bushy tail falling flat against the floor. “You’re Lady Angelica, he’s your butler Will, and I’m your pet Jon. I’ll fall in line, so feed meeee.”

The door swung open and Wolfie hastily leapt out of the way before it could hit him in the butt.

“Oooh, Holy Maiden!” a voice so loud everyone present went partially deaf thundered into the room. “Your performance was most splendid! Your dance was truly beautiful and graceful like a swan. And your singing sounded like it descended from the heavens!”

Plump, hairy legs swept into the room while a high-pitched voice layered exaggerated praises on the sham priestess. Butler Will quickly stepped in his way before he reached the bed.

“Mayor! You mustn’t! How could you enter a lady’s room without knocking —”

“My! You watched my performance? I’m so happy!” The spoiled princess upped the pitch of her voice to a sweet, girly tone and welcomed the mayor by taking him by the hand and seating him on the sofa. “Also, I’m not a saint, but the Spirit Priestess,” she corrected in an enticing voice.

“Hahaha! There’s no difference between the two. Moreover, Holy Maiden sounds even better.”

“Ufufufu!”

The “Holy Maiden” returned several steps back to the bed and muttered under her breath, “There’s a huge difference, pig.”

Wow, this girl is two-faced... Nichika discerned in just a few minutes of listening to her.

“Holy Maiden?” the mayor suspiciously called to her back.

“Yes, yes. How may I help you?” Angelica whirled toward him and responded in her nice-girl voice. “Oh my!” she proceeded to exclaim, withdrawing another step. “You mustn’t, Mayor! I could never accept such a large sum of money...”

“No, you must. This is a token of my gratitude for putting on such a wonderful show. It would greatly honor us if you accepted these funds for your holy journey to save the world.”

“Ohohoho! In that case, I must accept your kindness so as not to be rude.”

Nichika’s eyes bulged at the wad of cash she glimpsed exchanging hands. She glanced to her right; Oswald had dollar signs in his eyes as he looked her over. *Th-This guy isn’t possibly considering making me become an idol, is he?*

Unaware of the delicate psychological battle taking place under the bed, the village mayor rubbed his hands together. “And so I hope you will protect this village the same way you did Windy Village,” he hinted with a sticky smile.

“You’ve got it. Leave it to the Spirit Priestess. You can expect an extra serving of protection to be granted to this village the day the goddess is resurrected.”

How can she promise that? A bunch of dust balls kicked up off the unclean floor when Nichika slapped her hand on the ground. *Ah, crap.* It was too late for her to stop from sneezing louder than a backfiring car.

“AHHCHOOO!”

Silence fell over the room. Nichika thought she heard the sound of her blood draining.

“Wh-Who’s there?!” Angelica’s cry reverberated through the room.

Realizing the direness of the situation first, Oswald grabbed Nichika by the collar and fled from under the bed with her. As she was being dragged away, her eyes collided with a shocked Wolfie’s. An unfamiliar yellow collar had been snapped on his neck. He barked once and jumped up and down.

“Nichika? Master?!” he exclaimed.

“Wolfie!”

The tawny wolf ran toward them but was yanked back by the leash in the butler’s hand. Nichika considered roasting the leash off with a fireball, but her master stopped her.

“How did you escape from prison?! Capture them!” Angelica wailed, causing a purple crystal to swing at her chest. But before Nichika could confirm what it was, she was tossed out the window. Oswald’s simple order stole her whole attention.

“Fly!”

“Eeek!”

Nichika unleashed the broom from her belt out of sheer instinct. They were zooming into the starless night at full speed before anyone really knew what happened.

MASTER and apprentice landed in the grove they had escaped into earlier in a free fall. Oswald roughly jumped off the broom and an exhausted Nichika fell head over heels off the broom beside him.

Hair full of leaves, Nichika tried to calm her pounding heart as she took her grievances out on Oswald. “Haaa...haaah... Please quit it with the reckless requests like suddenly asking me to fly! For that matter, you can fly too, so why don’t you start carrying a broom on you!”

The man who was firmly against flying instantly shot down her proposal. “I refuse. I don’t like working up a sweat.”

“That’s not a good enough reason for you to piggyback off me!”

Their roles when it came to physical labor were always reversed.

Successfully shrinking her broom, Nichika looked back at the mansion to see if anyone was coming after them. Judging by the torches glowing to life, the mayor had formed a search group and wasn’t going to let them just get away.

“Why did you stop me?” she asked, hiding in the tree cover. “Wolfie could’ve easily gotten away if I fried that leash off him.”

“No, that would’ve ended horribly.”

“How come?” The discomfort in his voice got her to look at him.

Oswald unnaturally averted his gaze and scratched the back of his head as if he was guilty of something. “Did you see the yellow string around his neck?” he asked in a thin voice.

“That rugged collar?”

Since he brought it up, she thought back to what she saw around Wolfie’s neck. Some sort of box had been hanging under his snout.

Oswald leaned over to her as if they were about to have a secret conversation and clenched his fist in front of her eyes. Then he quickly opened it, flicking his fingers out from his thumb. “Explosives are stored in that box. With a flip of a switch it will go Ka-BOOM...”

“.....”

Nichika blinked. *If he knows how it works after looking at it for less than a second...* The instant she realized what his explanation meant, she thrust her finger at him and shouted, “YOU’RE THE FREAKIN’ INVENTOR!”

