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Illustration by Itaru

THE ECCENTRIC MASTER AND THE FAKE LOVER

Volume 1

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The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover

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Act 1: Welcome to a New World

Chapter 1: Girl, Plummets

A pink world was spinning round and round.

A girl was flying in a straight line, toward somewhere, within its dreamlike scenery. Absently, she wondered how she had ended up in this situation. If she remembered correctly...she had found a bizarre street on her way home from school.

The backstreet was the same as any found in a residential area—she'd otherwise never taken a second look if she hadn't heard the rich notes of a bewitching singing voice. Drawn to the sound, she had turned in to the back street, when suddenly the ground gave away. She only comprehended that she was falling when her stomach lurched as if rapidly descending a steep hill on a roller coaster.

The next thing she knew, she was free-falling in a pink world. At first, it had felt as if she were plummeting, but she gradually became aware that it was more like she was being pulled toward something—toward somewhere.

But where?

“UWAAAAAH?!”

Fear struck the girl like lightning as she realized something was pulling her toward the pink world like a magnet. The roller-coaster sensation of abrupt descending and ascending was happening at such breakneck speed she thought it might really break her neck. One thing was certain—her life would end in a pancake mess if she crashed into anything.

“SOMEBODY! HELP MEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!”

CRASH!

“AEUGH!”

Terror surged through her at the same time she slammed into something. After having let out a yelp unbefitting of a young woman, she remained limply

sprawled out on the ground for some time. Was she...dead?

“.....”

She couldn't move for a whole minute after her crash landing. She kept her eyes pressed shut.

The solid object beneath her seemed to be the ground. She was pressed against something soft yet rough, some spots rugged and scraggy. Were the chirping noises she heard that of birds? Wings flapped in the flurry of a sudden takeoff.

Is this a forest?

She counted to ten, taking deep breaths to confirm her lungs still worked. She was breathing in thick forest smells she'd never encountered before, and they filled her chest to the brim, which only further stirred her confusion.

Not wanting to move her limbs yet, she lifted her stiff neck from the ground and cautiously cracked her eyes. The woods spread out before her were sparkling.

“You've gotta be kidding me...”

The movement hadn't been accompanied by pain, so it didn't seem like she was seriously injured anywhere. She sat up. Her nose stung from where she had rammed it into the ground, but she didn't feel much pain aside from that. It could be nothing other than a miracle, considering the speed at which she had fallen.

For a while, she just sat there in a daze. By all appearances, the forest was the definition of tranquil. A gentle breeze swayed the shapes of the soft shadows from the sunlight shining down through the trees and played with her shoulder-length hair.

“I-Impossible. This can't be happening,” she muttered to herself.

The forest was devoid of people and deprived of human activity. It didn't matter if it was only her own voice, she desperately wanted to hear someone.

Slightly stronger winds stirred up the trees, making all sorts of rustling noises. To a girl from an urban city, being inside a forest was the same as being in

another world.

Though, for that matter, was she even in Japan anymore? The luscious, dark green colors all around her appeared out of the world she knew, but she couldn't recognize any of the thick vegetation thriving in abundance. The closest thing she could map her location to was the deep forests of Northern Europe she had once seen on TV.

I sure hope there aren't any wolves or bears around...

The girl shuddered as she imagined getting attacked by a ferocious wild animal or passing out in the bizarre forest from starvation. She quickly rubbed the tears from her eyes with the sleeve of her school uniform and jumped to her feet to shake away the unsettling images dancing around her head.

"I-I'm overthinking it! There aren't any signs of a large animal passing through here recently, and I'm sure if I walk around I'll eventually find the exit. I know I'll be home in a few hours and my dinner will be waiting for me. Miiko will be waiting for me too. I have to hurry home."

It's okay. I'll definitely be fine, she reassured, mustering her courage to take the first step forward...only to have the wind taken right out of her sails. The loafers she should've been wearing had disappeared from her feet at some point. Nervous about traipsing around a forest with nothing more than thin dark-blue knee-high socks on her feet, she remained rooted to the ground.

"....."

Uneasiness over her future prospects had left her without words.

Did my shoes fall off in that weird pink space?

She sighed in resignation and began walking again, trying her best to step on the softest undergrowth.

TROUBLE found her in but a few minutes.

"Ugh."

Since she had been driven to a corner due to the critical situation, her sleeping sixth sense had awoken with the adrenaline coursing through her. And

now, an indescribable sense of something foreboding had stopped her in her tracks.

Put simply, something was in the thicket before her.

“.....”

Some four-legged animal was moving through the other side of the brush. The crunching of leaves and twigs sounded loud in her ears. Her heartbeat accelerated to match, and sweat was forming in her clenched fists.

“...!”

While instinctively retreating, she had accidentally stepped on a fallen branch. SNAP. Whatever creature was several meters away must’ve heard the noise too.

Faster than she could think, the girl spun on her heel and sprinted in the opposite direction. Now wasn’t the time to remember that she had never been a fast runner.

“ACK!”

Either her panicked mental state or the fact she had no shoes on had worked against her, because her foot caught on one of the many roots crawling across the ground between the trees, and she fell flat on her face! Her grazed arms stung with pain, but the sensation promptly flew out the window the moment a shadow landed with a thud on a massive tree root in front of her.

A giant brown wolf had found her. Panting, its sharp, glinting golden eyes held her captive. Its deep, menacing growl paralyzed her as she scrambled to get back on her feet.

“N-No...stay away!”

The brown wolf lowered itself into a pouncing position. Its lips curled back, baring its white fangs all the way to the gums.

Her futile attempt to escape had ended in vain—the wolf lunged for her. She slammed her eyes shut, bracing for the impact of teeth sinking into her flesh.

But, no matter how much time had passed, the pain never came.

“...Eh?”

The arms she had braced in front of her head felt lukewarm for some reason. Nervously opening an eye, she found the wolf licking the cuts she had sustained when she tripped. Then, as she was watching the wolf in a daze, something even more unbelievable happened.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to scare you. I mean it. I’m not lying, okay?”

She surveyed the area for where the apologetic voice of a young boy was coming from. No one was around—aside from herself and the wolf.

She gawked at the wild animal in front of her in disbelief—sure enough, its lips moved and words came out.

“You got hurt. Does it hurt? You must be hurting, it’s gotta hurt, ‘cause I hurt when I’m cut too. I’m hurting right now too, the area around my chest is all tight. I’m sorry. I’m sorrrrrrrrr-ruff,” cried the wolf, messily shedding tears from his big yellow eyes.

He seemed so remorseful that it washed away her fear and doubts. She hesitated for a moment over whether to speak to the wolf or not.

Will he understand what I’m saying? Wait, he—I think it’s a he—is already speaking a language I understand.

“U-Umm, I’m okay, so please don’t cry.”

“Buuut, buut, it’s all my fault,” the wolf howled sadly.

Thank goodness, he understands me. Relief washed over her once she confirmed that she could communicate.

“I’m okay. See here? The bleeding stopped because you licked it.” She hopped to her feet to show she was okay, and the wolf’s sobbing slowed to intermittent sniffles.

“Really? You’re really, really okay?”

“Yup, I’m perfectly okay.”

He bared his gums at her answer, and she jumped—but it just seemed to be his way of smiling. The wolf, sitting down and wagging his tail as he peered up

at her with expectant eyes, seemed like a friendly dog—excluding his massive size and mouth full of fangs, that is.

“I’m so glaaaad. Hey, hey, where did you come from? It’s rare for visitors to come to this forest, so I got all excited and chased you!”

The girl swallowed back her immediate reaction—to tell him that he’d scared her half to death—and opted to reply with, “I don’t know how I got here either. It seems like I lost my way without realizing it.”

“Then are you a lost child? Yay, a lost child!”

Why is he so excited about that?

The wolf hopped to all fours and dashed around the girl in circles. After running around her ten times, he suddenly hit on the brakes and skidded to a halt right in front of her.

With a twinkle in his golden eyes, he said excitedly, “Hey, hey! Become my friend! Master is nice, but he never plays with me. I’ve been bored outta my ruffen-minndddddd.”

She immediately leaned forward. “Master? Does someone live in this forest?!” she demanded impatiently.

Looking stunned—the wolf was actually quite expressive—he nodded. “Master is here.”

“Will you please take me to this master of yours?”

The wolf was happy enough to jump into the air. “Yaaaay! Now the three of us can live together!”

That’s not what’s happening here. You’ve got the wrong idea! But not wanting to disappoint the wolf leaping with joy, she merely made a strained smile.

“Oh yeah! What’s your name?”

“Me? I’m...”

The wolf happily frolicked around after hearing her name. “So you’re Nichika, huh! Nice to meet ya!”

Chapter 2: Girl, Encounters

“**SOOOO** you see, Master is normally too busy to ever leave home.”

“Heh. What does he do about food?”

One girl and one wolf were walking together through the forest. To the girl, the terrifying forest didn’t feel so scary anymore when she had a friendly, giant wolf at her side.

“Food like vegetables and meat get delivered once every three days. Miss Charlotte comes from the sky.”

“From the...sky?”

“Guess what? Guess what? I LOVE Miss Charlotte! Sometimes she gives me treats and pets me on the head.”

“Do you like being pet on the head, Wolfie?”

The cheerful wolf had introduced himself as Wolfie, and he’d taken care to explain that it was an important name he’d received from his master.

“Uh-huh! I’ve got this biiiig body, so everyone gets scared and runs away when I’m in town. I can’t get them to come close even when I try... Even though I’ve been practicing how to smile in the mirror too...” Dejected, his bushy tail drooped.

Nichika hesitated for a second before warily placing her hand on his head to awkwardly pet him.

“Mnn! I like you too, Nichika! You aren’t scared of me!”

She laughed aloud as his tail sprung up and swished through the air. To tell the truth, she was still a little afraid...but she would keep that to herself.

But thinking of all the strange things, from the wolf fluent in human language to a deliverywoman who supposedly dropped off packages from the skies like a drone, Nichika found it hard to hide her anxiety over what kind of person

Wolfie's "Master" would turn out to be.

"Oh, Nichika, we're here! Oiiii, Master! Ruff, Ruff!" he barked.

They had arrived at their destination while she'd been worrying about what was in store for her. Wolfie ran from his spot beside her into a small clearing in the forest. Squinting against the sudden brightness, she followed him.

Someone was standing in the middle of the fresh verdure's vibrant green. Was it a man? Their tall frame was enshrouded in a long black robe, but at least they appeared to be human from behind.

The person called 'Master' heard the wolf prancing toward them and turned around. Black hair and glasses peeked out from under their hood, which was pulled low over their face.

"Huh? How many times do I have to tell you to stop with the RUFF! You aren't a dog so don't act like it!" the person shouted, smacking Wolfie over the head in apparent irritation, "and how long does it take for you to pick a single herb —"

"I'm s-sorry!" Wolfie stuttered ducking away.

The displeased male voice sounded much younger than Nichika had expected. When he spotted her come into the clearing, he stopped talking and trying to smack Wolfie with a rolled up paper, holding back the rest of the scolding phrase on the tip of his tongue.

"U-Um, hello?" Nichika said tentatively.

"WHOA!"

What was so terrifying about her that'd make the man fall on the grass?

Startled by his extreme reaction, she asked hesitantly, "Are you...all right?"

She offered a hand to help him up—but he suddenly lunged for her wrist and yanked her toward him, pulling her down instead.

"EEEP!"

In an instant, he'd pinned her against the grass, and his knee was digging into her back, causing her to squeak like a crushed frog. An angry shout rained down

on her faster than she could process what was going on.

“Where did you get in from?!” He mercilessly twisted her arm behind her back.

“OW! OW! OW! LET GO!” she screamed. She frantically tried to get him off, but she was so exhausted she couldn’t muster much strength, not to mention that he had an overwhelming advantage as a man. Pushing him off her was beyond her capabilities even as she tried to wiggle away.

Wolfie’s inappropriately chipper voice broke through the dire situation, “Guess what? Nichika is a lost child! I found her wandering the forest so I brought her back. Aren’t I good boy?” Wolfie bounced over to them like he was dancing.

The man heaved a heavy sigh before unleashing a fit of anger like a thunderbolt. “FILTHY MONGREL!”

“WEEH?!” Wolfie whimpered.

“Is your brain smaller than a bird’s?! What were the orders I gave you?! Didn’t I tell you to *bite any intruders to death* on the spot?! Don’t act like a rescue dog, dammit!”

Wolfie cowered on the ground. Nichika’s neck was twisted and her face was against the ground, but the sight made her shout, “Stop it! Wolfie isn’t at fault!”

“...You even told her your name?” The man glowered down at her with a sour expression. She could feel him rudely looking her over like he was assessing her. He scoffed, “A lost child? Is that your crazy excuse? Quit wasting my time prattling on stupidly with your dumb face and tell me the truth! C’mon, OUT with it!”

That was too much even for the normally polite Nichika. Clenching her teeth, she inhaled sharply.

“...the hell...”

“Huh?”

“WHO THE *HELL* ARE YOU SAYING HAS A DUMB FACE?!”

“WHOA!”

Fueled by her anger, Nichika erupted with an explosive power. Catapulting the man, who had let down his guard, off of her, she seized the opportunity and lunged at him, knocking him to the ground. He was taken completely by surprise and was unable to react to her counterattack before she had reversed their positions entirely. Now pinning his chest with her legs, Nichika reached forward, snatched his collar, and violently shook him.

“Didn’t you learn in elementary school to *save* a person in trouble?! Some NERVE you have, scolding Wolfie for demonstrating *basic* kindness by helping someone in need!”

“HUH?! What the heck is ele-elementary school?!”

The man’s hood fell off while she was shaking him by the collar. His piercing ice-blue eyes captured her; her heart skipped a beat.

THUD.

She accidentally released him halfway off the ground, and his head slammed hard into the grass.

“NGH!” he grunted.

Suddenly regaining her calm, Nichika blanched. Why was she straddling the sole person she had met in this godforsaken forest?

She swiftly retreated off the man to where Wolfie was sitting patiently nibbling on a stick he had snatched from somewhere, and whispered in his furry ear, “Hey, are you sure this violent and disturbed man is your ‘Kind Master’? Is he blackmailing you into service? Are you okay?”

“I can hear you, you know.”

Now standing with his cheeks twitching in irritation, the man took three huge strides toward Nichika and grabbed her head with his big hand. Then, bending down till his eyes were level with hers, he snarled with a voice so threatening that it made her toes curl. “All right, why don’t we straighten things out, *hm*? You said your name was Nichika or something, yeah? You have committed three crimes. First, you broke my barrier and trespassed into this forest. Second, you misled and bewitched my familiar. Now, do you know what the *third* crime you committed is?”

“U-Umm, I didn’t go home even though it’s dark out? Haha...”

“You’ve INFURIATED me!” he bellowed.

Chapter 3: Girl, Questions

NICHIKA downed the red liquid swirling in her cup. Its flowery aroma softly tickled her nose, and the subtle sweet flavor from dissolved sugar cubes gently soothed her weary mind and body.

“I see. Basically, you’re a ‘*high school girl*’ who came from a country called ‘*Japan*’?” the man asked, emphasizing the words he’d never heard before.

“Yup.” She returned her cup to the saucer with a clack, then noticed that the scowling man on the sofa across from her was eyeing her suspiciously.

“I think you’ve got a future as a scribe.”

“I’m telling the truth!”

He’d ordered her to explain herself before he passed judgment and had brought her to his home for questioning, which was about a three-minute walk from the clearing. Yet, when she’d obediently spilled her guts, what did it get her in return? The first words out of his mouth called her a liar! Of course she’d object to that!

“Did you fall from a cliff and hit your head? I’m no doctor; go get your head checked at a clinic.”

According to the man, they were currently inside the “Forest of Fathomless Deception” on the “Arcanshiel Continent,” which was currently off-limits to the outside world. His explanation had been full of terms she didn’t know, and she only understood about half of it, but there was one thing she could be certain of —

“I’ve come to another world...” Nichika muttered, looking out the window behind her. Two other-worldly moons, one blue and one red, hung next to each other in the night sky like the best of friends. “How’d this happen...?”

Leaving Nichika to her loud sighing, the man procured two different colored vials from the wooden cabinet and put them down on the table in front of her

with a resounding clink.

“Whatever your story is, I can’t just let you waltz out of here now that you know about this place. So I’ll give you the honor of choosing.”

“Choosing what?” Nichika curiously picked up both vials. The liquids swirled and splashed inside the small, thin glass.

“Whether you want to lose your voice or your mind.”

CRASH!

The vial she’d accidentally dropped shattered on the floor. Wolfie jumped to his paws in alarm from where he had been dozing off at her feet.

“AGH! What the hell did you just do, girl?! That vial costs a lot, y’know?!”

“Don’t you start with me! I refuse both options!”

What kind of dangerous poison was he trying to make me take?! Nichika was going to return with her body *and* her mind intact. Like hell was she going to willingly take something that would harm either!

“How ungrateful! I even went out of my way to compromise with you...” He turned to rummage through the cabinet again.

Nichika quickly scooted away, putting a safe distance between her and the grumbling man. “Who in the world are you? What are you doing in this forest?” she asked warily.