“Hey, pipe down! I never expected it to be used that way, either!” At a disadvantage, Oswald sullenly crossed his arms and began defending himself. “Just to be clear, that was never for sale. I made it as a hobby—”

“Please don’t make such items for the heck of it!”

What did he intend to use this creation that bordered a breach of ethics for? Nichika was really curious, but she regained her calm and redirected the conversation.

“How come it’s being used here if you never sold it?”

“That’s what I want to know. I had fun making it, but it just sat around collecting dust, so I gave two or three of them to Char when she took an interest...”

Both of them gasped then groaned at the same time. Didn’t Charlotte say that Angelica was one of her best customers back when she got the enrollment papers from her?

Nichika was the first to move on. She lifted her head with a determined look. “No use crying over spilt milk. Let’s just be happy we know what it is. We have to think positively.”

“Can’t we just leave him behind?”

“I’ll punch you if you really mean that.”

Nichika shot him a nasty look. Oswald was going to tell his apprentice he was just kidding but the words stuck on his tongue—someone was pushing their way through the shrubs.

“Uh, what’s wrong?” Nichika turned around toward where her master was looking and screamed at the person looming directly behind her. “Kyaaaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!” he screamed back. “I’m sorry! I am so sorry! I was not trying to frighten you. Please forgive me!”

The young man ran around her, dropped to his knees, and bowed with his head pressed against the dirt. She recognized him. “I’m an underling” screamed from his plain features, flat brown hair, and drab black robe.

“Umm, Will...was it?” Nichika ventured, remembering he was the butler Oswald had impersonated. The young man shook harder than a sapling during a tornado.

“Eeeep! How do you know my name? I-Is this what I think it is?! You plan to report back to your superiors to have any fakers arrested! Aaaaaaaaaah! I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I was forced into this by Her Ladyship! I had my doubts from the moment I left the mansion with her, but my parents have long since served hers and I couldn’t go against their orders. Please have mercy. Her Ladyship looks like a diva, but she’s actually an honest and good girl. Just that you might say she has let greed blind her. You could also say that she’s become desperate for money to support herself after running away from home. She absolutely isn’t looking down...too much...maybe just a little bit...quite a lot on the Spirit Priestess—no, no, no! She would never!”

“Oi, can I shut him up?” Oswald asked, growing markedly more irritated during Will’s never-ending apology.

“Things will only get worse if you do,” Nichika mildly rejected the idea and sighed. The butler repeatedly smacking his head against the dirt didn’t seem like he planned on shutting up any time soon.

NICHIKA feared if she let the butler be, he’d start banging his head against a nearby tree while rattling off his incessant apologies, so she let Oswald tie him up and sit him on the ground. She couldn’t shake the feeling that their positions as hunted and hunter had been flipped.

“Okay, let me make sure I have this right,” she said, going over what he told them. “Angelica started acting funny after she bought a purple crystal?”

The timid butler nodded his head like a broken bobblehead doll.

“Yeeessss, ma’am. I think it was somewhere outside Windy Village when a merchant in a white robe called us over and gave it to her for cheap. Ever since she accepted that pendant, Her Ladyship, while always having been a greedy person, became the ideal model for greed. She doesn’t bat an eyelash at scamming people, and even went so far as to use her looks to impersonate the Spirit Priestess...”

The more she heard the more suspicious she became. It matched up almost perfectly timing wise, so there was little reason to doubt his involvement.

“Wouldn’t you say that merchant was Phantom?” Nichika checked with Oswald beside her.

“I’d say so.”

Judging by everything he told her, the crystal was most likely “greed”. Nichika was racking her brain on how to destroy it when the shouts and angry footsteps of the search party came too close for comfort.

“Where are you?! Stop your meaningless resistance and give yourselves up!”

“Uh-oh.”

Nichika and Oswald fled from the spoiled young lady’s high-pitched demands. Several minutes later they heard a loud “Oh dear! How could this have ever happened?! Do you all see this? Only foul cowards would do something so

debase as tie up my attendant! I won't let them get away with this. I shall punish them with the power of the gods!"

Aaaah, geez!

In any event, it didn't look like they would get to sleep under a roof tonight. Nichika kicked the dirt to vent the anger she couldn't take out anywhere else.

AROUND that same time, another incident was taking place on the northern continent, far from Brownie Village. Far above the northern continent, to be precise.

A stunning black dragon flew over the sea of clouds. The boy, lying back on the dragon's scales, exhaled white puffs of air as he drew the sides of his hood together.

"Uggh, sooo cold. Good grief, I hate the cold. Oh, but a hot spring would be awesome here. A hot spring where I can watch the snow fall! Now that sounds nice! I want one!" the boy exclaimed, rolling around on the dragon's back. "That settles it! Let's blow up a water vein and bathe in a hot spring on our way home, Vadnir."

"Vuuu?" the dragon whinnied.

"It feels like heaven. In my world even the monkeys go in hot springs. It's not that strange for a dragon to bathe in one. Hot springs are the greatest, I mean it. Boy, wouldn't it be great if portable hot springs existed?"

The blue moon's light reflected off the shiny black scales and rippled along the surface as the dragon flapped his wings.

The black dragon rumbled a warning to his master. Phantom sat up and discovered nine white, shining birds flying beyond the dragon's snout. Their wingspan was wider than the black dragon's, and their dead eyes appeared to be made of snow.

"Are those guardians? Figures they won't let us have a pleasant flight into their space. Shouldn't expect any less of the country that closed off its borders," Phantom muttered then happily ordered, "All right! Get 'em, Vani! It's

flamethrower time! Haha!”

The black dragon exhaled black flames from his wide-open mouth. Three of the birds instantly evaporated. Two that barely flew out of the way disintegrated in the heat waves.

“Oooh? You’ve got a four times damage bonus for being opposite element types!”

The hit birds lost their shape and fell beneath the clouds. However, the rest didn’t show any emotion as they dispassionately attacked the black dragon. From the look of it, they weren’t living creatures, but attack dolls made of snow and ice.

“Tch,” Phantom pouted when he realized it. “We can’t collect any dark mana if they don’t have a soul.”

Holding onto the circling black dragon with one hand, he raised his other hand. A giant ring of fire spun at his fingertips.

“Well, I oughta get serious once in a while... Suck this!”

The released fire ring grew to ten times the size and minced up the remaining birds in one go. The boy openly rejoiced over crushing the guardians.

“Woohoo! I win!”

Standing up to brag about his victory exposed him to the strong winds, and he crouched back down shivering. With one hand he pinched his hood together, and fished through his belt pouch with his other.

“Aggh. Stinkin’ cold air. Let’s wrap things up lickety-split! Uhm, I think it should be around here.”

He pulled out a fist-sized crystal and stroked the surface before casually throwing it off the side of the dragon. The thick snow absorbed the crystal until it was out of sight. Lips curling into a sneer, the boy whispered in the direction of the white land far, far below him.

“Once upon a time, White Country fought equally against the entire southern continent. Actually, they were the superior fighters. They closed their borders and refuse to interact with other nations, but I’m willing to bet some deeply

rooted desires are brimming under the surface.”

This was his last magic crystal. Phantom had been spreading them along the route he assumed the girl would follow, but this particular crystal was the one he wanted her to come across for sure. He knew she would have to come here eventually.

“She’s destroyed wrath, sloth, and jealousy. Four more to go...that girl is pretty persistent too,” Phantom said, thinking of his target.

The visage of that easy-to-deceive-too-good-for-her-own-good girl flashed behind his mind’s eye. He didn’t have a personal grudge against her, but she was guilty of the same crime the moment she joined arms with Ini.

The boy stared at his hands. The amusement that was ever-present in his voice gave way to the first hint of anguish he felt on the inside.

“There’s no need for a world that threw me away.”

The black dragon whinnied with concern for his young master. Phantom snapped out of it and hugged the dragon’s neck.

“Sorry. I love you, Vadrir. Come on, let’s get outta here before we’re discovered. Oh, and take me to a clearing without any foot traffic. Let’s dig up a hot spring. Hot spring, here we come!”

The black dragon sped up, relieved his master returned to his cheerful self. He plunged into the clouds while secretly looking forward to this hot spring thing his master spoke so highly of.

Chapter 15: Girl, Becomes a Hero

THE sun poked out from the east. Squinting against the dazzling morning light, Nichika sat up in the shrubs she had made into her bed. Groaning, she stretched and popped each aching limb.

“Oww, everything hurts... Gosh darn it, my clothes are drenched.”

Morning dew weighed down her clothes with a sticky, icky wetness. Today was refreshingly sunny, the complete opposite from yesterday. A few white clouds drifted along the enchanting light purple dawn sky.

“Oswald? Wake up. It’s morning.”

A few feet away, a man sleeping on the same waterproof cloth slowly sat up. He always had a terrible case of bedhead whenever he woke up. After staring sleepily at his glasses, he put them on upside down.

Too tired to poke fun at him, Nichika gave him sound advice. “Why don’t you take them off? You’ll look different from yesterday.”

Nichika finished tying her hair in a high ponytail to match the loose tunic and plain shorts she wore instead of a skirt and blouse. At a glance, she looked like a boy.

Oswald stripped off his black coat—she quickly averted her eyes because he did it right in front of her—and changed into what all the village men were wearing.

They left their clothes out to dry in an inconspicuous spot and set out. Last night they were driven away from the village into the nearby forest. Oswald, fully awake now, shook his head and stretched. Yawning, he started the strategy meeting.

“Come up with any ideas overnight?”

“None. We just have to destroy Angelica’s crystal, but the village is on the lookout for us, so I doubt we can get close enough even with the Elusive Ball.”

It'd be perfect if she had a way to snipe the crystal, but Nichika was only skilled at wide and close range magic. Sniping would be extra difficult without the staff to offset her mistakes. It would be tragic if she roasted the girl to death, so that option needed to be taken off the board.

Sighing, Nichika put the same question to Oswald. "And did you come up with any plans? Trickery is your forte."

"If sniping is out of the picture, how about persuasion? Or having that butler steal for us?"

Angelica's haughty laughter and a fainthearted, cowering Will crossed both their minds. Why couldn't either of them envision him succeeding? Unable to shake his unease with that plan, Oswald decided to approach it from a different perspective.