He shot her an icy glare. “They say curiosity killed the cat, and *you* seem to have a real death wish.”

“...!”

Pushing his glasses up from where they had slipped on his nose, he sat down on the sofa opposite of her. Somehow, even his sardonic smile looked rather attractive, which only aggravated her more.

“I’m a witch,” he said simply, “I make items that are both good and bad for the world.”

“A...w-witch?”

Witches from all the fairy tales she had read went through Nichika’s mind.

They were all curious characters in possession of some mysterious powers, and usually tricked the heroes and heroines, but sometimes guided them to happiness.

“I make everything and anything: poisons, truth potions, love potions, magic weapons, and, if the price is right, even kits for making artificial life and raising the dead,” he explained casually, shrugging with his palms upward. “And thanks to my lack of morals, I’ve earned my fair share of enemies. Even so, in a world of haggling and squabbling, the demand for my work is never-ending.”

So he was basically saying that he’d secluded himself in this forest for safety, and that was why he couldn’t let anyone know his location.

“...Are you going to kill me?”

After telling her this much, Nichika sincerely doubted he would let her go without a catch. The man stood and opened the door to the next room over. Then, without looking back at her, said, “I’ll decide what to do with you tomorrow. Don’t even think about running away.”

His back disappeared behind the door. Left with those ominous words, Nichika could only sit there, the blood draining from her face.

Chapter 4: Girl, Eats

“SO you should just totally live here forever too, Nichika. I’m pretty sure Master won’t do anything horrible to you if you do.”

“You really think so?”

“I do, I do! That’s for the best. Let’s do that.”

Nichika stayed seated on the sofa in an absentminded daze after her conversation with the witch. She was inattentively petting the cheerful Wolfie at her feet, but it wasn’t like she had given up on going home already.

She had a family who was waiting for her to come home. Just thinking about spending the rest of her life serving such a dangerous and eccentric man made her shudder.

On the flip side, what could she even do? At best, she could make a run for it, but she’d probably end up captured. Even the friendly wolf who had taken to her would likely turn against her if his master ordered it. And was there any guarantee that she’d manage to escape this forest if she did successfully run away? Could she find a way back home just by leaving? How could she survive in a foreign world alone?

“Miiko...”

Tears began to roll down her cheeks when she remembered her younger sister’s innocent smile. What was in store for her? Nichika felt like she had been left alone in a darkness so opaque that she couldn’t even see her fingertips.

THE clock hanging on the wall indicated that the date had changed. Stillness enshrouded the room, with little noise other than the occasional squeaks Wolfie made in his slumber.

Nichika was still awake. She couldn’t sleep. Thinking about what the future held for her erased any desire she had to lie down and sleep.

A sudden noise from outside made her lift her head. The window facing the garden was dimly glowing—her eyes rounded at what she saw.

“Wh-What is that?”

It looked as if the sun was shining on a single spot, despite that it was nighttime. An absurdly sweet aroma wafted on the wind toward her.

“.....”

Without thinking, Nichika sprung into the garden, skipping over to the light. Once her eyes adjusted to the brightness, she saw a young apple tree standing no taller than her waist. A single tiny fruit hung from the tree branch, glowing as if it were made of gold.

“Aaah...aaah...”

All her worries and anxiety dissipated the second she inhaled the fruit’s sweet scent. It smelled so delicious; she felt like she was in heaven. Somewhere in the corner of her mind, she remembered that she hadn’t eaten anything since lunch.

“It looks yummy.”

A vacant smile washed over her face as she reached out. It was inviting her. The golden apple dropped right into her hand, as if it had been waiting. Once she sunk her teeth into it, she couldn’t stop.

GULP!

For a while after she had taken the final bite, Nichika stood there, still and entranced. But—

“...?”

She jolted back to her senses. *What in the world did I just do...?*

Tilting her head in confusion, she peered down at the apple tree that should’ve been in front of her. The sapling had transformed into a rose bush, with large crimson flowers swaying from it instead of apples. The divine light had vanished, and gloomy black stems were trembling creepily in its place. Nichika reached for the rose bush to try to figure it out, but the roses withered away right before her very eyes. Faster than its scattering petals could hit the

ground, a fierce sensation slammed into her without warning.

“...?!”

Pain—more intense than she’d ever experienced before—erupted in her abdomen. It felt as if she were being punched from the inside out.

Voicelessly screaming, she collapsed. The brutal pain slowly shifted into a searing burn, creeping through her body from her toes to her fingertips. Nichika could only gasp and writhe; something disgusting was crawling around inside her.

“...EEK!” Nichika sharply sucked in her breath when she saw her arm. The skin was bulging as if something inside was trying to break through. Scenes from science documentaries where a tape worm burst out of their host flashed through her mind.

Then, at last, whatever was inside burst through her wrist and shot out—it was a rose vine. Right at that very moment, the same rose vine she had witnessed withering away was sprouting out of her arm.

“N-NOOO!”

The slithering vine snaked around her arm. From it, a giant flower blossomed. Dyed in her blood from where it erupted from her arm, the flower looked vividly crimson even in the dark of night.

Her consciousness gave way to the shock and excruciating pain. *Am I going to turn into some plant? Am I’m going to be the seedbed for this beautiful rose?*

Had a long time passed? No, it had likely only been a few seconds. Her name was being called in the distance. The sound narrowly brought her consciousness back.

“MASTER! It’s Nichikaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Oi, what the hell are you doing?!”

Another panicked voice joined the commotion. Cracking her eyes open, Nichika saw a wolf and a man.

“Wolfie...and...?” she mumbled nonsensically.

“What the— You ate this?!”

Nichika thought she saw a horrified look on the man’s face when his gaze swept from the withered flower over to her—but she couldn’t be sure, for even he was hidden behind the thickening haze.

“Is Nichika gonna die?! Is she?! Is she?!”

“Wolfie, go fetch some water. Hurry!”

“But, Master, I can’t carry a bucket with my paaaaws!” he howled hopelessly.

“You can hold it in your mouth, stupid dog!” The man redirected his attention from the wolf scrambling away to the collapsed girl. Reaching out, he wrapped his hand under her back and propped her up.



“Have you been baptized before? Received blessings from your parents?”

“I-I’m Japanese! I’ve done no such thingggg!”

“Vomit! Right now!”

So he said, but she couldn’t sit up on her own anymore, much less force herself to vomit.

He suddenly shoved his index finger into her mouth and reached for the back of her throat, forcing her gag reflex. She felt the stomach acid surge back into her mouth, but the apple she should have swallowed didn’t come out.

“It’s encroached fast... Has it already taken root throughout your body?”

Gagging on her vomit, Nichika stretched out her hand, seeking rescue from her fear. The rose had already reached her shoulder.

“Am I...going to...die?”

“.....”

“I don’t want to. I’m so...scared.”

The entire world distorted like a warped filter had been placed on it. She didn’t realize it was due to her tears until the sensation of something streaming down her cheeks left a salty imprint in her open mouth. Was her life going to end at only sixteen years in a foreign land so far from home?

“I don’t wanna die...I haven’t accomplished anything yet...”

The man leaned over her—the two moons shone behind him. Taking her chin in his hand, his handsome face grimaced like he was at his wits’ end. The icy blue of his eyes filled her vision as he lifted her chin.

“Just let me get this out of the way in advance...” he muttered.

“...?”

“What I’m about to do to you is an emergency stopgap measure. Don’t go kicking up a fuss about it later.”

His enchanting blue eyes, neither the color of the sky nor the ocean, enraptured her despite the dire situation.

“I’m seriously not into little kids either...”

“Wh-What—”

Nichika felt like he was saying something terribly rude about her. But her words of protest were swallowed whole.

“Mnnh?!”

It took a whole second for her to realize she was being kissed. She instinctively struggled to get away, but he held her right hand captive behind her head, blocking her escape. Slowly but steadily, an airy feeling rose inside her, making her dizzy.

“Haa...aah.”

Saliva trickled down the corners of both their lips. She couldn’t stop choking on the liquid filling her mouth. Yet, the man wouldn’t let her free. He entangled his tongue with hers as if to stop it from escaping.

GULP!

Unable to keep from swallowing any longer, she ingested the saliva—and that’s when he finally released her.

Rubbing his lips with his sleeve, he warned with an indifferent tone, “Don’t spit it out. If you don’t want to die, that is.”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wha...!” Nichika slid back on her butt as fast as she could to get away from him. It wasn’t the most graceful retreat, but she didn’t have the composure to care. “UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Losing her presence of mind, she covered her mouth with her hands. Flames lit her cheeks, likely red enough to see in the dark. “W-Was th-that a k-k-k-k-kiss just n-now...?”

Nichika had saved her first kiss for a future important someone, but now some guy from who knew where went and stole it! She earnestly wished she could chop the last several minutes out of her memory and toss them away forever. She pitched forward from where she sat, slamming her hands on the ground as the horror and despair overtook her.

“This can’t be real. This is a nightmare.”

“Hmph. Would you have preferred to die like that then?”

“What?”

His comment prompted her to check herself over. The rose vines that had coiled around her arms were shrinking, emitting a faint hiss. Blood oozed slightly from the hole that was now pinprick size instead of a massive gash. The bleeding would stop soon enough.

“Is this for real...?” The pain had abated as well. However, her mind, on the other hand, was still reeling with everything that had happened since she’d set foot outside. “Wh-What’s going on?!”

The man’s expression seemed to say he had all the answers. He picked up the lantern he’d set on the ground and approached the withered rose, stooping to pick a petal off the dirt, which he carefully examined by turning it over.

“This rose is a rare species known as *Fake Lover*. It has a habit of parasitizing living creatures that happen to pass by. ”

“Parasitizing?”

He answered her seriously up to that point, but he had a twisted personality, and he wasn’t going to pass up the chance to pick on her. Not to mention that he wanted to vent his annoyance over having been smacked awake in the dead of night.

“Ha! I never thought there’d be a human in this day and age who’d be stupid enough to fall for that sorry excuse of a hypnotic illusion. It mostly parasitizes animals that wander by. The only people who fall for it are vulgar ones who haven’t been baptized like you—”

He glanced over his shoulder, expecting her to snap back at him again, and froze—tears were filling Nichika’s eyes, shimmering like a lake’s surface at night.

“H-Hey, why are you crying? I’m just stating the facts...”

Nichika hung her head, her shoulders quivering. She had been sent flying into some weird world to be a victim to one thing after another. She was at her limit.

“I want to go home...send me home.”

“.....”

A gentle breeze stirred the surrounding trees.

Nichika cried and cried, until she could only sniffle. Out of nowhere, something heavy patted her head. Wiping her tears, she lifted her face to find him looking down at her with a perplexed expression.

His lips parted slightly, but he only breathed out a single syllable that didn't form any words. The hand he was awkwardly stroking her head with betrayed his previous callousness with its kindness.

Is he trying to comfort me? Surprise stopped her tears. But just as she was about to say something to him, a brown fluffball suddenly leapt at the man, shoving him out of her view.

“MASTER!”

“WHOA?!”

“How's Nichika? Is Nichika okay? I fetched the water! AAAH, save her, Master!”

The man, now drenched from the bucket of water that had spilled over his head, glared fiercely at the wolf panicking in front of him. Angrily, he growled with a deep, vibrating tone, rumbling from some deep pit within, “...Is that water you fetched what just doused my head?”

“Oh nooooo! The water!”

“You should apologize to me before you worry about the water!”

Nichika watched them in astonishment. They'd completely forgotten about her and had started their routine master-servant scolding time.

“Where'd all this energy even come from?! You normally never move this fast. Have you've been slacking on the job all along?!”

“N-No, I haven't! I was just desperate this time! It's not like I always take naps, chase after pretty butterflies, take a break to go around snacking on gooseberries—”

“You mutt!”

“WEEH!”

“...PFT!” Nichika couldn’t help but giggle.

“Huh?”

“OHHH!” Spotting the laughing girl, Wolfie leapt at her. “YAAY! It’s Nichika! Nichika! Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere? Are you? Are you?”

“Thanks, Wolfie. I’m okay.” She pet Wolfie on the head as he licked away her tears. Then, her face growing serious, she asked the man, “Why did the rose vine disappear?”

He was squeezing the water out of his dripping robe with a grim face. “It didn’t disappear. Fake Lover is still residing somewhere in the pit of your stomach.”

“Ugh.” Her hand shot to her abdomen. She was on pins and needles thinking it could burst out of her again. “Then why did it go away just now? Was it because you did...you know what?”

Remembering what they had done turned her face red again. However, taking the sequence of events into account, that kiss couldn’t be anything other than something that had halted the growth of the rose.

He watched Nichika for a minute before sighing. Looking away, he curtly replied, “...Although this species germinates when nourished by the host, it’s known that the growth can be suppressed if given *a certain something*.”

“What?”

“Bodily fluids from the opposite sex.”

Bodily fluids—in other words, tears, spit, blood, or even—

“Huh? HUUUUUUUUUUUH?!” Nichika jolted backward as she turned bright-red.

He continued his explanation, completely unconcerned with her reaction, “I heard this rose was extinct, so I haven’t actually witnessed it myself either. They say it used to be an ingredient for love potions though.”

“Is there any way to cure it?! Is there?!” Desperate, Nichika clung to his clothing.

The man coldly shot her down. “Beats me.”

“No way!”

“I told you, I’m no doctor. You should be grateful I at least knew the stopgap measure.”

Nichika’s head drooped in front of the man folding his arms at his chest in exasperation. She wished she could wake up from the nightmare this situation had become.

“Anyway, I’m heading to bed. Just you try to disturb my peaceful sleep this time, and...” With the utmost irritated expression, he flipped a thumb toward the ground. “I’ll squash you.”

“...Yes, sir.”

Chapter 5: Girl, Tempted

THE next day, Nichika awoke from a shallow sleep. Surveying her surroundings, she slapped her cheeks with both hands to get rid of her grogginess. An unfamiliar room, an unusual sofa, and a talking wolf—so her second day in another world began with the same strangeness from the first.

“Blegh, it wasn’t a dream after all.”

“Morning, Nichika. Did you sleep?”

“Somehow.”

Wolfie sluggishly stretched as he got to his feet. He escorted her out of the house to the well she had spotted yesterday so she could wash her face. Refreshing air filled the forest, and it whisked away some of her pent-up feelings.

Nichika had never used a water well before. Mimicking what she’d seen on TV before, she threw the bucket into the well, then used the rope attached to the pulley to draw it back up. The bucket came up full of clear, cool water.

She wanted to rinse as much filth off her as possible, so she soaked her handkerchief in the water and got to wiping herself down. What she carried with her from her own world didn’t amount to much: the clothes on her back, a handkerchief, and a few pieces of hard candy in her pocket. She had been carrying her schoolbag when the ground had given way under her feet, but it seemed to have disappeared around the same time she’d lost her shoes.

“Now that I think about it, I still don’t know that person’s name. What does he go by?” Nichika asked Wolfie.

Really taking a moment to consider the situation, it was strange she didn’t know the name of the person who had stolen her first kiss. Though, should she even count it as her first if it’d happened in this world? Honestly, if possible, she’d rather not count it as a kiss at all.

“Master’s name? Mm, I don’t know if it’s okay to say it.”

“Why wouldn’t it be okay?”

“Um, um, you see a name is a very, very important component that lets a person exist here. So Master said you shouldn’t share your real name unless it’s absolutely required.”

Is that really how it works? Nichika thought.

“He said a powerful witch can curse a person to death with just their name.”

Nichika nearly spat out the water she’d sipped from her cupped hands. “That’s a bad joke, right?!”

I told him my name! I totally told him my full name yesterday. Does that mean he already has power over my life?!

“D-Do you mean everyone uses an alias or—”

“I see you start off your mornings already obnoxiously loud.”

“Eek!”

Nichika instantly spun around as if she’d been stung by a bee when she heard the deep growl behind her. The man was leaning against the door with his eyes half-closed.

Crap! I have to change his impression of me right now! I don’t want to get cursed to death!

“G-Good morning to you! Isn’t it a fine, refreshing morning?!”

“...You’re so obvious.” He walked over to the well yawning and leaned over to wash his face. He wasn’t yet wearing his glasses. Could it be that his eyes weren’t bad enough to need them at all times?

He dragged the bucket Nichika was using over and artlessly chucked it into the water as he scratched his head.

“It’s too much of a pain to figure out what to do with you. I’ll bring you to the nearest town, so get ready to go. We’ll leave in an hour.”

“Pardon?”

Her immediate relief that he wasn't going to curse her or dose her with freaky potions clashed headfirst with the new fear that he might abandon her somewhere, while she still lacked a single clue about what was happening to her. Was he possibly trying to wash his hands of her now that some spooky rose parasitized her?

"U-Umm—" She was about to ask him if he could at least give her a pair of shoes, when—

"HELLOOOOOOOOOOO! OSY!"

"GAH!"

Something rammed into his back with that bubbly holler. The man fell upside down into the well, and Nichika heard a loud ka-plunk accompanied by a splash.

"Whoa...!" she yelped.

"Oh? He disappeared."