"The main point is that we just need to expose that priss as a fake and prove you're the real deal, right? Dragging her credibility through the mud is a good option... I've done it plenty of times before."

Nichika didn't think he should be bragging about how he's good at ruining people, but she had experienced how badly he turned such comments back on her too many times for comfort, and discerned that silence was the best policy.

Oswald rubbed his chin between his fingers. "We don't have enough cards to stack the deck—what's that?"

Slight vibrations shook the ground. They saw a herd of brown monsters passing the foot of the hill.

"Are those wild boars?" Nichika asked, surprised to see a familiar animal. "That's a huge group..."

"Dodongagas," Oswald corrected. "They're an unintelligent monster that thoughtlessly charges after the one in front...and they have a certain habit." He paused with a conniving smirk. Whenever he looked like a boy who came up with an ingenious prank it never bode well for her. Meeting her expectations, he announced his less-than-friendly strategy. "I've got it. Let's redirect that herd into the village."

"You've gotta be kidding!"

“Dodongagas have a habit of charging after red. We’ll use that to our advantage.”

Nichika had very mixed feelings about how she was gradually learning how to predict what her master was plotting. Setting aside her horror, she confirmed the finer details with him.

“Is that safe? How many people will get hurt?”

“A field or two might be ruined, but they’ll just have to forgive us for it. Better than them continuing to be scammed by that fake Holy Maiden.”

Oswald’s plan was to lure the dodongagas into the village’s fields with a red cloth. No match for a stampede, the villagers would rely on the “Spirit Priestess” to run off the unruly monsters. But the girl they adored was nothing more than a sheltered little princess. Once the villagers lost trust in Angelica who wouldn’t be able to do a thing, Nichika would appear and valiantly drive away the monsters. Then Angelica would be tossed in jail within the hour.

But Nichika couldn’t hide her apprehension with his plan. And she had this nagging feeling they were forgetting something important.

“You think it will go that well?” she asked, frustrated she couldn’t remember what they were forgetting. “To start, how are you even going to get your hands on a red cloth?”

“We’ve already got the perfect ingredients.”

“Ah,” she uttered after he said it.

Brimming with confidence, her master enacted the plan. “We’re off to the village. It’s time to manipulate the rumor mill.”

MORNING began at the crack of dawn for Brownie Village. Life in the village revolved around working in the fields, as could be said of most farming villages in the countryside. The main street bustled accordingly with the time of day.

The baker’s wife stepped outside to put out the open sign and began gossiping with the shoemaker’s wife who came out to do the same thing. These ladies gossiped whenever they saw each other in the morning and at night.

“Did you hear? They say some no-good travelers interrupted the Holy Maiden’s concert yesterday.”

“The ones rumored to have been tossed in jail?”

“Yes, the very same. Well, wait until you hear this. I heard they broke out of jail and ran away yesterday! And then get this...” the baker’s wife giggled and lowered her voice to a secretive whisper. “What do you think they found when they finally checked inside the cell? Yvonne’s husband sound asleep without his pants on!”

“No way! How did that happen?”

“That’s what we all want to know! What a joke.”

A boy wearing a hat had appeared in front of the women while they were enjoying their gossip. They didn’t recognize him from the village, but the face shadowed under the large cap was so adorable it immediately washed away their wariness.

“Good morning. Are you out on an errand, lad?” the shoemaker’s wife asked.

“Good morning, ma’am! I sure am. Boss sent me to handle the shopping. Can I buy two pairs of sturdy rain boots from you?”

“Rain boots, is it? I certainly have some in stock. What size? Are they for you, lad?”

The shoemaker’s wife fetched two pairs of rain boots, one for a man and one for a boy. She grew suspicious as she wrapped them and put them in a bag. “Why are you buying rain boots when the weather is so nice? I have plenty of other shoes available if you like.”

The boy paid for the shoes and confidently shook his head. “The boots are good, thank you. My boss is amazing at predicting the weather. As I understand it, there will be a great downpour just past noon no matter how good that day’s weather is if the morning songbird chirps slowly three times in a row, followed by two fast chirps. You ladies best prepare yourselves for a downpour. Bye!”

The boy bowed and ran off. The wives exchanged looks and changed what goods they were going to lay out for the day. They both returned inside their

shops and spoke to their husbands.

“Darling, I heard it’s going to rain this afternoon. Hot stuffed rolls might sell well.”

“Honey, we have to break out our stock of rain boots from the back.”

KLEHNA leaves could be severely damaged by heavy rainfall right before harvest, drastically reducing their commercial value. Therefore, it was common sense in Brownie Village to secure the leaves under row covers whenever it was about to rain.

In one terraced field, two people pinned down a thick white cloth while looking up at the fairly clear sky.

“Is it really gonna rain?”

“Ma said so. The baker’s wife had a famous traveling fortune teller predict the weather for her and he said it’s absolutely gonna pour just past noon today.”

Rumors tend to become exaggerated as they’re passed around, but that was especially true in this village with nothing to talk about. Everyone ended up thinking that the baker’s wife paid a large sum to a fortune teller that morning and had the weather predicted.

The boy from earlier was naturally Nichika disguised as a boy following the scenario Oswald gave her. Such a simple little fib moved an entire village into taking action. Rumors are not to be underestimated.

The villagers wiped their foreheads when they had almost finished laying the row covers over the fields.

“Man, it’s hot and humid.”

“What did ya expect? We’ve been gettin’ some strange weather since last night.”

The two villagers stretched out the rest of the thick cloth while avoiding the mud at their feet.

“Uh? What is that?” one of the villagers asked.

A horde of brown was scurrying over the top of the hill. These monsters were commonly seen around here, but the problem was that they were charging right into the terraced fields!

“Oh spirits! It’s the dodongagas!”

ANGELICA was enjoying a sweet dream under soft and comfy blankets. It was her favorite dream where she elegantly drank tea while handsome men waited on her hand and foot.

“Lady Angelica, these are the rare sugar cookies I ordered for you from a faraway land.”

“Oh my. Thank you.”

The man with raven-black hair held out the silver platter from behind her chair and smiled. He kind of resembled the man who had escaped from prison yesterday. That man was so handsome he was being wasted on that homely self-proclaimed priestess.

I’ll entice him into serving me if I get my hands on him again. I’m not satisfied unless I get everything I want. I have the beauty and talent necessary to make that happen.

Reveling in her greed, Angelica pinched a cookie between her fingers and returned the offer to the handsome man. “Would you like one, too?”

“Thank you very much, my lady. However, I much prefer this sugar...” He gently grabbed her chin and tipped it up. His perfectly chiseled face leaned closer.

“Oh, we mustn’t...”

A whirlwind romance about to begin—was promptly shattered by a thick accented voice shouting in her ears, ripping her from dreamland.

“HOLY MAIDEEEEEEEEENNN!”

Angelica shot up in bed and glowered at the door. The blood rushed to her head when she realized it was the mayor pounding away.

“Stop that racket! What do you want at this spirit forsaken hour?! Eesh!”

Forgetting to mask her true personality, she unlocked the door. The messily sobbing mayor tumbled into the room, fell to his knees, wrapped around her legs, and started begging.

“Oh, Holy Maiden, please save us! Monsters! Dodongagas!”

“Huh?”

Will stepped into the room behind the mayor and uncomfortably reported, “It seems that a large number of dodongagas are tearing up the klehna fields near the village gates.”

ANGELICA hastily changed and came to the foot of the terraced garden just behind the mansion. Looking up, she saw dodongagas running through the yet-to-be-harvested klehna fields, just as Will told her. They numbered in the dozens. The mayor had been lying in wait for her outside while rubbing his hands raw.

“Please get rid of them this instant!” he bellowed, his facial muscles spasming. “If the damage spreads any further the village won’t make a profit this year! My salary will go up in dust!”

“All right already. I just have to get rid of them, yeah? Then get rid of them I shall.”

Irked at having been dragged out of bed, Angelica held up the staff she stole from the homely girl. And, without much thought, shot off her best spell.

“FLAME BURST!”

The magic orb shined brightly on top of the staff. There was a sudden recoil effect, followed by every ounce of magic being ripped from within her.

“Wha...?”

An explosive fire burst shot from the staff while she recoiled in shock. Uncontrollable magic scorched everything in sight. Angelica fell into a complete panic over the unexpected power behind her weak spell.

“Kyaaaaaaah! KYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

“Wh-What in the spirits’ name are you doing, Holy Maiden?!”

The surrounding temperature rose rapidly, and the moisture in the air began to evaporate. The klehna leaves were naturally steamed, and the pigment started to transfer to the cloth laid on top.

The mayor squeezed the sides of his face in his hands and wailed like it was the end of the world. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAH! Our merchandise!”

“Lady Angelica! Please stop!”

“I can’t!”

Butler Will was begging behind her, but the red glowing magic orb was hungrily siphoning magic from Angelica and transforming it into spell fodder.

BOOM!

The situation just got a whole lot worse. The dodongagas were further agitated by the white cloths being dyed bright-red. Their numbers tripled beyond what anyone present could handle. The mayor’s cracking voice peeled across the klehna fields.

“HOLY MAIDEEEEEEEN!”

MEANWHILE, master and apprentice arrived in the village to enact their plan and were rendered speechless by the disastrous situation afoot. The plan was to secretly steam the field, dyeing the white cloth red, but they hadn’t accounted for Angelica casting fire magic before they got there. At last, Nichika remembered the important piece of information that slipped their minds.

“Oh yeah, Angelica can use magic too...”

“While I can’t comment on her magic potential, the real Angelica Rubens is notorious for hating anything to do with learning.”

Headmaster Grindieda’s comment repeated in Nichika’s head.

Oswald covered his eyes with his hand. “Say that sooner...”

“Doesn’t matter now! What are we going to do about this?!”

By all appearances, the damage was severer than anticipated. “This wasn’t supposed to happen” was written all over her master’s hard face.

THE growing herd of dodongagas charged in different directions as a group, their rampaging exceeding what the villagers could fend off. Seeing how dire the situation had become, Angelica grabbed her butler’s arm and raised the white flag.

“We’re getting outta here, Will!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaat?!”

Will wasn’t the only one whose eyes peeled open. The mayor, who had been pointlessly flailing his arms like a windmill, turned on her.

“H-Ho-Holy Maiden? Are you going to forsake us? Don’t even joke about it!”

“Please don’t ask the impossible of me! Not even someone as great as I can stand up against that ferocious horde!”