The culprit, a woman dressed in a way that screamed, "I'm a real witch," had flown in from the sky. She was wearing a black pointy hat and a black mini dress with a short hem. Tied to her stereotypical broom was enough luggage to kill.

She hopped down from the broom as it came to hover just above the grass and pushed her luscious sunny blonde hair out of her green eyes as she squinted, straining to see as if she were trying to find an answer to his disappearance but was utterly lost.

"Oh my gosh, Osy! Did you finally complete the Teleportation Schema? You'll doom my business if you have! What are you going to do to make it up to me?"

"U-Uhh..." Nichika was still debating whether to run away or strike a conversation, when the blonde witch twirled toward her.

A twinkle instantly lit the witch's emerald eyes. "Wow! ADORABLE! Hold on, where did you come from? Are you possibly Osy's girlfriend? Tell me, tell me!"

"I AM NOT!"

That was *definitely* the one thing Nichika had to deny at all costs. *Especially* after what had happened last night.

Wolfie trotted back over from where he'd been blown to during the witch's initial crash landing, and gleefully rubbed his big fluffy body against her legs.

"Miss Charlotte! Welcome!"

"Good morning, Wolly. You being a good boy?"

"I am! I am! Ehehe."

Oh, so this must be Miss Charlotte who makes deliveries from the sky that I've heard so much about.

While Nichika mentally sorted out the situation, a sopping-wet phantom—also known as the man who seemed to go by Osy—crawled its way out of the bottom of the well.

"CHAR! What the hell kinda entrance is that?!"

"Oh, dear me. Why are you coming out of a well? Did you become an apprentice to a water spirit?"

"Are you seriously asking me that?!"

The man's sleepiness had been thoroughly washed away by the icy cold water. Nichika was surprised he actually survived the fall to the bottom of a deep well.

Is everyone in this world so eccentric? As Nichika started worrying even more about her future prospects, Wolfie let out a short howl to get their attention before introducing everyone.

"Nichika, this is the Miss Charlotte I was telling you about yesterday. She's a witch like Master, but she does sky deliveries because she loves flying on a broom."

"Hi, Nichika! It's nice to meet you! I'll accept any job requests you might have! For a girl as adorable as you, I'll even give you a special discount!" Charlotte swooped in and excitedly reached for Nichika's hands.

"U-Uh, okay?"

Was she just imagining that the heat in the witch's green eyes appeared to burn as ferociously as a forest fire?

“Oh my *word*! I seriously have the urge to sweep you off your feet and kidnap you right here and now...” She panted heavily. “Hey, do you have any interest in becoming my apprentice?”

“No, I’m—”

“Don’t touch her, perverted woman.”

Before they knew it, the man had approached them and was now slapping Charlotte’s hands off of Nichika. Charlotte squirmed theatrically under his piercing glare.

“Owwie! What’s your problem? I bet you plan to keep this cutie pie all to yourself and do this and that with her! Perv! Mega Perv! Shut-in magic nerd!”

“HUH? Who’d do such a thing?!”

“C’mon, it’s the truth, and you know it. You don’t have to pretend to be offended!” She playfully grinned.

“You little—” Enraged, the man hooked an arm around Nichika’s neck and yanked her to him, almost as if to embrace her.

“Ow! Ow!”

“Did you *seriously* think for even a second that I’d consider some little girl without any sex appeal, who stupidly went and got herself parasitized by Fake Lover?! Like some kind of brain-dead rodent,” he huffed angrily, “Huh?! Sorry, but I’m *not* in need when it comes to women. Why would you think I’d want to keep some petacolon-like girl with me?!”

“Excuse me...?” Nichika muttered.

Horrible. I can’t even begin to guess what a “petacolon” is, but he’s definitely mocking me. I can tell that much at least.

“Let go of me!” Nichika protested, “I haven’t done anything deserving of your mockery!”

“YEOW! Don’t scratch me!”

Charlotte’s snicker vanished into a serious frown as she watched them. “‘Fake Lover’? The antiquated slave potion? They say if you leave it be, a person will

transform into the rose's seedbed overnight. Is that true?"

"Yeah, seems to be," Nichika managed to answer, still struggling in the man's hold.

"This is serious then. I'm surprised you're still alive."

"Um, well, I had him...provide the stopgap treatment." Nichika turned red and averted her eyes.

Charlotte put her finger to her chin as she contemplated what Nichika had said. "What's the stopgap treatment?"

Wolfie jumped at the opportunity to answer. "Guess what? Guess what? Nichika and Master came close and—"

"GAAAAAAAAAH!" Nichika leapt out of the man's arm, quickly smothering Wolfie's toothy mouth with her hand. This wolf was so innocent to the point of causing problems!

"Then, the rose seed is still inside you?"

"Unfortunately... He didn't know how to remove it..."

Charlotte clapped her hands together once as if all the pieces had fallen together for her. "Oh, I get it now! That's why Osy woke up so early. You're setting off on a journey to remove the Fake Lover seed, right?"

"Come again?"

"We're WHAT?"

Nichika's surprised question and the man's exasperated groan came out simultaneously, but Charlotte paid them no heed and began jubilantly pulling various items out of her heavy pack of bags.

"Then you'd best prepare for the trip! Oh dear, Nichika, what happened to your shoes, girl? And you won't last on a long journey in such thin and flimsy clothing. Wait just a moment. I'm certain I have a thick mantle and sturdy boots somewhere in here."

"...Oi." The man's low growl cut into her humming. "Don't you try and sell me a bunch of junk with this situation as an excuse."

“Don’t be silly! I’d do no such thing. By the way, Osy, you aren’t planning on going out in that witch’s robe, are you? I have the perfect coat for you.”

“You’re not even trying to hide your attempt at hawking your wares!”

Behind the yelling man, Nichika’s heart was pounding out of her chest. It’d be much more reassuring if “Osy” and Wolfie were to come with her. Much, much better than being left all alone in a world she knew absolutely nothing about.

But he wasn’t for the idea at all.

“I refuse. What’s in it for me? My troubles will be over once I erase her memories and leave her in some town.”

The world wouldn’t be that kind to me, would it? Nichika’s shoulders slumped, but Charlotte cackled, covering her mouth gleefully with her black sleeve. Then, placing a firm fingertip to her plump lips and changing her tone of voice to a whisper, she leaned in as if to signal that she was about to reveal a secret.

“Then why don’t I give you a piece of information that’ll make you want to leave here on a faraway journey? It’ll be on the house, since you’re a regular patron.”

“Oh? Just try it. I’ve no intention of budging, no matter what you have to say.”

“The Witch’s Council has moved for real this time—and a full-scale move, at that.”

The man’s cocky smile withered instantly into a severe scowl. “*What* did you just say?”

“Of course they had to! Something about the witch’s tools you’ve made causing nothing but pointless trouble, bringing them a rush of grievances... Well, since even before that, they’ve been acting suspiciously lately. Seems like they’ve been arresting unregistered witches without official licenses left and right.”

Watching the conversation unfold as an unrelated third party from a distance, Nichika observed that the mood was turning grimmer by the moment. The two witches exchanged information in heated whispers until they abruptly broke off and walked over to her.

“Your average person is one thing, but this barrier doesn’t do much to witches. It’s not inconceivable that the councilor might drop from the skies into your backyard at any moment.”

“This location’s been exposed? Tch. Persistent bunch.” Completely awake now, Osy walked right over to Nichika and clearly called, “Wolfie!”

“Yes, Master?”

“I’m leaving home for a while. You coming?”

“Of course, Master! I will accompany you anywhere!” Wolfie sat down neatly in perfect form as if at attention—he could’ve won a dog show, if he were a dog. Evidently, he knew when to set his playful personality aside to properly carry out his role in the master-servant relationship.

“We’ll leave in an hour as initially planned. Be prepared to leave at any time. Same goes for you too, Nichika.”

“Roger!” Wolfie barked.

“O-Okay?” Nichika replied.

Chapter 6: Girl, Resolves

THEY gathered in front of the house an hour later, fully prepared for their journey. Wolfie carried a huge yellow rucksack on his back, which bulged with all the items crammed inside.

Nichika had just finished putting on the equipment Charlotte had given her. Pulling the deep-crimson mantle over her school uniform, she slipped the arm bracers on under her sleeves as protection for her forearms, then tugged on a sturdy pair of brown leather boots in place of the loafers she'd lost to finish off her travel gear assembly.

Charlotte whistled. "Aww! You look even more amazing than I thought! I have outstanding taste, if I do say so myself."

"Wow!" Nichika agreed, "The design is so cute for such practical and sturdy gear!"

"Isn't it? Isn't it? I made all of it!"

Not only were the items solidly built, they had also been enchanted with magic to ward away evil among other things. As one might expect, clothes fashioned by a witch were of a different caliber.

The wind went out of Nichika's sails as she remembered a certain glaring detail. Undoing the buttons on her mantle, she apologized, "I'm sorry, Miss Charlotte. I feel bad to say this after you let me try all these clothes on, but I don't have any money on me to pay for it."

"Oh, no biggie!" Charlotte flashed her a sneaky grin and whispered secretively in Nichika's ear, "I'm adding ALL the costs to Osy's bill. Let him buy this much for you. You've got that kinda relationship, right?"

"I told you, we don't!" Nichika bleated, turning bright-red.

The witch only chortled in return. "Just kidding! You're a cutie, Nichika, so I'm writing this off as a special freebie. I look forward to your patronage from now

on!”

Charlotte’s so generous! Overwhelmed with gratitude, Nichika quietly thanked her again and bowed her head.

“Oi! What’s with this bill?!”

The homeowner had finally come outside. He’d apparently abandoned his worn-out, seedy black robe for a long leather overcoat and had fastened a traveler’s mantle on top, which was naturally black as well. Despite wearing all black, he looked like he was made for it instead of a suspicious creeper, which had to be because of his handsome face. Nichika resented him for his blessed looks.

“What you have is already cheaper than it should be. It’s an exceptional price, considering the market value.”

“Hmph. You don’t have to deliver food for a while.”

“Yup, yup. I know.”

Osy pulled an emerald stone from his leather pouch and handed it to Charlotte.

Nichika carefully studied the interaction between the two witches. *Is that the currency in this world? Hmm, now that I watch them though...*

“I’ll contact you once things settle down.”

“I’ll drop by again when you do. And please choose somewhere I can reach you by broom.”

“No promises there...”

*Am I wrong to think **they’re** the ones with a special relationship? A blonde beauty and a black-haired, handsome young man. They’re a picture-perfect pair. Blegh. Are there only good-looking people in this world?*

A palm smacked her in the forehead while she was brooding over her own childish face.

“C’mon, we’re leaving. I’ll leave you behind if you don’t pay attention.”

“Wh-Whoa! Hey!” Catching her balance right before toppling over, Nichika

took another look back at Charlotte. "Thank you so much, Miss Charlotte!"

"Be careful, okay? Let's meet again soon." The blonde witch nimbly straddled her broom, and, with a carefree smile, she kicked off the ground. In a sudden gust of wind, she rose above the trees in no time.

After watching her go, the remaining three walked to the forest's edge. Eyeing the back of the man clothed in black in front of her, Nichika ventured, "Hey?"

"What?" he answered without glancing back at her. So he was at least willing to talk to her, for now.

"So your name is Osy, huh?"

"Don't address me so casually. Call me Lord Oswald."

His curt response ticked her off. "Yeah, right," she muttered.

Oswald noticed her pout out of the corner of his eye and snorted.

Wolfie, meanwhile, appeared to be in the best of moods as he joined their conversation. "You should just call him Master too, Nichika!"

"No thanks. It'll have a different meaning if I call him that."

Oswald raised an eyebrow. "There's a difference between the two of you?"

"I don't remember signing up to become your slave!" Nichika retorted and stuck her tongue out at him. Did he think she'd let her guard down around him?

As she treaded on the crunchy forest undergrowth, Nichika felt grateful that her new boots fit perfectly. They had melded to her feet, as comfortable as a pair of shoes that had been broken in after years of use yet still had all their padding. She had one less thing to worry about now.

"Oz. Hey, Oz," Nichika pestered him until he turned a grudging eye on her, "Why are you a witch and not a wizard?"

"Huh? What part of me looks like one of those cracks?"

"Well..." she trailed off, not wanting to say, "all of you," after hearing the venom in his voice. Was there some sort of common understanding that there was a fundamental difference between witches and wizards unrelated to

gender? She just couldn't get over how strange it sounded for a man to be called a witch.

"I don't know what misunderstanding you're having right now, but 'witch' is an occupation here. It's a general occupational term used to refer to anyone who creates tools and items enchanted with magic. It has nothing to do with gender."

"Interesting."

"Don't get me started on the wizards... I've no intention of ever joining the ranks of those meatheads who live only to flaunt their power. Besides, witches make way more money."

"Oh, my first guess was right. It's about the money."

"Oi, Nichika? Right now I'm doing you a big favor and simply adding the inconvenience fees to your tab, but I *will* be having you pay me back for all of it."

"S-Someday, okay..."

Nichika was slowly starting to understand his personality—he was eccentric, annoying, and miserly, almost to a hilarious degree.

Their surroundings had shifted into a gentle downward slope. The space between the tightly packed trees grew more sporadic, and Nichika took care to hop over the protruding tree roots as she descended through the thick underbrush.

She wanted to drop the topic but didn't want the forest's noises to be the only sounds, so she decided to ask another question. "Can you not fly?"

"It's conventional wisdom that male witches can't fly."

"It is? So are there different things that male and female witches can do in this world? Can normal people not use magic at all? And what's the Witch's Council?"

"S-Slow down."

Her barrage of questions had overwhelmed him. Unfortunately for him, Nichika was an inquisitive girl who didn't shy from asking questions.

Her enthusiasm suddenly gave way to serious contemplation. “Can I become a witch too?”

“.....” Oswald studied her, considering it, and Nichika instinctively stopped. After a pause, he wordlessly beckoned her with his hand.

“...?” She obediently jogged over to him. Taking both of her hands in his, he poured a minuscule amount of magic into them. “Whoa!”

An electric current rushed through her body—vivid crimson dyed her wide-open eyes before receding.

“OW! What did you just do?!” Nichika hopped away from him like a cat with its back arched as her rounded eyes returned to their natural black color.

“...Hmm.”

“What?”

Surprise slightly coloring his features, Oswald quickly walked off again after his little test.

“W-Wait for me! What just happened?!”

“Beats me,” Oswald dismissed her.

“Nichika!” Wolfie chimed in, “Guess what? Guess what? I wanna go shopping with you once we reach town! And then after that we can...”

The group disappeared beyond the grove of trees, holding what seemed like three completely disconnected conversations. A short while later, the sound of large wings flapping echoed through the still forest.

“.....”

Whatever had showed up disappeared faster than it had appeared. In its wake, a single golden object fell from the sky. The golden, feather-like, beautiful work of art fluttered onto the dead leaves below, glowing unceasingly. Sparkles emitted from where it fell.

“**WOW!**” Nichika exclaimed in awe of the scenery spreading before her eyes

just outside the forest. Grass-covered plains stretched out as far as the eye could see. Skipping through the beautiful landscape she had only ever seen on TV screens, she said, “This is so amazing! I can’t believe it’s real! How far does it go for?”

Clouds dotted the clear blue sky like they had been dashed across with white paint. A gentle breeze blew the green grass down at her feet.

Wolfie stretched with his rear end up in the air. He happily informed her, “This grassland is the biggest patch of grass on the entire continent!”

“Are there no villages nearby?” Nichika asked, holding her hair down to keep it from being whipped up by the wind.

Wolfie chuckled as best a wolf could and drooled. “There’s Lisette Village. They’re famous for their whole pheasant roast...” His drool plopped on the ground.

Beside his gluttonous familiar, Oswald surveyed the sprawling grasslands and sporadic trees dispersed throughout, calculating their present location. Realizing they were off from where he had planned, he frowned.

“We went off course a bit. We’ll probably reach the town in less than an hour at this distance,” he muttered.

“Mm! Walking somewhere with such a great view is actually pretty nice. We might get there sooner than you expect,” Nichika responded optimistically.

“.....”

“Wh-What?” She flinched under his scrutinizing gaze. She didn’t know how to take his expression, aside from that he looked startled.

“You’re surprisingly perky today—especially for someone who was sobbing about how much they wanted to go home just yesterday.”

“D-Don’t bring that up...” Now that he mentioned it, she did remember something like that happening. “It’s not like the situation will get better if I cry about it. You have to stand up and take action if you want anything to take a turn for the better,” she declared, holding her head high. Then she bashfully scratched her cheek and added with a smile, “Well, that’s what Mom says all

the time at least.”

“...You have a mother?”

“Of course I do!” she snapped at his stupid question. Remembering the mother she loved dearly in her mind’s eye, she babbled excitedly, “She’s an incredibly wonderful mom! She’s strong and kind and is raising me and Miiko—my little sister—by herself, as a single mother.”

Suddenly losing steam, Nichika’s gaze fell to the grass underfoot. Wrapping her hands around her elbows as if to hug herself, her voice sank into melancholy, “...I have to return home as soon as possible. I’m certain she’s worried about me.”

Determination flashing through her eyes, Nichika abruptly threw her arms open, held her head high, and smiled, faster than either the man or wolf could respond. “So! That’s why I decided not to cry anymore. Taking a step forward is way better than staying in the same place curled up in a ball crying,” she announced.

It was the conclusion she’d come to after a night of crying all alone in a ball in the corner.

Oswald laughed derisively at her resolve. “How admirable—not that your lesson has anything to do with me.”

“You’ll eat those words someday!” Nichika quipped back.

Chapter 7: Girl, Gambles

“**MASTER**, Nichika! There’s Lisette Village!” Wolfie looked back at them from where he trotted ahead, his tail wagging excitedly. Beyond his wolfish grin, an idyllic village awaited.

A bubbling brook curved its way through the village surrounded by a plain log fence and modest fields unfolding into the distance, creating a truly tranquil sight. However, the ravenous wolf saw the village in a completely different light from his human counterparts, and broke into an eager gallop for it.

“*Ahhh!* What a delicious village! Just you wait for me to sink my fangs into you, whole roast pheasant!”

“For your information, we’ll be leaving before you’ll get the chance to eat.”

At Oswald’s comment, Wolfie tripped and tumbled several times into a sorry heap. Then, clinging pathetically to Oswald’s leg as he walked by, he whimpered in a voice so pitiful that even Nichika felt guilty.

“Whyyyy?! Whyyyyyy?!”

“Why would we stay? I’m only stopping by this village to drop this girl off. You and I won’t be staying here long.”

His answer took Nichika by surprise. So he was going to leave her alone after all—the realization put a real damper on her mood.

“You could at least feel a little more concerned about—ACK!” Grumbling, she walked right into Oswald’s back because she failed to notice he’d stopped. Rubbing her swelling nose, she complained, “Don’t just stop in front of me! What’s wrong?”

But her two companions stood motionless without responding to her. Confused, she walked around the frozen Oswald and was greeted with an unbelievable sight.

“Holy smokes! That’s a *lot* of witches...!”

Like a flock of bats, a group of black robe-clad witches zoomed around on brooms above the village they were heading to. The spectacle didn't end there, either—there was a second group of black-robed people patrolling the ground too. They were interrogating the villagers, clearly in search of someone.

“Let me guess, that's the Witch's Council?” Nichika turned around for confirmation, but the man and his wolf were already sprinting away with the wind. Running with perfect form, their figures steadily grew tinier as she dumbly watched them go.

“What a cheap move!” she protested in disbelief.

“Farewell, Nichika! Take care!”

“If you're dropping me off, do it RIGHT!”

Shouting proved to be a big mistake. Someone in the village had heard her, and it didn't take long for the commotion to follow. Nichika's cheek twitched nervously and her toes curled in her boots, but it was too late to undo what she had done.

“...Hey, is that who I think it is?!” one of the witches bellowed.

“There's no mistaking him! It's the Heretic Witch Oswald!”

“AFTER HIM!”

The black-robed group charged toward Nichika.

“EEEP!” Frightened, she swerved around and raced after Oswald and Wolfie as well—thus, a game of chase began.

Wanting to alleviate the gnawing sense that she'd just screwed everything up, she hurled her complaints at the culprit. “‘Heretic’?! What did you DO?!”

“NOT MUCH!” he yelled back, then admitted in a slightly quieter voice, “...I just borrowed a bunch of banned ingredients, since they were necessary for my experiments.”

“That just makes you a *thief* then!” she huffed back, dashing madly after him.

He looked back at her dumbfounded. “Why're you following me?!”

“You think I can enter that village after they saw me with you?!”

The voices of their pursuers were hot on their heels. Nichika thought she could make out some fairly disturbing shouts of, “*AFTER HIM!*” and “*KILL HIM!*” but she hoped from the bottom of her heart that she was just hearing things.

After several minutes of running full-speed while frantically weaving her way through the person-tall grass, Nichika hit the limits of her stamina and collapsed. Wolfie slid to a stop and returned to her, but she’d already lost the energy to even push herself off the ground.

“Nichika! You’ll be caught!” he whined.

“Haah...haaah... I need...a short break...”

She had never been the athletic type to begin with, which meant that sprinting as fast as physically possible for so long had just been too much for her. Unexpectedly, Oswald also turned back for her. Clicking his tongue as he went down on one knee, he pulled something out of the leather pouch attached to his belt.

“This is merchandise, but there’s no avoiding it this time. You’ll be paying me back for this later.”

“HOW?!”

Oswald procured three tiny balls stuck together with what looked like sticky tape. Then, with a light poke, he chanted a spell. ***“I am a seeker of northern winds. Cleanse our presence and shield us from thine sight. Blow cruel, and sheathe us in the North’s cold. Grant my plea, that none may find us.”***

Instantly, smoke spewed out from the balls and wrapped around the three of them. The smoke was peculiar and cold; though transparent, it looked as if it contained every color.

“What—”

Oswald put his hand over Nichika’s mouth to silence her. He quickly covered Wolfie’s mouth with his other hand, earning a wide-eyed look from the wolf.

Does he not want us to talk?

“Did you find him?!”

“I’m certain he went this way!” A man in a black robe with a wand in hand

jumped out of the tall grass. He strained his eyes in their direction, vigilantly raking his gaze over the area.

Gripping her chest to keep her heart from jumping out of it, Nichika stayed perfectly still. A few minutes later, another witch called for the man, and he left.

Once the witches flying overhead were long out of sight, Oswald at long last exhaled his bated breath. "Looks like we gave them the slip for now."

"Hey, what's this smoke?" Nichika finally asked, shivering in the chilly smoke.

He shook the ball in his hand, and a tiny clip-clop sound rang from inside. "This is one of the Witch's Items I've created called 'Elusive Ball.' Activating it releases a special gas that obscures your presence."

What a sophisticated stealth item! Nichika was genuinely impressed.

Oswald let out a loud sigh beside her. "I didn't think the Witch's Council's minions would show up this fast... Lost my chance to discard excess luggage."

Nichika wasn't stupid enough to miss the meaning of his extra remark. "Well, *excuse me*, for being your excess *baggage*." She held him in a pointed glare, until he averted his eyes and turned his back to her, while running his hand through his hair.

"Well, don't sweat it. There should be other villages out there. I'll be sure to drop you off somewhere."

Nichika stared at his back for a while before the question flew out of her mouth. "I can't come with you?"

A full gust of wind blew between them before Oswald spun around with his eyebrows raised, his lips twisting up. "HUUUUUUUH? *You?* Come with *me?*"

"...I'm not that smart, but I asked that after a lot of thought, you know."

She refrained from telling him to quit making a face so stupid that she wanted to punch it, and, instead, frankly laid out what she had been thinking ever since they'd exited the Forest of Fathomless Deception.

"I don't know where you're heading, but you'll be traveling for a while, right? I'm more likely to find out how to get back to my world if I travel around rather

than staying in one spot. And as you know..." Red flushing her cheeks, she lowered her eyes as her voice dropped to a barely audible whisper, "I still have the Fake Lover problem to deal with."

Nichika wholeheartedly wished she could avoid bringing up her new freak medical condition, but the situation called for a reminder.

Oswald stared down at her. Then, crudely cutting straight to the crux of the matter, he commented, "Well, yeah, becoming a prostitute is about the only way you can regularly consume a man's bodily fluids."

She had been vaguely aware of the reality, but had desperately wanted to avoid thinking about it.

"STOP! I absolutely won't do that!"

*I don't want to stoop so low, even if this is a matter of life or death! When push comes to shove, I might have to do it, but I'm **definitely** not considering it until I'm really on death's bed!*

Fortunately? At least I think it's fortunate, this guy hasn't had any interest in me right from the second we met. So isn't he the best person to strike a clearly defined deal with?

"I know it's asking a lot, but I'll repay you in whatever way I can, so..."

"Oi, don't go there—"

"If I have even an iota of potential to become a witch, please take me along with you as your apprentice!" Nichika pleaded with absolute seriousness.

Oswald threw his head back as if she'd thrown him for a loop. But then he flattened his lips into a hard line and folded his arms sternly. "No."

"Whyyyyyy?!"

"I don't want an apprentice."

That wasn't going to be enough to make her back down. If Nichika backed down now, prostitution was in her future! ***I don't want to be a prostitute!*** She screamed internally as if the very thought of being a prostitute was a curse.

"PLEASE!"

“No means no.”

“I’ll do my very best to never get in your way!”

“Bug off!”

Her enemy was formidable. They locked glares without giving an inch on either side.

Naturally, it was the wolf who broke the tense mood. Ruining the standoff with the loudest stomach growl known to man, Wolfie splayed out all four legs and collapsed onto the grass.

“Masterrrrr. I’m starvingggg,” he whimpered.

Obstinacy dampened by that pathetic grovel, Oswald unglued his eyes from Nichika and shot Wolfie an exasperated complaint, “You know, you should *really* learn how to read the mood.”

“Does that taste good?”

Nichika giggled. “Why don’t we have lunch, Wolfie?”

Rather than toeing the line, breaking for a temporary truce could prove more effective in changing Oswald’s mind. Ready to grab any opportunity, Nichika put down her bags with a smile.

TEN minutes later, and the grasslands had quickly transformed into a picnic spot. Wolfie’s packed-to-the-brim rucksack was full of the lunches Charlotte had given them that morning.

“Anyways, you’re aiming too high in life,” Oswald lectured, “Be grateful you’re alive and live out a modest life that’s within reach. What’s your problem with prostitution? Every woman without a relative does it.”

“I don’t want that for myself. I’m going to find a way home *and* remove the seed that’s using my stomach as its host, and I refuse to ever give up on living, too. I’m a selfish creature.”

“This ham sandwich is yummy!” Wolfie cheered.

They were having a terribly crass conversation for a fun picnic, but it’d look

like the picture of peaceful to any passerby.

Next to fluttering butterflies, Oswald shook his fork in front of his face to threaten her. “Let me be clear: coming with me means you’ll be hunted down. Just like what you experienced today.”

“I know...but still...”

Looking askance at the girl who had fallen silent, he pulled the fork from his mouth, then tossed it into an enameled cup and snapped his fingers. Cards appeared out of thin air and slid into his hand.

“Okay, let’s gamble on it then.”

“Gamble?”

He held two cards in front of her and spread them out. The ice blue of the eyes she saw past the edges of the cards narrowed in on her.

“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.”

“And if I draw the joker?”

“I’ll drop you off at the next town.”

Nichika hesitated for a moment before pursing her lips and putting her hand on one of the cards.

“.....”

His lips drew down in an arc.

The sky was free of clouds.

Her fate had been determined.

Act 2: Seaside Blue Port

Chapter 8: Girl, Admonishes

SEASIDE Blue Port: a key transportation city connecting the protruding peninsula to the opposite shore. Oswald gazed down at the city built in a semicircle from the top of the hillock and exhaled a heavy sigh.

“You know, that city there has a good brothel,” he brought up.

Nichika swiftly shot down his casual remark with a confident smile. “We have no business there. I won the gamble, so I’ll follow you wherever you go—whether you like it or not.” She blissfully descended the hillock, humming a catchy tune.

Indeed, Nichika had remarkably drawn the ace of spades during their gamble. She couldn’t help but crack up laughing every time she remembered the sore expression on his face.

Oswald screwed his face up like a child who had been made to eat sour candy, but he trailed behind her and spat out in resignation, “Fine, fine, damn it. I’ll be your guardian for a bit.”

He then began listing the conditions of their master-apprentice deal.

First, Oswald was to provide Nichika with some form of bodily nutrient once every day. Second, he would guarantee her safety to the bare minimum necessary for survival. In return, Nichika was to undertake any odd job she could handle as Oswald’s apprentice.

“You can count on me! I might not look the part, but I’m good at chores!”

“Argh, damn it! How did this happen? I know that card was rigg—”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing.”

Ignoring the stifled grumbling coming from behind her, Nichika cocked her head and stared down at the nearing port city. The contrast of white stucco

against bright-blue rooftops was dazzling. Refreshing, salty breezes from the sea tickled at her longing for home.

It was the kind of port city found in picture books. But, contrary to Nichika's sentimental feelings over the view, Oswald appeared to perceive something off about it.

"Strange."

"What is?"

"Why isn't there a single ferry flying?"

"Flying?"

Nichika thought she had misheard him, but immediately thought twice about it. After all, why would it be strange for ferryboats to fly in a world where witches took to the skies on brooms?

They decided that wasn't enough of a reason to avoid checking out the city and continued their steep descent toward the city.

NICHIKA gasped when she finally set foot inside Seaside Blue and was confronted with its abnormal atmosphere up close. Tension hung over the entire city like a thick cloud, and the residents looked haggard.

"I've got a real bad feeling about this place..." Nichika mumbled, scanning the faces of the fatigued shoppers and the worn-down shopkeepers.

"It *is* strange. This city is usually full of energy."

"Nichika! Look! Look! I found them selling this!" a perky voice announced behind her. Something jumped on her back, knocking her off balance.

"Whoa!"

Nichika moved her right foot forward to catch herself. When she looked over her shoulder, she found a boy with unruly brown hair and a friendly grin clinging to her back. He looked around the size of a third or fourth grader and wore a large cap low over his twinkling golden eyes. He attentively gazed right at her like an obedient dog. The pointy canine tooth poking out the side of his

smile was adorable too. But obviously, she didn't recognize him.



“Wh-Who are you?”

“Eh? It’s me.”

It *couldn’t* be, but she had no better guess, so she uttered the name of the companion who’d been gone for some time, “...Wolfie?”

“That’s right!”

How can that be? How could my four-footed friend turn human in an instant?

Oswald broke through her confusion to curtly explain, “I can’t have him walking around the city in his wolf form.”

He’s got that right, Nichika was thinking, when the high-spirited Wolfie reached forward and hugged her with so much force that she thought his bushy tail would pop out.

“Hey! Hey! What do you think of my human form? Is it cool?”

“Agh, Wolfie, you’re heavy...”

Though he had the appearance of a child, he felt heavy on her back as he nuzzled her neck. She was trying to escape his wolf hug when Oswald turned to them.

“Oh yeah, what were you saying you found being sold?”

“Right! Take a look at this!”

The wolf boy finally hopped off her back and loudly tugged a newspaper from under his shirt. He unfurled it and held it up over his head for them to see, pointing out a tiny advertisement printed on the bottom right corner of the page.

“See this? This article here is—”

“Wait,” Oswald spoke over him, suddenly suspicious, “Where did you get the money to buy that from?”

“Money?”

From around the street corner right behind the blank-faced wolfboy, a big man in an apron angrily raced in to the shopping street. Impatiently raking his

gaze from one side of the street to the other, his eyes locked with Nichika's. His expression furiously transformed into that of a rampaging bull.

"GET BACK HERE! YOU LITTLE THIEF!" The man came charging at her with a club raised overhead.

"Eep?!" Nichika jumped backward.

She frantically turned to ask what to do, but the other two were already running down the street!

Déjà vu surging through her, she took after them while screaming, "You're doing this AGAIN?! Is this a *pattern* for you guys?!"

"Wolfie, you damned mongrel! Didn't I teach you that if you're gonna steal, you have to do it in a way you won't get caught?!"

"Aren't you disciplining him for the wrong thing?!"

SOMEHOW, they succeeded in shaking the furious shopkeeper off their tail and escaped in to some backstreet that was devoid of activity.

Nichika was rapidly coming to regret her decision. Panting heavily and bent forward with her hands on her knees, she muttered remorsefully, "It was a mistake to follow this guy after all..." But right after the thought had left her mouth, her optimistic personality rebounded, and she clenched her fists and strengthened her resolve. "No! It should be possible to rehabilitate this man's horrible, broken personality! That's right! Maybe I was dropped into this world with that as my purpose!"

"What are you mumbling to yourself about?"

Nichika lifted her gaze from the ground and saw Oswald leaning against a wall, shamelessly reading the stolen newspaper. Despite his brazen attitude, she offered him her honest opinion. "Um! It's not too late, so I think you should apologize to the shopkeeper and pay for that!"

"Is your brain smaller than a water flea? Do you want to get tossed in jail?" He flicked her head.

"Ouch!" She staggered back from the stinging pain.

Oswald narrowed his eyes on her, lowered the finger he'd flicked her with, and continued in exasperation, "You don't seem to have any common sense, so let me fill in whatever hole you have in your head. Shoplifting is a capital crime in this city."

"It is?!"

"What would you do if it were? Don't offer careless advice if you don't know anything about the area."

"Wait, so that was a lie?!"

"At worst, we'd get a stern warning and pay a fine. But I'm not paying."

"You really are the worst of the worst!"

Wow. Just wow. I have to give him credit for his skill in talking his way out of things. But, right as Nichika decided that she needed to change her approach with him, she realized they were missing something—the boy who was supposed to be right behind them was gone.

"Hm? Where's Wolfie?!" She poked her head back into the main street and glanced around, but she couldn't see his unruly brown hair anywhere. The blood drained from her face as she grew worried. "Wh-What should we do? Did he get caught?"