“You can’t abandon us! Isn’t it your duty as the Holy Maiden to save the lost and suffering people?!”

“Eeei! Let go of me already, you old fart!”

“Holy Maideeeeen!”

Snapping, Angelica accidentally let the cat out of the bag. “Oh my spirits! Your whole ‘Holy Maiden’ ‘Holy Maiden’ tirade is grating! Stop ragging on me! I am not your Spirit Priestess—ah!”

She threw a hand up to cover her mouth, but it was too late. The mayor and all the villagers who came to help heard her confession loud and clear. Only the DODODO rumbling of the dodongagas running around echoed through the unnatural quiet.

“Oho...Ohohoho! Just kidding...”

Sweating like a ton of bricks, Angelica tried to scamper away like a crab. Will sighed and lifted his head to explain everything—his eyes flew wide open and he let out a warning cry.

“Lady Angelica!”

“Wha?”

Angelica felt a sudden rush of air and turned toward it. The herd of monsters was descending the hill at a furious pace. Their deranged, soulless eyes were dead set on her.

“Uwaaaaaaaah! Run awaaaaaaay!”

The mayor and all the villagers scattered like baby wolf spiders off their mother’s back. Angelica didn’t move though. She couldn’t move. For the first time in her life she was facing death. This was different from the straw dolls she fought during magic lessons back home. Palpable bloodlust prickled her skin, knocking her weakly onto her bottom. She clamored to her feet, but was hit by a wave of exhaustion from her magic being drained. Dizziness crashed over her, causing her legs to buckle.

Oh no. My legs...won’t budge...

Pushed to the brink of despair, Angelica let out a shrill scream that sounded like a curtain ripping in half. “Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

She threw up her arms and braced to be trampled underfoot, but she was instead wrapped in a gust of wind that was better suited to a spring storm. She slammed her eyes shut against the torrential winds whipping up her hair, and heard a noble voice ring throughout the land.

“O great current that rushes over the land, come to me! Sylphide!”

Surprised, Angelica forced open her eyes just as a girl landed protectively in front of her with spread open arms. Shock coursed through her to see it was the girl she had tossed in jail yesterday.

“Y-You are—”

“Stand!” she commanded. “Hold out my staff. Now!”

The dodongagas forced away by the gale had fallen back in line and were barreling toward them again. At Nichika’s command, Angelica stood and held up the staff. But her hands visibly shook. She screamed and tried to bolt when the girl gently covered her trembling hands.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do it with you.”

She glanced to her side; the girl’s clear eyes were dyed a deep shade of green as she gave a reassuring nod. Just looking into those eyes told Angelica what she must do.

Both girls planted their feet and braced for the magic recoil. Corresponding magical power was drawn from them both and mixed into the magic orb.

“BLOW THEM AWAY!”

“ROAST THEM!”

The moment they chanted the spell, the world opened up before Angelica. She unleashed the magic within, experiencing an exhilaration she had never known before.

“FLAME TORNADO!” the girls roared as one.



THE combined magic unleashed by the Spirit Priestess and the fake Holy Maiden manifested tremendous power that succeeded in repelling the dodongagas. Nichika felt bad for using the monsters in their plan, but not too bad since she hoped it might make them think twice about ruining the fields again since she heard that the pesky creatures made a habit of tearing up their harvests. Once things settled down outside, the captured Wolfie burst out of the mansion.

“Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah! MASTER! I knew you would come for me!”

KLONK!

“Owwie!” he yelped.

The elated wolf leapt onto his master and was met by a fist bonking him on the head.

“A squirrel has more intelligence than you! Who in their right mind blindly follows a stranger offering them treats?!” Oswald scolded, removing the cover on the back of the detonator. He tore off the small magic crystal powering it, and the yellow loop around Wolfie’s neck fell off with a hiss.

Butler Will admired his handiwork from the side. “Ooh! Spectacular. Leave it to a witch to figure out how the detonator works at a glance. Did that disarm the explosives?”

“Y-Yeah. Almost all of these things have the same mechanism.” Unwilling to fess up that this was his invention, Oswald dubiously averted his eyes. He bent the circuitry until it was rendered useless and threw it away. Then he turned to watch the unusual scene unfolding in the noisy klehna field.

“What in Arcanshiel is the meaning of all this, Holy Maiden—no, you’re no maiden. Who are you?”

The mayor mourned in front of the burnt klehna field, but his anger was being completely ignored. For Angelica, the one at fault, was sticking to Nichika like glue and didn’t register anything anyone else said to her. She spoke to the hero who rescued her in a charmed, sickeningly sweet voice.

“Aaah, Lady Nichika... the moment you landed dashing in front of me has been forever burnt into my memory.”

“Er...” Nichika forced a smile. She was at a loss with how to handle this situation. The fancy priss was gazing ardently at her face from a distance that entirely disregarded personal space.

“The electrical current that surged through me when our hands touched snatched my heart!” Angelica continued, ignoring that she was making her hero uncomfortable. “This is a first that I, Angelica Rubens, have felt this way...”

“How are you going to repay us?!” The mayor finally exploded when he saw her cheeks turning pink. “You were never the Holy Maiden, were you?!”

“Eesh! Silence, outsider! It’s extremely rude of you to interrupt my love talk with Lady Nichika! Go away!”