"Not my problem," Oswald answered, unconcerned.

She leveled him with a sharp glare. Then, forgetting his warning from only moments ago, she voiced the first thing that came to mind, "Aren't you worried? Aren't you *family*?!"

Oswald's eyes narrowed to slits. "That animal is my servant. Don't get the wrong idea. *I have no family.*" His low growl, tight with restrained emotions, reverberated through the backstreet.

"You don't...?"

"Let's go. You don't have to worry about that stupid wolf. I don't need him if he kicks the bucket over this."

Reluctant to say more in the face of the icy aura around him, Nichika followed him in silence.

Chapter 9: Girl, Baits

SEASIDE Blue had two ports: a seaport and a port built into the cliffside.

Nichika's jaw dropped when they arrived at the cliff port that had been out of sight from atop the hillock looming over the city. A scene so fantastic it completely overturned everything she'd imagined when the port had first been described to her unfurled before her eyes.

"Ooooh!"

Countless planks and buildings jutted out from the cliff, and many winged creatures were berthed within. Nichika was shocked by the array of species.

"Ch-Chickens? Pigs are flying! Wow, what is *that*? A rabbit?!"

All of the animals were large enough for people to ride and were outfitted with saddles as if they were to be used like public transportation. Pointing at the various creatures flapping and grooming their wings, Nichika repeatedly smacked Oswald on the shoulder.

"This is so awesome! Are they alive? They aren't machines, are they?!"

"Ow! Don't hit me, moron!"

Telling her not to be excited was impossible. She watched a man mount a winged chestnut horse and take off toward the sea—*this* was what it meant to be in a fantasy world.

"So cool! I wonder if I can ride one too?" Nichika breathed, lost in awe of the sight...until she noticed a crowd of people aggressively shoving their way onto the largest loading dock. "What's going on over there?"

"The large ferries for long-distance travel haven't been taking off. Today marks the third day of rising tempers from passengers who want to cross the sea..." Oswald abruptly tossed the newspaper on Nichika's face. "Goes to show that reading the paper comes in handy sometimes."

"Bwah!" Nichika pulled the newspaper off and unfurled it. She was greeted

with monochrome pictures in motion: a middle-aged man in a uniform was apologetically bowing over and over again to passengers. She couldn't read the letters, but she got the gist from that. "Large ferries? Did they break down or something?"

Looking around the port revealed a distinct shortage in creatures big enough for transporting large amounts of cargo or people in one go. Ignoring her question, Oswald briskly set off toward the angry crowd.

"As I have stated, we are terribly sorry, but all transfers remain undetermined at this time... We can unfortunately offer nothing to those who may be in a hurry besides the advice to either take a detour by traveling by land or by boarding a boat—"

"Don't give us that load of crap! Who the hell would choose those dangerous routes?!"

"Seriously! Krakens are showing up and attacking boats, you know!"

"And I get terrible seasickness! I throw up unless I travel by air!"

As the travelers continued to jostle the crewmen around, Oswald slid between them and smoothly caught one of the young uniformed men by the collar. Slipping into an overly polite tone, he asked, "May I ask you a question? I'm terribly sorry to take up your time, but I am in a rush. I'll lose out on one million gems if I'm late to business negotiations with the Cherry Blossom Kingdom over a spice deal..."

"Now, it wouldn't be strange for the aviation company to cover some of the damages for a loss caused by their inability to properly operate their business, would it? By the way, what is your name? Oh, I see it on your nametag there. Jim, is it? I'll remember that. I'll make sure to mention you should the need arise later. I hope you don't mind."

"Please don't!" The young crewman cried out.

"....." Nichika narrowed her eyes on Oswald.

What are you, a loan shark? Swallowing back her impulse to say that aloud, she silently watched their interaction unfold. It didn't take long before the young crewman was tearfully apologizing.

“I-I’m so, so sorry! P-Please relay your grievances to our headquarters. I’m sorry, I’ve only joined this company half a year ago. I am in no position to take responsibility, really!”

Seeing the crewman’s shaking fingertips, Oswald snorted and let go of his collar. Turning to walk away from the screaming mob, he grinned evilly. “This might be an unexpected chance to make some money.”

“What are you going to do?” Nichika asked.

“Witches earn their keep off of trouble like this. Remember that.”

Nichika had a bad premonition about what was to come. Regardless, she went on following him anyway.

They left the harbor and hiked up the cliffside a ways until they reached a building with an orange roof.

“Whale Aviation Company” was written on the signboard hanging from the building built on top of the steep cliff—or so Nichika was told.

“It’s super inconvenient not being able to read...” she muttered.

“Why don’t you learn from Wolfie? Having a teacher of his caliber is just right for an idiot who’s forgotten how to read our common language.”

Nichika snapped. “Seriously, why do you only speak in offensive ways?! You keep on calling me idiot this, moron that—my name is *Nichika*, you hear me?!”

“Uh-huh. Pipe down.” Despite the angry shouts at his back, Oswald casually pushed the orange door open and headed straight for the reception desk. Leaning forward, he placed both of his hands firmly on the desk, startling the receptionist.

“W-Welcome. What business do you have here today...?”

“May you be so kind as to inform your president that a passing witch interested in solving all your problems has graciously dropped by?”

The woman gasped at his thinly veiled irreverence. Nichika brought her hand to her head, cringing.

Rushing to her feet, the receptionist nearly tripped over her chair on the way

out of the room as she fumbled over her words, “P-Please wait just a moment!”

But Oswald ignored her and simply barged into the president’s office. Casually taking a chair without an invitation, he leaned back, crossed his long legs, and rudely propped his feet up on the low table in front of him.

“Wh-Wh-Who are you people?!” the president stuttered. Naturally, he was flustered. Watching him repetitively wipe sweat from his head with a handkerchief as his eyes darted between them, Nichika sympathized with his plight. She really was starting to hate her master.

“How do you do? I’m Witch Oswald. I’ll dispense with the tedious greetings and cut straight to the point. I have the power to resolve all the problems your company is currently facing.”

“Excuse me?!”

“Allow me to confirm the situation first: your large-scale ferry ‘Whale’ suddenly disappeared one day, throwing your operations into disarray ever since. Is my assessment correct?”

The president couldn’t afford to show any weakness after the media had gone and written whatever they’d wanted about the situation. He cautiously surveyed Oswald with a stiff expression and replied, “You don’t have to...point out what I already know. We are in the middle of a wide-scale search as we speak.”

“Judging from the circumstances, the Whale couldn’t have gone far yet. There aren’t many places to hide such a large vessel, after all. How about it? Won’t you try entrusting your troubles with me? I will be sure to locate it right away and bring it back before that mob out there decides they would be better off lynching the man in charge than wasting their time with crewmen.”

The man paled, wiping more sweat from his head, his beady eyes instantly seeking out the room’s only exit.

Nichika was wowed by how adept her master proved to be at the art of casual conversation and threatening. He’d cunningly ensnared his opponent in the palm of his hand and was now quickly advancing the negotiation. She could only watch his ploy develop with wide eyes.

“C-Can you really do something about it?!”

“I can. In three days—no, two days—I should be able to make everything turn in your favor. As for my fee...”

“I’ll pay it! It’s a pittance compared to the profits I’ll save if you resolve this issue!”

“Then our negotiations are complete. Oh, and I don’t mind if my compensation is contingent upon success. Well then, I shall report back to you once there is progress.”

The negotiations had been settled in less than five minutes since Oswald had rudely barged into the room. And now, after tossing some sort of paper roll to the president, he briskly exited the room. Nichika hastily bowed her head in parting and ran after him.

“You can really resolve this in three days? How?”

“I don’t even need three days. But if I said I could solve the issue right now, he’d see that I’m taking advantage of his pathetic situation and jacking up the price, so I said three days. I’ll solve the issue immediately and tack on an extra fee for it.”

“Then, you already know exactly what to do?”

“As if. I’m going to start my investigation now.”

“You’ve got no plan at all!”

I have to tip my cap to his shameless ability to take his confidence this far. He’ll live on as a conman even if he makes all witches go out of business.

While Nichika was internally marveling over his abilities, Oswald pulled some suspicious witch contraption from his pocket. It was a black and charcoal-like object in the shape of a misshapen bird. Poking it with his fingertip, he ordered, **“O birds, O wind, O spirits, become my eyes, for I am one without wings, and open the door to the world.”**

The charcoal contraption shuddered to life and suddenly soared into the sky. As they watched it rise, Oswald gave Nichika a basic explanation. “That’s one of the tools of the trade and part of my merchandise, Bird of Vision. It can’t do

anything but fly above a region and produce a record of what it looks like, but it comes in incredibly handy during investigations like this.”

The little bird flew high into the sky until it ran out of energy and fell back down. Plummeting toward the ground, it crashed smack into the parchment Oswald had spread out right below it.

SPLAT.

Nichika grimaced. “Yuck.”

The bird splattered black liquid across the parchment and stopped moving. The liquid oozing from it acted like ink, dyeing an image on the parchment. It was a rough monochromatic sketch of a bird-eye view of the area, like one you might capture with an aerial camera.

Feeling cold sweat trickle down her back from the disturbing spectacle, Nichika had to ask, “...Couldn’t you have made it work in a less grotesque way?”

“It falls within the realm of reason and logic, so what’s it matter?”

Oswald pinched a wing of the bird’s corpse between his fingertips—at least, that’s what it looked like to Nichika—and disposed of it. Then he studied the map made from its guts and began gleefully making inferences about where the Whale could be hiding.

“I sincerely doubt that such a ridiculously large transportation vessel would be able to go far in only a few days. With that in mind, we should look for places nearby that could hide something of that size... That narrows our search area down to vast forests or caves. See here? This cliff has the ideal cave system. It’s done well in hiding the vessel, but you can see traces of a giant creature moving around the area. And there’s a lake nearby, so it doesn’t have to worry about drying up. In all likelihood, the Whale is here.”

“No way...!” Surprise swept across Nichika’s face. She didn’t think he’d be able to pinpoint its location with a single picture. His confidence hadn’t been a bluff.

Oswald yawned, then removed his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “How boring. The transport vessel most likely got sick of its work and is going on strike. We’ll go find it tomorrow, tranq it, and finish the job. Let’s go back to the inn for

today and sleep.”

“Tranq it? How?” Nichika asked, already getting the feeling that he was up to no-good.

Oswald glibly responded with a rather heinous answer. “With a brainwashing potion, of course. Just the other day, I managed to complete the perfect medicine for it. It paralyzes the brain into complacency, so that the subject won’t think of anything other than obedience. That’ll ensure it’ll never even think of going on another strike again.”

“There’s a limit to how cruel you can be, even when forcing someone into submission!”

“By the way, using this on humans turns them into mindless zombies—”

“You’re forbidden from *EVER* using that on me!” Nichika stressed, internally vowing to never ever consume anything Oswald handed her again. “Didn’t this Whale run away because it had good reason to? It’s horrible to brainwash it without learning why it left!”

“You’re really loud, you know that? Stop spouting lines like you’re the heroine of a trashy pulp-fiction novel.”

“Well if that’s what I am, then *you’re* the Demon Lord of All Evil!”

Their loud quarrel started to draw attention from the people around them. Noticing their stares, Nichika impatiently held up her index finger in front of Oswald. “One day! Please give me a single day! I’ll make sure to find a solution that benefits both the president *and* the Whale.”

“Oh, will you now?” Oswald snickered mockingly as he directed a perversely entertained gaze down on her. “I’m not *unwilling* to wait, but what are you going to do if you fail to solve anything after running off that big mouth of yours? Hm?”

“Uhh...” Giving up after coming this far wouldn’t fit her personality. Determined, Nichika balled her fists and stoked the flames by declaring, “If that happens, I’ll do any one thing you ask of me!”

“OH my gosh, I’m such a big fat idiot! Why’d I have to go and say that?!”

Nichika had parted ways with her master to investigate on her own and was now walking along the seaside port smacking her head over her rash decision making.

“I have no idea what that sadistic witch will order me to do if I fail! I really have no choice but to solve the issue by myself!”

She resolutely lifted her eyes from the ground, deciding to begin her investigation by locating the perfect partner to help her out. She took a good whiff of the air.

“Smells delicious—this should be the one I’m looking for...” Spotting a food stall grilling freshly caught fish, she approached it and was half-exasperated to find a young boy “sitting” in the fragrant billowing smoke with drool trickling down his chin. “...Wolfie.”

“Eh? Oh? Nichika?! Wow! What a coincidence!”

“Y-Yeah. I guess you could call it that?”

“Miss,” the street vendor addressed her, “would you mind taking that crazy boy away with you now? He’s been sticking around drooling like a dog for a while, making it difficult for me to get customers.”

“Ahahaha. Sorry about that!” Nichika apologized and quickly snatched up Wolfie’s hand to drag him away from the food stall. But no matter how hard she pulled and pulled, she barely inched forward.

“Nooooo!” he howled, “The baby kraken BBQ! My crockpot shellfish!”

“Wolfie, *C’MON!*”

Laboriously digging her feet into the ground with each step, it took all her strength to pry him away. Finally, after she had succeeded, she turned to scold him with a fierce face.

“For heaven’s sake, you worried me! Don’t go off on your own like that!”

“I’m sorry. I was just wandering around following the yummy smells!”

Nichika sighed and pulled a strawberry candy from her pocket. “I’ll give you

this, so control yourself!”

“Yippee!”

Cheerful mood restored, Wolfie eagerly ripped off the packaging and threw the candy in his mouth. Rolling the round hard candy from side to side on his tongue, a radiant smile broke upon his face.

“It’s really sweet! Super tasty!”

“There’s something I want your assistance with, Wolfie. Will you help me?”

“Mm? Only if Master says it’s okay.”

Wolfie and Oswald were familiar and master—did they have some sort of contract in place? Surprisingly, Wolfie was difficult to win over. But Nichika had nothing to lose by persisting. Pulling another candy from her pocket, she dangled it in front of him.

“...I can give you another one if you help me, though?”

“I’ll do it!”

Why is he so easy to understand? Nichika wondered as they walked to their next destination. *My life is so much easier because he’s such a gluttonous wolf.*

On the way, she overheard some fishermen complaining. Intrigued, her feet stopped.

“It’s no good. I heard a kraken appeared at the southern fishing harbor too.”

“Why have they suddenly increased in number out of the blue? We’ll lose our livelihoods if this continues.”

“Rumors say that the world’s been thrown out of balance because the Spirit King has passed...”

Spirit King? As Nichika pondered whether something like a king of spirits existed in this world, Wolfie called out to her.

“Nichika! What’s wrong?”

He’d run on ahead and was waiting for her to hurry and catch up to him.

“Oh, sorry! I’m coming now!”

“...**SO** there you have it,” Nichika concluded, finishing her summary, “I want to investigate the Whale’s circumstances.”

“Ooh, so that’s what you guys were doing while I was gone?”

Now with Wolfie at her side, Nichika had returned to the cliff port. It was time to commence gathering information from the locals.

She approached one of the resting two-person aviation vessels classified as “Tomnpa,” and tried speaking to it. “H-Hello?”

“Oink?!”

The pig-like creature spun around, startled by her voice, and warily observed her before prudishly sticking its nose up at her. Its skin was baby pink, and it had the same white wings folded on its back as all the other vessels.

“You’re a living creature after all...right? Are you all born with wings?”

“Oink! Oink!”

“I was born and raised as a Tomnpa, miss—or so it says.”

“You understand what it’s saying, Wolfie?”

Wolfie rubbed a finger under his nose and proudly puffed out his chest. “Sure I do! After all, I’m a member of the Long-eared Tribe, Hasse. I understand most of our languages. Ehehe.”

“Hasse?”

“It’s the classification for species that look like animals but can shapeshift into human forms.”

So he didn’t transform into a boy by using one of Oswald’s Witch Items? If he can shapeshift, why didn’t he just go to town as a boy instead of staying in wolf form? Wouldn’t that have stopped people from being scared to death of him?

Tomnpa oinked loudly before Nichika could question Wolfie further. *Shoot. I’ll ask Wolfie about it later. Either way, having an interpreter on hand is great!*

Nichika filed away her questions for Wolfie and resumed asking the questions she had for the waiting Tomnpa instead. “I heard Whale has been gone for

about three days. Did it say anything before disappearing?”

“Oink! Oin! Uah!”

“‘She said nothing at all. She has always been the reticent type who will not say more than is strictly necessary.’ Or so he says.”

“Whale is female then? In that case, were there any drastic changes before her disappearance? Any information helps. Like, was she acting funny?”

“Oiiinnnnnn! Oink! Kikipuuah!”

“Really?” Wolfie raised his voice in surprise.

“What? What did he say?”

Wolfie interpreted Tomnpa’s words for Nichika. “Whale’s rider—basically, her partner and helmswoman—was clinging to her, crying, the night before Whale disappeared. He says she was saying, ‘At this rate, all three of us are done for.’”

“Three of us? Whale, the rider, and then who?”

“No idea,” Wolfie relayed.

THEY left Tomnpa to enjoy the rest of his break and continued walking around the cliff port asking questions until evening. All of the creatures serving as flying vessels reported that they had noticed, even if only slightly, that Whale’s behavior had been odd.

“I was right; something had to have happened. No matter how I review the information, Whale must have had a reason.”

“Like dissatisfaction over food?”

“Whale isn’t you, Wolfie,” Nichika replied in exasperation.

They had arrived at the inn. Before opening its door, she went over their plans for the next day.

“At any rate, I’ll head to that cave before Oswald tomorrow. It seems like I wasn’t wrong to think Whale is facing some serious problem.”

“You’re leaving the city, right? I’ll come with you, since it’s dangerous.”

“Thanks.”

Nichika finally opened the door and went inside the inn—and froze. The very Oswald they had been talking about was sitting in the corner of the room facing them on the first floor, in the section marked for dining. He was in the middle of his evening meal.

“Yo, detective. Is your investigation coming along swimmingly?” He greeted, grinning as he waved his fork with lettuce on it at her. He obviously believed it was impossible for her to solve the case.

Pouting, Nichika yanked the chair out across from him and noisily plopped down. “It’s going quite perfectly! Unlike you, I’m aiming for a diplomatic, peaceful solution, so it’s naturally going to take more time.”

“Hmph. Then why don’t you show me what you’ve got so far?”

Crap! I don’t even have any solid clues yet! I can’t let him know that, even if he tries to force it out of me! Nichika tightly grabbed hold of a roll in the basket on the table, careful not to make eye contact with the man sitting opposite of her.

Already finished with his meal, Oswald stood to leave. “I’m heading to my room now, but...Nichika? Come to my room before bed.”

The butter knife slipped from her fingers.

“It’s medicine time,” he said flatly.

I forgot! ...I wanted to keep forgetting about that accursed parasitic weed...

Chapter 10: Girl, Laments

SHUTTING the old-fashioned door behind her, Nichika strode into the room with the valiant expression of a soldier charging in to a decisive battle. Locking a death glare on the man in front of her, she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

“You certainly don’t look like a woman who came to ask for a favor.”

Oswald was sitting in a chair facing the window. He tilted back his wineglass before placing it down on the end table beside him. Then, resting his elbow on the armrest with his chin in his hand, he turned to look at her. His eyes caught the moonlight, giving them a mysterious hue as he calmly returned Nichika’s piercing gaze.

A slight smile danced on his lips as he provocatively called her closer, “What’s the matter? Hurry up and come over here.”

Nichika marched over to him and abruptly pulled out a quill she had borrowed from the lobby. Skepticism furrowed his brow when he recognized what she was carrying.

“...What is *that* for?”

“I’ve been thinking it over all this time. This is the only answer!” A victorious look crossed her features as if she had come up with the most genius plan. She tightened her grip on the quill with a glint in her eyes. “I’ll tickle you until you cry and take care of my needs by licking your tears!”

“Are you stupid?”

Her eyes rounded over his flat-out refusal. She one-hundred percent had not expected that answer.

“Why?! Isn’t it a good plan?!”

“You slimy one-celled snail. You expect me to lower myself to such a disgrace for you? I outright refuse. Go kick the bucket on your own time.”

“Why?! That’s not in line with our contract!”

Tears in her eyes, Nichika reached out to grab him, but cringed when he wrapped his arm around her waist. He pulled her toward him. Frantically, she tried to steady herself by thrusting her knee between his legs, and, before she knew it, found herself in a strange pose where she was looking down at his face within kissing distance. Her heartbeat accelerated against her wishes at his sudden proximity.



Oswald had removed the glasses he usually wore. She was captivated by his partially closed eyes and upturned lips.

“If I have to provide you with bodily fluid, I want to enjoy it a bit. Given the situation we find ourselves in, we might as well enjoy it together, yeah?”

“But...um...I...” Bewildered, she was finally able to avert her eyes from his face. All of this was a first for her—she hadn’t even had her first crush yet. Was it okay for her to take the lead?

“Look at me.” Oswald grabbed her chin and brought her gaze to meet his.

Nichika worried that her embarrassment was turning her redder than a tomato. *There’s no other way out of this! The rose inside me will wake up soon if I don’t do it!*

Oswald almost burst out laughing at the trembling girl who had nervously squeezed her eyes shut and was bracing herself for impact. But, he managed to restrain himself and slowly brought his lips to meet hers.

“.....”

The faint squelching sound of liquid transferring between mouths echoed in the still room. Her final gulp signaled for them to draw back from each other at the same time.

Nichika’s expression was stiff for a moment before she threw a hand over her face and fled the room.

Left alone on the chair, Oswald coldly muttered, “...What a child.”

NICHIKA dashed out of the room and to the terrace where she collapsed on the ground. Leaning her head against the railing that looked out over the port toward the ocean, she loudly wailed and let the tears fall freely down her face.

“Nichika?! What’s wrong?” Wolfie’s surprised voice joined hers as he jumped down in his original wolf form from some unknown location behind her.

Nichika continued to sob. She bawled for five minutes straight, until her crying fit receded and her hiccups stopped. She was lucky that no one else had

come out on the terrace. Wolfie had sat down beside her and rubbed himself against her back until she had finally calmed down.

“I-I’ve never even fallen in love with a boy before...but now I have to do such dirty things!” She said gazing into the distance as torches were lit in the growing gloom of evening, the sound of the ocean easily heard over the cacophony of drunkards in the nearby taverns.

“Nichika, do you hate kissing Master?”

Nichika rubbed at her wet eyes until they were dry and weakly shook her head. Trying to organize her jumbled thoughts, she voiced her true feelings, “That’s not it—I’m uneasy. I’m worried that when I finally get back to my world and fall in love with someone for real, I’ll keep thinking back to what I’m doing now.”

“Hm? I don’t get it... Can you spell it out for me?”

“Kissing feels too good!”

If she was being honest with herself, Oswald was an exceptional kisser. His tongue had parted her lips and mischievously slipped in to play with hers, running across the back of her teeth—just remembering it made her burn with embarrassment.

“AAAAH! DARN IT! Why is that perv so damn *good* at it?! I’m a beginner with no experience! He should take it a little slower with me!”

“O-Okay?”

“What am I supposed to do, Wolfie? Am I weird? I don’t care about him in the least. Does that make me a pervert who just enjoys kissing, even without love?!”

“C-Calm down, Nichika.”

“I don’t want to be like that!” She shook her head back and forth to knock the memory out, sending her hair flying with the jerky movement.

How could her body genuinely enjoy it when she had been so against it? Was she secretly a nymphomaniac? Her emotions were in utter chaos because of how her body and mind had reacted so differently to the same thing.

“Ugh....waah....” she resumed sobbing.

Wolfie gently pressed his muzzle against the corner of her eye to wipe away the fresh outburst of tears. Nichika slowly turned her head toward him and found his tail wagging so hard it could break a rock.

“In that case, why not think of kissing as a way of greeting?”

“Greeting?”

“Yup. For wolves, we do it when we’re happy and grateful. Just think of what you’re doing as a daddy kissing his daughter.”

She cracked up at the word daddy. “Pft! Haha! I-I don’t want that guy for a dad! And I don’t want to think of a dad kissing his daughter that way either!”

“Hehe.”

Laughing her heart out was cathartic and left her feeling refreshed. She pulled her knees to her chest and gazed up at the night sky, where countless stars twinkled in different colors.

“That makes sense though. Maybe it all comes down to how I look at it...”

“That’s right. I’ll kiss you too, Nichika.” Wolfie planted a kiss on her cheek, his whiskers tickling her.

“Ahaha!” She giggled at the ticklish feeling.

She was truly grateful for how innocent this wolf was.

“Thank you, Wolfie. You’re right. It’s my own responsibility, since I did this to myself. I can’t go crying over it every time. Oswald is only doing this because he lost the bet and ended up in a contract with me. It’s misdirecting my anger to take it out on him, huh?”

“Yup, yup! You’re much cuter when you smile, Nichika!”

Wolfie’s cute grin was revitalizing. He had always been there for her since she arrived in this strange new world; had he not found her in that forest, she might’ve died a pitiful death. It was impossible to show how grateful she felt.

“Now go to bed! You need to sleep, or you won’t wake up tomorrow.”

“Good point.” Nichika got to her feet, twirled toward him, then knelt down

and wrapped him in a tight hug, hoping it would convey her gratitude even just a little. “Thank you so much. Good night.”

“Ehehe. You’re welcomeee.”

Chapter 11: Girl, Manipulated

THE next day, Nichika and Wolfie commenced their plan before the sun had fully risen. Relying on Oswald's map they'd stealthily borrowed, they arrived at a forest located about ten minutes away from the port city.

"Found it. This is the place." Standing in front of the cave marked on the map, they checked the surrounding area to confirm it was the right place.

"Do you think they're really here?"

"Hm..." Back in wolf form, Wolfie angled his ears up like satellite dishes and reported what he heard. "I hear what sounds like deep, slow breathing coming from inside."

"Let's check it out then."

With Wolfie brushing against her legs, Nichika felt her way along the dimly lit cave. Timidly, she tried calling out to whoever or whatever was inside. Her quiet, "hello?" bounced off the cave walls and vanished within. No response came back.

"Strange. Somebody is definitely here..."

Wolfie was about to step forward, when the sensation of bloodlust suddenly shuddered through his fur. Less than a second later, something whizzed by at high speed.

"Watch out!" He leapt, chomped on to the back of Nichika's neckband, and dragged her down to the ground.

"AAH!"

An arrow flew within centimeters of her head and pierced into the tree behind her with a loud thunk. The color drained from her face when she looked up from where she sat, sprawled on the ground, and saw the still-shaking arrow lodged in the tree.

"Be careful! Somebody's here!" Wolfie warned Nichika right as someone

appeared from the dark depths of the cave. It was a girl of similar age to Nichika, and she was nocking an arrow in her bowgun.

“Who are you? What business do you have here?!” she demanded.

Her hair was chopped short; her eyes sharply angled. She didn’t look like she was playing around. Noticing the goggles hanging from her neck, Nichika guessed that she was the Whale’s helmswoman.

The girl set the next arrow with a click, without giving Nichika time to explain herself.

“Hurry up and scram! There’s nothing here!”

“Wh-Whoa! H-Hold on a minute... Eep!” Wolfie yelped, jumping away from the barrage of arrows she fired at him.

Still on the ground, Nichika mustered her courage and held up both hands in surrender, showing that she hadn’t come for a fight. Then, in a quivering voice, she called out, “Wait! We didn’t come here to capture Whale! We came here to warn you!”

The girl with the bowgun stopped firing at Wolfie and swung it towards Nichika as she eyed her skeptically. Without letting her guard down, she kept the bowgun’s muzzle trained on Nichika.

“Warn me about what?”

“A man worse than the devil is coming this way with a tranq filled with a brainwashing potion!”

“E-Ehhhh?!” Wolfie interjected, “Nichika, saying he’s worse than the devil is a bit—”

“It’s the truth!” Nichika immediately shot down the wolf’s loyal attempt to defend his master and looked straight into the helmswoman’s eyes. “He’s going to use a potion to screw with Whale’s mind. And that’s totally the wrong way to go about this! That’s why I beat him here!”

“You’re really asking me to believe that?”

“I understand it sounds like a made-up story, but please, at least believe me when I say that I want to save Whale. I’m on your side,” Nichika beseeched.

Silence fell between them for a long moment. Finally, the girl exhaled and lowered her bowgun. Then, beckoning Nichika with her free hand, she said, “Follow me. Let’s speak inside.”

THE inside of the cave was brighter than Nichika had expected. Dim green lights glowed off the cave walls.

“Luminous moss is native to this cave. You can see pretty well in here even at night,” explained the girl walking in front of them. The corners of her eyes softened slightly. “Sorry about suddenly attacking you like that. Now that I’ve thought it through, there’s no way the president’s henchmen would foolishly charge in from the front like you did.”

“Foolishly....”

“Aha, sorry. Forgive me if that offended you. I’ve never been good at making small talk. The name’s Mihm. I’m Whale’s partner and helmswoman.”

Nichika shook her head. “Don’t be sorry, I totally understand why you’re on edge. I’m Nichika.”

“I’m Wolfie!” Wolfie announced cheerily.

“Whale is farther down this way. She’s edgy right now, so keep quiet.”

Nichika swallowed the lump in her throat as they turned the corner. When she saw the gigantic body just around the bend, she found herself at a loss for words.

At first, she had thought it was a blue wall. But on closer inspection, she could see the wall inflating and deflating—no, it was *breathing*. Jerkily sweeping her gaze to the right filled her vision with the morning sunlight shimmering across a wide pond that spanned from one side of the cave’s huge clearing to the other.

The giant whale she had thought was a blue wall directed one glaring eye at her.

Mihm promptly stepped forward to placate her. “Maria, they aren’t the enemy. Don’t attack them.”

Sweat trickled awkwardly down Nichika’s back under the piercing gaze of the

gong-sized eye. But Maria heaved a long, drawn-out sigh and closed her enormous eyes. Mihm gestured for Nichika to sit down on the glowing moss as she took a seat next to Maria. From their spot they could look out over the massive pond, and the giant hole in the cave ceiling that let the morning sunlight seep in.

“She’s high-strung because she’ll be giving birth soon.”

“Giving birth...?”

Nichika thought back to the information she had gathered on how the night before Maria had disappeared, Mihm had clung to the whale’s body and said, *“At this rate, all three of us are done for.”*

“So that’s why you said the three of you were done for on the night before you vanished!” Nichika impulsively exclaimed, right as the pieces fit together for her. Her loud voice echoed through the cavern, and she quickly clasped her hands over her mouth. Continuing in a whisper, she asked, “Three, as in: you, Maria, and the baby in her belly, right?”

“Y-Yeah, but how do you know about that?”

Nichika explained how she had been investigating Mihm and Maria’s disappearance in Seaside Blue and let them know that all the other vessels were worried about them since they had absconded without telling anyone.

“They’re all worried about you. Why did you leave without saying anything?”

“Because...!” Mihm gritted her teeth and balled her hands. “Gollum—that *wretched* president—it’s all his fault!”

The story went something like this: Gollum, the current company president, had committed horrible acts several years ago in order to boot the former president of the company out of power. He had stolen the position he now enjoyed, and continued to exploit others while treating his employees like disposable tools.

“Among all the employees he’s horribly mistreated, Maria got it the worst because she’s our only large aerial vessel. He forced her to work from the wee hours of the morning until the late hours of the night. He barely gave her any breaks for rest and has almost worked her to death more than once!”

“How horrible...” Nichika sympathized.

One day at work, Mihm had realized Maria was pregnant. The discovery had sent not joy, but dread running through her veins. Instead of being able to rejoice for the coming life, she had been filled with fear for her partner’s safety.

“Whales have huge bodies, but they are very sensitive creatures. Working or moving too much during this critical time is dangerous for not only the baby, but Maria too.”

“Did you tell Mr. President that?” Wolfie asked, pawing at some of the glowing moss on the slick ground.

Mihm silently shook her head. “I can’t tell him. It’s a given he’d take away the child if he knew about it. I plan to send the calf away as soon as Maria gives birth.”

“Right away? Is it okay to separate the baby from the mother that fast?” Nichika inquired, concerned.

“...I believe that’s better than subjecting a child to slavery under that tyrannical president.” Mihm wore the gloomy expression of someone who had completely given up hope. She stood and moved to the water’s edge to lovingly stroke her partner’s face. “Maria told me she was forced to work as an aerial transport vessel since the day she was born, so she doesn’t know any other way of life. Her only wish is for her child to have what she didn’t—the ability to go out and see the world.”

Entrusting her unachieved hopes and dreams to her child... The choice struck a deep chord within Nichika. Her own mother had given up so much to raise her and her younger sister as well.

Hopping to her feet, Nichika earnestly offered, “If that’s the case, I’ll help out too! When is she going to give birth?”

“She’s at the point it wouldn’t be unusual for her to go into labor anytime now. But it’s my first time seeing a Whale give birth, so I can’t say what will happen for sure...”

“Okay! Just you wait. I’ll do whatever it takes to persuade the devil!” Nichika sprung around to take a big step forward, about to burst into a run, when a

frigid voice echoed through cavern.

“You should pray that the devil you speak of isn’t me.”

Nichika’s raised foot hit the ground, and she skidded to a halt, feeling dread wash over her as she connected the voice to its owner. Her sour-faced master appeared from the shadows of a boulder.

“O-Oswald. What a coincidence...meeting you...here...ahaha.”

“What’s coincidental about this, stupid apprentice? Who’s the devil? Hmm?”

Nichika retreated several steps, cold sweat chilling her fingertips. Since when had he begun listening from?

Ignoring his statue of an apprentice, Oswald took a good look at the massive whale and scoffed, “So you really were here. Stop deserting your job and get back to work. If you don’t hop to it, I’ll tranq you with some special medicine.”

“Wait!” Nichika said frantically, rushing to explain what she had discovered since arriving at the cave, “The Whale is pregnant! She went into hiding to protect her baby!”

But the man simply leveled her with an icy glare.

“What’s that to me?” Oswald asked indifferently.