Her boundless arrogance managed to finally push the mayor over the edge. Turning dark red, he started swinging his arms around. “How can you act like that after devastating the village’s fields?! I’ve had enough! I’ll do whatever it takes to find your parents and have them take responsibility!”

“Go right ahead.” With a snap of her fingers, butler Will rushed over.

“You summoned, my lady?”

“Will, contact Daddy and tell him to pay this mayor whatever price he asks. I’ll buy it all, as is.”

“Excuse me?” The mayor’s mouth fell open.

“I think it would benefit us both if we built one of our family inns on this burnt field,” she continued with a fearless smile.

“Excuse me?”

Ignoring the mayor who could only parrot his own words, Angelica laid out her “Brownie Village Inn Town Plan” at length.

“I’ve had my eye on this village as the perfect stopover point for travelers heading to the bustling Windy Village. I’m happy to hire the villagers as staff, and travelers staying at the inn will spend money in the village during their stay... Why, we could rake in an even greater profit if we come up with a local

specialty. I know! Mayor, you have excellent quality klehna leaves here. Why not expand from selling just the leaves to producing your own dyed products locally?”

“M-Manufacturing would require significant capital—”

Angelica’s face lit up and she heavily promoted herself as a merchant’s daughter. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll go to my father and have the Rubens family provide total backing for this project. Let’s start with a small dye factory. We can expand once we see how well it’s received.”

“R-Rubens?! Y-You mean the multibillionaires?!”

At last, the mayor realized that this arrogant princess wasn’t a Holy Maiden, but, in some senses, a more valuable person than a saint. The news nearly knocked his feet out from under him. But then he narrowed his eyes on her and pointed at her face.

“Are you trying to con me again?”

“How rude!”

Oswald stepped up to Nichika, who was zoning out during their negotiations. The newly freed Wolfie was with him. Relieved to be reunited at last, Nichika crouched and hugged his fluffy chest.

“Wolfie! I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever. How are you feeling? Did they hurt you?”

“Nichika! I’ve been dying to see you.”

He seemed well enough because they made sure to feed him three meals a day. Actually, he seemed a little fatter since the last time she hugged him.

Turning a suspicious eye on him, she asked, “...Did you gain weight?”

“Dehehe! I could eat my fill of rib and yam-filled omelets and steak as long as I didn’t disobey them!”

Did Wolfie willingly follow them for the food? Nichika suspected.

Meanwhile, Angelica and the mayor seemed to have come to an agreement. Apparently, the construction of the inn would begin in a month’s time.

“She’s got some mad business skills...” Oswald commented, both impressed and staggered by the news.

“Not interested in this kind of money making?” Nichika asked the man who, though he didn’t show it much lately, was quite money hungry.

“Don’t even joke about it,” he replied, his face souring. “You can only make this kind of deal once you have plenty of capital and connections. Oh! Hold on. I can get just that if someone marries into that fancy lady’s family...”

“Whaaat?!”

“Okay, go get her!”

“Me?!”

Oswald threw Nichika in front of Angelica.

“Oh my!” she exclaimed, her face glowing as she cupped her hands around Nichika’s. “Lady Nichika, please wait just a little longer. I can get ready to go soon as I finish handing this project over to someone from my family.”

“Ready to go...where?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” the reckless princess responded with a smile. “I shall accompany you on your journey. I will look after your every little need and care for your body and soul. And then someday...dehe...hehehe...guhehehehe.”

A chill scraped down Nichika’s spine before the drooling, enraptured princess. She frantically came up with a reason to stop her. “W-Wait! Wait! Who will run the inn?”

“I am merely suggesting the idea to Daddy. I plan to leave the rest to the professionals.”

“It’s too dangerous for you to come!”

“Please leave the danger to me. I shall burn everything in your way with my passionate flames! Also,” Angelica switched tactics and began listing off the benefits of taking her along, “if you so desire it, my family will pull all our resources to support you in every way. We will prepare the finest carriages for comfortable travel, arrange all the accommodations in each area, and set up bodyguard units when necessary.”

“Ugh...” Nichika’s resolve wavered a little at how nice Angelica’s offer sounded. But she dissuaded herself and put her hand on the shoulder of the girl who wouldn’t stop selling herself. “Thank you, Angelica. Your support means a lot to me. But I believe this journey is one that I have to walk with my own two feet, see with my eyes, and hear with my ears. I mustn’t overlook even the tiniest of oddities. That’s why I can’t accept your offer.”

Angelica looked like she was about to cry after her gentle yet firm rejection. After a few moments, she answered with a torn smile.

“You are awe inspiring... And that is exactly what it means to be the Spirit Priestess, isn’t it?”

“Aha...ahahaha. I don’t think I inspire all that much.”

“With that said, you will allow me to accompany you, won’t you?!”

“ARGH!”

Nichika felt like banging her head against the wall. Conversations with this girl always went in circles. Pulling herself together, she went with a different proposal.

“I have an idea! How about we do this?”

“**HOW** it pains me to bid you adieu, but I know I will see you again soon, Lady Nichika!”

They were standing at the crossroads outside Brownie Village. Nichika returned Angelica’s childlike big wave with a small flick of her wrist.

“I promise I will absolutely, positively come running to you the day I finish up my studies at Elminage!” she declared with a sunny smile.