“How could y—”

“Whether she gives birth to the child or loses it, she has a duty as an aerial vessel to complete her job.”

“I *dare* you to say that again!” Mihm burst in furiously, rising protectively in front of Maria.

Oswald glanced at her with disdain. “You’re the Whale Rider? Are you aware of *who* is filling in the hole that megafish left? The small vessels are being pushed to the limit to transport what was originally the bigger vessel’s responsibility. They get no sleep at night. From morning till night, they’re being worked to the bone. The other vessels are starting to collapse from overworking.”

“.....”

“If this keeps up, some will die. And it’ll be all *your fault* for prioritizing an unborn life you can’t even guarantee will survive—”

“**STOP IT!**” Nichika screamed in an ear-piercing cry, unable to take his crap any longer. *Why is this man only ever capable of saying cruel things?!* “You’re horrible,” she denounced, “What’s wrong with respecting the soon-to-be born?”

“Ha! The very ignorance you excel at is rearing its ugly head again, Nichika. Humans can choose to increase the number of aerial vessels by however much they want, whenever they want. That whale’s baby was manufactured from nothing more than this sorry girl’s ego.”

“.....”

“Wh-What does that mean?”

Nichika looked back at Mihm—her eyes were downcast, and she was fidgeting uncomfortably.

Oswald went on with a cynical smile, “Dissatisfied with her poor working conditions, the rider cooked up this whole thing. She had the Whale impregnated so she could have a ‘just’ cause to rationalize her escape. She’s just using it to make people sympathize with her and think, ‘She had no choice but to flee.’ And you fell for it, perfectly.”

“...You’re wrong,” Mihm demurred.

“Good for you, rider. You got a nice little vacation.”

“You’re **WRONG!**” Her hysteric shriek bounced off the walls and echoed down the cavern tunnels until it vanished. Her eyes were blazing with the raging fury of her exploding emotions. “It was really just a coincidence that Maria conceived a child! I didn’t make it happen!”

“.....” He stared at her, unimpressed.

Unable to withstand the weight of his burrowing eyes, Mihm gradually began to tremble, tears spilling from her yellow eyes. “...But...you might be...right about one thing... I thought I could escape if I...used this as the reason.” She fell to her knees. In a ghost of a voice, she cried, “I’m sorry, Maria. I’m a horrible

person...”

“Mihm...”

No one said anything more. Even the normally talkative wolf sat perfectly still without twitching a single whisker.

The stillness of the cavern was interrupted by a sudden outbreak of movement as a gang of men clothed in all black charged inside.

“She’s here!”

“Mr. Gollum, she’s this way. Please watch your step.”

“Wh-What’s going on?” Nichika asked, surprised, as yet another man walked into the cave’s clearing.

He looked familiar, this man who had stuffed his burly body inside a yellow-striped suit of poor taste. The seams of his suit bulged. He panted heavily as he kicked a rock with the tip of his leather shoe.

“I’ve finally found you, after all the trouble you put me through. You’ve forced me to hire bodyguards and travel to this miserable place.”

Mihm was shocked to see President Gollum—the root of her problems—show up in person.

Oswald spread his arms wide in a warm welcome for his client. “My utmost apologies for troubling you with coming all this way. I thought it would be best if you confirmed the situation with your own eyes, Mr. President. Is there no mistake that this Whale belongs to your company?”

His sudden change in attitude infuriated Nichika so much that she marched right over to his rotten face and yelled, “You called them here?! *Heartless jerk!* If you know the situation, then—mmph!”

Her angry yells were stifled by Oswald’s hand. As she struggled, he flashed her a wicked smirk. “You might find yourself thinking you can hear the incompetent sounds of a fledgling attempting to speak the human language, but please pay it no mind.”

“Mmph! Mmphhh!”

“Oswald, you are an exceptional witch. That is most certainly our Whale indeed. Make it return right back to work.”

“As you wish.”

“MMMGGH!”

Nichika waited for a moment when Oswald let down his guard to counterattack, but her freedom was swiftly stolen by a black string he pulled from his pocket. With her neatly wrapped up in the magic string, he lowered her to the ground.

“Watch how things play out from there,” he commanded, “This is how a witch works.”

Nichika begged Wolfie for help with her eyes, but he sadly shook his head. He couldn’t move against his master’s wishes.

“S-Stop. Don’t come near me!” Mihm shrunk away as the shadow-dressed man came for her. Oswald held what looked like a syringe.

Please! Maria truly cares for her child. Let her give birth! Please! Nichika begged in muffled noises.

“.....” Oswald didn’t reply.

I’m begging you with all my heart!

“What? What’s she moaning over?” Gollum interrupted, unaware of Maria’s pregnancy.

Oswald’s eyes narrowed to crinkled slits. “Who knows? I can’t understand her,” he curtly replied in a voice devoid of emotion.

“Then do the deed already! Fuhyahyahyahya! Now we can reopen for business!” Gollum brayed with laughter, reveling in his avarice. His disgusting smirk bared his yellow teeth, giving Nichika an uncontrollable urge to look away. “You filthy animals created a hell of a lot of problems for me. You’ll be paying me back until the day you die!”

“No...please don’t...” Mihm wrung out.

Oswald’s brainwashing syringe was a few centimeters away from Mihm’s skin.

Nichika thrashed violently until she tore her mouth free from the gag held in place by the magic string and let out a piercing scream—

“DON’T DO IT!”

ZAP!

“?!”

A tiny electric current surged through Oswald’s hand, shocking him into dropping the syringe. Swerving around, he aimed a chilling glare at his apprentice writhing on the ground.

“Are you trying to get in my way?” he challenged.

Nichika stared right back into his icy eyes. Her own bold, daring eyes had turned gold. Holding his glare, she stubbornly countered him, “While you have a horrible way with words and a sick personality, you were the one who rescued me when I knew nothing about what was going on.”

“.....”

Her eyes were burning brightly. “Am I wrong for wanting to believe in you?”

“...That thought process of yours is what they call naiveté.” Oswald shifted his gaze away from her and picked up the syringe. Confirming that it hadn’t broken, he answered in an unimpassioned tone, “A job is a job. Saving you amounts to nothing more than a temporary whim on my part. But you’re going to make me wish I never saved you by interfering with my work.”

“...But I—”

“Shut your trap.”

She didn’t cry but lowered her eyes in a withered look. Oswald brought the syringe near Mihm again, but—

“.....”

He lowered his arm and stood motionless for what felt like forever before exhaling the loudest, longest sigh. As everyone watched intently to see what he was going to do next, he muttered in a rather casual voice, “Oh yeah. That reminds me, I forgot to tell you something, Miss Mihm.”

“Err? Um, me?” Mihm fumbled for words as the conversation suddenly turned to her. Oswald snapped his fingers and pushed the folder of papers that appeared into her hands.

“I forgot to give you the results of the investigation you hired me to do. Here it is.”

“I haven’t requested anything of—”

“I forgot to deliver the investigation results to you.”

“Like I said—”

“I’m telling you that I forgot to give it to you. *Zip your lips and accept it, you little punk.*”

Mihm flinched from the scathing words uttered by Oswald’s true abrasive personality and dropped her gaze to the papers crumpled in her hand. Her expression steadily grew more severe as her eyes scanned the paragraphs of tiny print.

“H-How can this be?”

“Eh? What is it? What is it?” Curiosity piqued, Wolfie put his forepaws on Mihm’s trembling arm and pulled himself up to see. Reading the investigation results aloud in his carefree, bubbly voice in her stead, he announced, “The results of the investigation into the frequent appearance of kraken in the seas around Seaside Blue Port is as follows: there is a very high chance someone is importing red kraken, which are not normally found in this region, from the southern continent of Sandny, and are intentionally releasing them into the water—”

“Wha-?! Stop that! Don’t read it!” President Gollum clumsily dashed over to snatch up the report papers, but he slipped on the moss and fell.

Mihm stared down at him, contempt sweeping over her face as a certain thought suddenly struck her. “What’s going on? ...Importing krakens? Do you mean he’s—”

“As you’ve guessed, President Gollum seems to be the one importing kraken. Boy, it caught me by surprise,” Oswald declared with theatric pomp. He

shrugged. "Travelers will naturally prefer to travel by air if dangerous monsters are attacking along the sea route. Case in point, Whale Aviation Company's business has increased exponentially since the krakens started showing up. It's the natural result, since you practically blockaded your rival's route."

"Shut up! I've done no such thing! Do you have proof?!" Gollum seethed, his face bright-red.

"Sure," Oswald coolly asserted, "I have copies of a great deal of purchase orders, invoices, receipts, and accounting books. The accounting girl readily supplied me access when I asked. You may have things officially labeled as business expenses, but do bridge girders normally break three times a month?"

"Grr..." Gollum was at a loss for words. Then, abruptly, he swiped the folder of papers from Mihm and began shredding them. Elated with his vicious success, he convulsed as laughter shook his potbelly. "How d'ya like that?! Truth is a load of crap if the evidence is destroyed!"

"In other words, you admit to it," Oswald noted. "Obviously, that was just one copy. I have the originals stashed away at my inn, naturally."

"You witch! I'll crush you along with the evidence, and it'll all turn out the same! GET 'EM!"

At Gollum's signal, the ten or so mercenaries closed in on them with their weapons drawn.

"NO!" Nichika screamed from where she laid tied up on the ground, "Don't come near me!"

"This is why we should've kept the peace and stayed on Gollum's side," Oswald commented. "Well anyway, we're going to fight back."

"Remove this blasted magic string if you want me to fight!"

Oswald sighed and raised his hand, and the magic string melted away. Nichika immediately tried to make a run for it, but his hand shot out and clamped onto her head just as fast. Then he dragged her behind a boulder, while she helplessly watched Wolfie and Mihm prepare for the fight out of the corner of her eye.

“I told you we’re fighting back. Do your ears work?”

“But how?!”

Naturally, a normal high school girl like Nichika had no means of fighting armed men. Oswald didn’t seem suited for hand-to-hand combat either, and it was impossible for Mihm and Wolfie to take on so many mercenaries. To make the situation worse, they also had to defend the immobile Maria.

“I-I’m only going to get in the way.”

“I’ll use you.”

“Excuse me?!”

She braced herself for what was going to follow that absurd statement, but he only held out a hairclip with a beautiful blue gem attached to it in place of an answer. Before she could accept or examine his offering, he snapped it into her hair. Instantly, it let out a blaring beep and buzzed in her ears, which was followed by an inexplicable sensation rushing through every nerve in her body.

“What the—What did you do to me this time?!”

“...A compatibility of sixty percent, huh? Not bad numbers for the first time.”

“Won’t you please explain what this is now?!”

Oswald grabbed Nichika by the collar as she was shaking in her boots over what was about to happen to her and tossed her out of their hiding spot behind the boulder. Giving her back a big shove, he sent her stumbling into the middle of the battlefield. At her strange entrance, every person there turned their attention on her. That alone was enough to break the stiff tension in the cavern as if they had poked a hornet’s nest with a stick.

“Kill her!” Gollum shouted, commanding the mercenaries by raising and dropping his hand.

At his signal, the mercenaries charged her at once. Her thoughts dissipated upon seeing the dull glint reflecting off the knives they brandished. She recoiled back in fear, when Oswald barked an order at her.

“Thrust your hands out!”

“Uwaaaaaah!”

She thrust her hands outward, palms open. Some sort of schema flowed into her brain and she felt the distinct sensation of something turning inside, forming some kind of force in her hands as if it were the directly concentrated energy caused by the churning inside her. Once the force grew beyond what she could contain with her hands, it fired!

“**FIRE!**” she shouted involuntarily. An enormous fireball, large enough to swallow a person whole, shot from her hands. The recoil from firing it sent her flying back, and she skidded across the cave floor on her rump.

The mercenary who took the brunt of the fireball blew past Maria, slammed into the lake, and sunk. He resurfaced unconscious, the hair on his bobbing head clearly incinerated.

“Whoaaaa! What the heck?! What was that just now?!”

“We’ve got more to take down! Get on your feet, *now!*”

Nichika didn’t have time to spare for astonishment over the supernatural phenomena taking place in her body. Frenetically pushing herself off the ground, she launched another fireball at the next mercenary. Then she ran over to Mihm and Wolfie with Oswald behind her, and the four of them fought together to protect Maria.

USED like a marionette by her master, Nichika displayed tremendous fighting ability. They finished off the rest of the mercenaries over the next few minutes of the battle. The men who had only been hired as bodyguards were overwhelmed and laid piled in heaps on the cool cave floor. Gollum, the last man standing, fell to his knees and clasped his hands together in a last-ditch plea.

“Eeek! Please don’t hurt meeeee! I’m begging you! See? I’ll do anything you want. Just spare my life!”

“The only thing I want from you right now is to leave Whale Aviation Company for good!” Mihm demanded valiantly, her bowgun trained on his face. President Gollum tripped over his feet as he fled.

Oswald reached out after the back disappearing down the cavern tunnels at a speed far faster than one would expect from his plump exterior. “AH! WAIT, you *cheapskate*! What about my reward?!”

“Ahaha. Looks like he...ran away on you....”

Oswald was on the verge of chasing after his fleeing paycheck when he heard the weakness in the barely audible voice behind him. Nichika was bent forward with her hands on her knees, shuddering haphazardly and sweating beads.

“You—”

“You didn’t get your money...but wasn’t this a peaceful resolution? It’s my win this tim—”

She lost consciousness before she finished speaking and collapsed onto the ground. Oswald quickly came over to her and held her up in his arms. His eyes widened at the heat exuding from where he placed his hand on her forehead.

I feel like I was dreaming.

I’m embracing a soft kitten that’s warm like the sun.

Now then, it’s time to go back. There’s nothing scary here.

Nothing at all.

Chapter 12: Girl, Attacked

WHEN Nichika awoke, she found herself in the same inn room she had slept in the previous night. Curtains fluttered over the window, scattering rays of gentle morning sunlight across the hardwood floor.

She sat up in a daze. Immediately, a brown-haired boy leapt on her, his eyes shimmering.

“NICHIKA! G’morning! Are you okay? Do you hurt anywhere?” He nearly spilled the contents of the washbowl he was carrying on top of his head, but he safely placed it on top of the sideboard next to her bed. Humming, he submerged a cloth in the boiling-hot water, wrung it out, and then offered it to her. “You can wipe yourself down with this.”

Nichika gratefully accepted the warm rag, still unable to fully grasp the situation. “Wolfie? Um? I....”

“We’re leaving today! I’m so glad you woke up in time!” Wolfie exclaimed, throwing the windows open.

The scenery drew an awed, breathless exclamation from her. “Wooow!”

Beyond the window, against the backdrop of the deep-blue sky, enough aerial vessels to fill the panoramic view were in flight. Recognizing the conspicuously gigantic whale among the other smaller vessels, Nichika hopped out of bed and dashed over to the open window.

“Is that Maria?!” She squinted to make out the details and counted five tiny whales flying alongside the big one. The mischievous calves were having a blast swimming around Maria. “She successfully gave birth! What a relief.”

But that means... How much time has passed? When did Maria give birth and leave the confines of that cavern?

“Hold on. How long was I asleep—”

“You’re finally awake, stupid apprentice?” A voice that could only be

described as the embodiment of disgruntled cut her short.

Nichika looked over her shoulder to find Oswald leaning against the door with his arms crossed, glowering at her. Sensing that she was in for it, she awkwardly greeted him, “M-Morning.”

“Two days. Two WHOLE days. How are you going to repay me for all the time and money I wasted because you were snoozing away?”

Her eyes grew round in surprise as he stalked over to her. *I don't think I woke up once during those two days... I was in that deep of a sleep?*

“I...slept for that long?”

“That’s not all, either. You made all my work on this job go unpaid. I’m adding the balance to your bill.” He pushed his forehead backward until she fell back into bed.

“Uwah!”

Faster than Nichika could sit back up, Oswald struck her with an ultimatum. “We have no more business in this city. We’re leaving in thirty minutes. I’m leaving behind anyone who doesn’t make it in time.”

“Aye aye, sir!” Wolfie barked.

“Th-Thirty minutes?! Wait, wait, wait! I still haven’t changed yet! And I want to bathe!”

“Then you better do it all in thirty minutes.”

“Nooooooooooooo!”

AFTER managing to get ready in less than half an hour, Nichika stood at the cliff port with a travel rucksack on her back. The large aerial vessel, Whale, just happened to be on its return flight. When it spotted them on the dock, it flew over to the port and came to a stop with a jerk. A familiar face appeared out on its deck and looked down at them.

Pushing her goggles up on her head, Mihm raised her voice loud enough to be heard below. “Nichika! You’re up?”

“Yup! Sorry for making you worry!”

Smiling brightly, Mihm jumped down from Maria without using the gangway. Nichika smiled in return as Mihm gracefully landed. She glanced around to take in the newly restored energy brimming around them in the city.

“Looks like things are finally doing well,” Nichika commented, “I’m glad the babies were born without complication too.”