Nichika’s one condition was that she properly attended the magic school she had run from.

The young lady was quite dissatisfied at first, but she changed her mind when Will told her she wouldn’t make a good traveling companion if she ran away from things she didn’t like. The butler’s passionate appeal was a sight to behold—he was desperate not to let this chance to straighten her out slip by.

After walking for a while, Oswald looked back and reported what he saw. “She’s still waving.”

“Don’t look back. Don’t look back. I’ll only look forward.”

Nichika kept walking, chanting like she was saying the slogan of youth, and finally breathed once they reached a spot where they were out of sight.

“Not even I would want to bring a girl like that along...”

Angelica wasn’t a bad person by any means, but Nichika’s instincts yelled that she would become a worse troublemaker than Oswald. Her tremendous wealth and influence made her even more unmanageable than an eccentric witch. Still, she felt guilty.

“Think Elminage will survive...?” Oswald muttered.

Aaaah! Headmaster Grindieda, Melissa, I am so sorry! Nichika mentally fell on her knees apologizing to them. She felt bad for pushing Angelica on them, but she needed them to look after her. Headmaster Grindieda did accept her into Elminage, after all. Washing her hands of the situation with that thought, Nichika sighed, a small smile tugging at her lips.

“But I’m glad it all worked out in the end.”

As she walked, Nichika held up the magic crystal that continued to emanate a bewitching gleam. Angelica gave it to her as goodbye gift. “Greed” was written on it, just as she suspected. She threw it in the air and hit it with a fireball. The shattered pieces crumbled as they fell and the wind swept the dust away. One, two, three, four; Nichika counted on her fingers and tilted her head.

“Does that mean we have three left to go?”

“Let’s go! Let’s go! High and low!” Wolfie hummed, prancing past them.

A sudden gust of wind fluttered Nichika’s deep crimson cape. It was a prototype in a new clothing line dyed with klehna given to her by the mayor as an apology for tossing them in jail. Her happy acceptance of it was met with Oswald’s disdain.

“You’re just being used in that priss’s marketing scheme,” he said, seeing through their ploy. “Do you want to be walking advertisement for them?”

“Don’t care. I love the color.”

Every time she passed through a town or village, her equipment and memories increased.

Will I remember everything once I get back home? I don’t want to forget a single thing, she wholeheartedly prayed.

However, her prayer was easily overturned in the next village. She was about to learn certain events were better off forgotten, and as soon as possible.

Afterword

HELLO, author Roka Sayuki here. I'm thrilled to be meeting you again in the afterword like this.

My favorite scene in Volume 2 is the exciting broom race hosted by Windy Village. It's still difficult for us to fly in the real world, but we are free to spread our wings in our imagination. So I wrote this scene hoping you could enjoy the flight with Nichika.

Also, after rereading my own story, Oswald really comes across as a bad guy. He runs as soon as there's trouble, he doesn't mince words, and he's a far cry from your typical shoujo novel hero. But he offers advice and shows concern in his own awkward way. He is slowly growing as a person, so I hope you will continue to watch over his growth and developing relationship with Nichika. Deep down he's a nice guy; he just enjoys teasing his apprentice.

And now, without further ado, here's a sneak preview of the excitement coming up in Volume 3!

Remember that hint about an upcoming event Nichika will want forever erased from her memory? Ready for a slight spoiler alert? "Lust" is the next magic crystal lying in wait for her.

And this time our favorite brown fluffball who didn't get as many scenes in Volume 2 will be the star of his own arc! Why did this always cheerful mood maker leave his hometown and become Oswald's familiar? Wolfie's past will finally be revealed!

Things are going to get even more exciting when a certain hyper girl barges back into the story, the Great Earth Spirit's shocking form is discovered, and Lambert catches up to our favorite master-apprentice duo. And there will even be certain changes to Nichika and Oswald's relationship... Please look forward to one of the most entertaining volumes yet!

It's thanks to all of you saying that you love this story that I was able to put out another volume. Thank you so much.

Please continue to support me!

Roka Sayuki

2.21.2020



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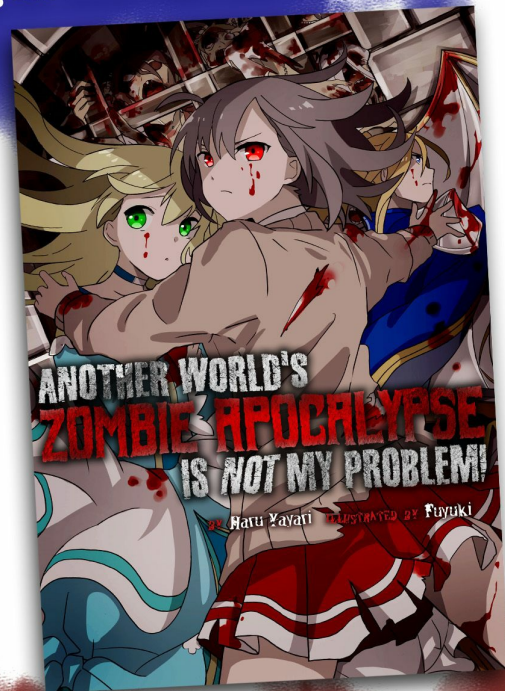
"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."

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