“Never in my wildest dreams did I think she would have *five* calves! Life is going to get busy.” Mihm awkwardly scratched her cheek as she worried for the future, but her happiness outshined the anxiety. Her gaze swept up to where the Whale Aviation Company Headquarters rested on top of the cliff. Quietly, she confessed, “To tell you the truth, all the company employees got together to discuss the situation. We’ve decided to dissolve the company and each operate our own business independently. We’re an aviation union now—like a guild.”

The union would set the absolute minimum and maximum possible fare prices, but each individual helmsman would be free to decide how many times a day they would operate and their hours. Helmsmen and helmswomen were now embarking on new business ventures, such as offering limited express flights or flights with meals included, to differentiate from each other.

Mihm smiled blissfully as she petted the whale calf that came to nestle against her. “People can work at their own pace from now on. I heard the ocean route has reopened too. I’m pretty sure we won’t have any more vessels in danger of being worked to death.”

“Really? I’m so glad to hear that,” Nichika said sincerely.

“Damn it,” Oswald muttered, “I shouldn’t have billed the company. How was I supposed to know they’d dissolve in less than two days...?”

The two girls beamed at each other, ignoring the grumbling man in black beside them. Meanwhile, Wolfie, the only straggler from the group, was busy chasing after the delicious, alluring smells wafting from a food stall in the distance yet again.

“PREPARE for takeoff! Hold on tight, because it’s going to be a bumpy ride!”

Nichika’s group and the other passengers boarded the platform on Maria’s back, finally setting off from Seaside Blue Port City. Holding on to the railing surrounding the massive deck, Nichika’s eyes opened wide as she watched the ground rapidly draw away from them.

“Mesmerizing...” she marveled at the view.

The deck was similar to a boat ferry’s, but the ride was much smoother, with less shaking. If she hadn’t come to this world, Nichika would’ve never had the chance to experience riding the back of a flying whale.

When I put it into perspective, this is an experience of a lifetime.

A gentle breeze blew past, playing with her hair on the way. She laughed as she watched Wolfie, back in wolf form, playing with the whale calves. Snow-white birds flew in formation overhead.

NICHIKA moved around the deck to take in the different views. To the south, she basked in the beauty of the deep-blue ocean. Walking halfway around the deck to the north, she gazed at the white mountaintops in fascination. That was when someone spoke behind her.

“I’m surprised you can keep gawking at that stuff without getting bored. It’s not my problem if you accidentally fall off.”

She looked over her shoulder at Oswald who should’ve been napping on a deckchair, but he had directed his sleepy face toward her. She faced him with a radiant smile. “I know I’m late saying this now, but thank you so much for saving Mihm and the babies, Oswald.”

Nichika was convinced he’d conducted a separate investigation after he freed her to try it her own way. And here she had been thinking he was an inhuman monster who only cared about profits. His actions during the Whale incident proved he wasn’t so far gone as to be impossible to save.

So she had sincerely thanked him. In return, however, she received a rather warped reply.

“Having another one of your misunderstandings, are we? ...I simply determined it was better than suffering through all the complaining you would’ve put me through for the rest of the time we’re stuck together if I hadn’t done it.”

“Silly Oz. You need to be more honest with yourself.” Her unrestrained, goofy grin gradually deepened the creases in his brow. Afraid they were about to end up in yet another quarrel, Nichika changed the topic. “Ahem. Err...where are we headed now? Toward those white mountains?”

Oswald glanced at the faraway mountain range across the ocean, then turned his face in the opposite direction, his expression slightly clouded. His black hair and mantle fluttered in the refreshing sea breeze.

“No, we’re currently on course for Cherry Blossom Kingdom.”

“Cherry Blossom Kingdom?”

“We’ll be able to do a bit of research there without being pursued by the Witch’s Council. Alright, I’m gonna nap now.”

“Ah, hey!” Nichika sulkily puffed out her cheeks at him as he quickly found a comfortable spot and fell asleep for real. Left without a conversation partner, she muttered her empty complaints to no one in particular, “Would it kill you to give a better explanation? Aren’t I at least your temporary apprentice? You won’t even teach me a single witchy thing, either.”

She recalled the battle they had fought in the cavern. Though her master had been the one controlling her body, the blazing heat of the flames she formed in her very hands had been neither an illusion nor a sleight of hand.

“How did he do that? Can I do it without him?”

The blue hairclip had been removed from her hair by the time she’d woken up. Was she unable to use magic without being connected to Oswald through that clip?

“Hmm. I still have so many questions.”

A second after she made up her mind to seek the answers in Cherry Blossom Kingdom, she heard the heavy flap of large wings overhead. Curious, she looked

up. A single feather fell from the sky, flashing once in the light, before drifting into her hands. It was a gold so stunning that it looked entirely unnatural.

“...?”

Suddenly, a big shadow crossed over her. She tilted her neck back to take a second look and blinked at what seemed like a black dot in the bright sunlight. The dot rapidly grew bigger until—

“Huh?”

A man, with gold wings jutting out of his back, was zooming in a beeline for her. “NICHIIIIIIIIII!”

“EEEEK?!”

He literally tackled her with his arms open wide. Nichika tumbled onto the ground and was being squeezed before realizing what had hit her.

“Ahhh! I’ve finally found you, my lovely honey! My *sweet love*!”

“EEEEK! AAAAH!” she shrieked.

Not paying any mind to the fact that he had pushed her over, he began kissing her neck. Nichika screamed her throat sore and desperately tried to push him off, but the man held on like an octopus. Shoving his face back with her hand, she at last managed to get a word in edgewise.

“Who are you?!”

“Now it’s time for you to come with me, Nichi! There’s no reason for you to wander this corrupted world any longer!”

“I asked *who the heck* you are! Answer me!”

The other passengers stared at the fiasco from a distance, unwilling to get involved.

Tears in her eyes, Nichika continued to shout, “Quit the crap and GET OFF —**HEY!** Don’t touch me there!”

“You must’ve been so lonely! It must’ve been so hard for you, but you can relax now! I’ll heal you with my love that’s deeper than any ocean!”

Chills shot down her spine as he rubbed her thighs. Inhaling a sharp, deep

breath, she screamed in the loudest voice she could muster, “***SOMEBODY HELP ME!***”

Chapter 13: Girl, Settles Things

REWINDING the story several minutes back—Oswald had rolled over on the deckchair with the best sun-to-shade ratio. Ready to indulge in indolence once more, he shut his eyes.

Life's been hectic since we left the forest. I can't even get a peaceful nap in anymore, aside from the occasional downtime during commutes like this.

A lover of sleep above all else, he basked in the glorious sunlight with his eyes closed. Unfortunately, his peaceful rest was soon interrupted by something that rolled and tumbled into the legs of his deckchair.

“...?!”

The entire chair, with him on it, went flying into the air, and he landed hard on his back. Piercing screams ransacked his eardrums—and they belonged to the apprentice he'd grown accustomed to.

“SOMEBODY HELP ME!”

Nichika's shrill, earsplitting screams rang through his head. Pushed past his limit, Oswald got to his feet while rubbing his back and proceeded to stomp over to wherever those terrible screams were coming from.

“PUT A LID ON IT! You disturbed my peace and quiet time! Want me to sew those lips of yours shut?! HUH?!”

“OZ! SAVE ME!”

“Huh?”

He looked down to find his apprentice not only with tears in her eyes, but underneath a strange man with half of her clothes pulled off. His cheeks twitching, Oswald spun on his heel, raised one hand to wave goodbye, and tried to leave the scene.



“Oh...err...good for you, Nichika. There’s somebody in this world with weird enough tastes to want a thin, scraggly girl like you...”

“HEY! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Yeah! How dare you mock my empress!”

Nichika jerked her head up in shock; she had just met this man for the first time, why was he acting so intimate with her? “Where do you get off calling me your empress?! Can you quit with this one-sided nonsense?!”

“Nichika, dear! What is the story with this man? Is he your acquaintance? No, he can’t be. You’d never associate with someone who looks so underhanded, like an unhealthy slacker!”

Oswald was by no means a patient man. His temples bulged with straining veins at those insults.

Failing to notice, Nichika replied incredulously, “Before that, I want to know who in the world you are...”

“You aren’t lovers, are you?! If you compare the two of us side by side, it’s plain as day that I’m the far more handsome man!”

His boasting wasn’t unwarranted. His looks were exceptional: his silky gold hair shimmered under the sunlight; his blue eyes sparkled like crystals; his facial features and his body were almost *too* perfectly sculpted that it made him look like he had been carved from stone. Coupled with his white clergyman-like clothing, he almost bore a divine visage—if his actions up until now hadn’t utterly ruined the image, that is.

Unfortunately for him, he wasn’t Nichika’s type. Without being entranced by his beautiful face, she protested, “M-Me? Lovers with *him*?! As if! Would you get off me already?! You weigh a ton!”

“He has an evil look in his eyes! And his posture’s terrible! His clothing sense is horrendous, with all that black—”

The winged man stopped speaking mid-sentence when a sudden gust of wind grazed his ear. One second later, and the deckchair that had been chucked at him crashed into the ground a meter away.

He swung his gaze in the direction the chair came flying from and found a scowling Oswald, already picking up a second chair. Oswald's unparalleled bad temper had finally gotten the man to roll off of Nichika. He stood up and straightened his clothes out.

"Hm? Are you challenging me to a fight?" he queried calmly.

"You can do whatever you want to that girl, but if you're gonna do her, do it somewhere without people. You're friggin' loud."

Nichika was appalled Oswald prioritized his sleep over her chastity, but, quickly remembering that this was the kind of man her master was, she sighed. Meanwhile, a pleased smile touched the winged man's lips, and he held his fists up as he shifted his stance to a fighting pose.

"Interesting. I'll take you on."

"I'll smack you right off this ship," Oswald spat.

"Wai—" Nichika grabbed the winged man's cuff to stop them before the situation exploded.

Out of nowhere, a bright light surged around her—by the time her vision cleared, she was standing in an unfamiliar white space along with the winged man.

"Eh...? What is this place?"

The endless white space, lacking any walls or floors, threw her depth perception out of whack. The winged man walked over and hummed speculatively. An impressed expression had taken the place of his previous fawning.

"To think you could unconsciously transport me to subspace—your potential is higher than I anticipated."

"I brought you here?"

"I haven't introduced myself yet, have I? Call me Ini."

Nichika gaped at the man—Ini—who was now formally facing her. "Ini..."

Saying his name struck a nostalgic feeling in her chest. She tilted her head at

the mysterious warmth filling her, when Ini made an absurd confession.

“There’s no reason for me to hide it. I’m the one who summoned you to this world.”

“Oh, you are—*WHAAAAAT?!* ” Her reaction was delayed because of how casually he had dropped the news.

Not letting her speechlessness bother him, he promptly revealed the truth—or at least he shone a light on why she had violently crash-landed in that forest—with a dimpled grin.

“Goodness gracious, you wouldn’t believe the panic I was in! The summoning worked out great, but some trouble knocked my coordinates off the mark.”

Nichika scrambled to plead, “P-Please send me back to my world! Actually, let me contact my mom first and—”

“Now, now, patience. Hearing me out won’t delay you by much.”

...I guess he’s right about that. He probably had a good reason for summoning me here...I hope.

“Haaah... Fine. For what purpose did you bring me here?” she asked, confronting him with a frank question.

Ini waved his hand. Instantly, as if captured by a drone, a projection of scenery spread out at their feet.

“This world is currently on the verge of unprecedented danger,” Ini explained, his tone grave. He pointed to areas where the forests and rivers had mutated into an abnormal shade of purple.

Nichika instinctively knew that the obviously poisonous color meant nothing good. “It sure looks like it... What happened?”

“Balance among the spirits has been crumbling due to the drastic increase in people who are mishandling black magic.”

Purple slowly permeated farther and farther before their eyes. Even from a distance, Nichika could tell the surrounding creatures were turning ferocious from the agonizing pain induced by the purple aura.

“This is awful...”

While her heart was aching for their plight, Ini’s severe intonation hit her. “You are the only person who can save this world now, *Spirit Priestess Nichika*.”

Nichika gawked at the crazy title, and unconsciously pointed to herself as she repeated his words to confirm she’d heard right, “Priestess? Me?”

“Yes, you. You have the power to communicate with the spirits.”

Ini took her hand and pressed a transparent orb that was slightly larger than a baseball into her palm. Beads of sparkling light danced inside, making it clear that this was no ordinary glass ball.

“Travel the world and collect the Four Great Spirits’ power into this magic orb. Once you do, the world will regain balance.”

Nichika felt horribly confused and flustered. “Y-You think you can just tell me that and I’ll do it?!”

Ini solemnly knelt before her and squeezed her hand. “Please, Nichika, save this world.”

“You’re putting me on the spot! I don’t have a strong sixth sense! And I’m not from a family of priests or priestesses, or anything like that!”

What can a genuinely normal person like me do about it?

Ini nodded confidently despite her refusal. “No problem there! You are one-hundred percent the Spirit Priestess without all of that! I absolutely know I didn’t choose wrong!”

“Say what you want, but—” Nichika tried to continue questioning what he was basing these claims on, but he swiftly cut her off with a statement that made her waver.

“Naturally, I’m not asking you to do it for free. The eve you successfully complete your mission, I’ll not only send you back to your world but also grant you any one wish!”

Nichika’s eyes went wide as she quietly turned the words over in her head. Then, placing her hand on her abdomen, she cautiously asked, “...When you say ‘any wish,’ you really mean anything at all?”

“Indeed. Nothing is impossible for me!”

The scales in her head weighed “Being the Spirit Priestess” against “Removing Fake Lover Seed + Being Sent back Home.” One side of the scale immediately fell.

“I’ll do it!”

FOLLOWING Ini’s directions, Nichika successfully escaped the subspace and landed back on Whale’s deck. Just as she felt relief over her safe return, a deckchair suddenly came hurtling toward her and slammed into her side, sending her flying across the deck.

“UWAAAHH!”

“Huh?”

Needless to say, Oswald had thrown the chair. Knocked to the ground, Nichika shot a teary glare at him. “What’re you doing, *jerk*?! That HURT!”

“You...where did you come from?”

From Oswald’s perspective, he had thrown the chair at the creepy winged man. Yet, Nichika abruptly appeared where the man had been. It had been an inevitable accident out of his control.

Oswald was about to ask Nichika what kind of wind she’d caught to end up there, when a line of light ran through empty air and a glowing man hopped out of the rift.

The moment he arrived, Ini grasped the situation. His eyebrows pulling back in anger, he flared up, “You *cretin*! How *dare* you act so violent toward my empress!”

“I’m **NOT** your empress!” Nichika yelled.

“You’re so adorable when you’re being bashful like that,” Ini cooed.

“Hey, Ini, I’m telling you to quit it—”

As Nichika tried to straighten him out, Ini wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to him.

Irrked by the slightly more amicable mood between them, Oswald briskly strode forward. Abruptly and forcefully, he yanked Nichika away and pushed her behind him. “An apprentice isn’t allowed to wander off without her master’s permission.”

“U-Um, you see, Oswald...” Her mind raced for an explanation that would conciliate him, but her attempt was immediately squandered by the upturn in Ini’s lips.

Ini smirked belligerently. “That reminds me, our fight hasn’t been settled yet.”

“I was under the impression that you ran with your tail between your legs.”

“Come on, you guys! Give it a break—” Nichika started, when unexpectedly, a ridiculous electric noise burst out of nowhere and reverberated across the deck. “...What is that sound?”

His expression the only composed one of the bunch, Ini procured a phone-like device from his pocket and held it to his ear. “Hello? It’s me.”

“What, the sound came from you?” Oswald muttered.

Ini spoke with someone on the other end of the device for a bit before his face stiffened, and he began repeatedly nodding to the person who couldn’t see him. He truly seemed to be talking to someone.

After hanging up what Nichika could only view as a cell phone, he stood still on the deck with a grim face. Just when she thought he was turning to look at her, he glomped her for the third time.

“GEH!”

“I’m so sorry, my honey. An urgent job came for me. But you needn’t worry your pretty little self! I’ll be watching you at all times!”

“You’re one crazy stalker...” Oswald grumbled, staring off into the distance.

Unfazed, Ini held up an index finger. “There you have it, manservant. I grant you the honor of serving as my empress’ caretaker. Be extra careful not to let a single hair on her head be harmed. That’s an order.”

“Who’re you calling this girl’s ‘manservant’?! It’s the reverse. THE REVERSE. She’s *my* servant!”

“I’m your apprentice! Please don’t make this conversation any more complicated than it already is!”

Ini lightly danced across the deck and nimbly jumped onto the railing. Theatrically spreading his arms, he gave a graceful bow.

“Sorry for disturbing you, ladies and gentlemen! Let us meet again soon! HA! HA! HA!”

He kicked off the railing and disappeared below the deck. Nichika rushed over, but a blast of wind burst from below and a figure shot up into the sky. The massive golden wings vanished into the sun like someone was playing his arrival in reverse.

Sensing a stabbing glare burrowing into her back, Nichika jerkily turned around. Forcing an awkward smile, she cocked her head.

“...Um, are you mad?”

“What the HELL was with that guy?!”

Nichika opened her mouth to placate her master, whose normally sharp and icy glare had grown even more pointed, when she realized her answers had just flown away.

She thrust her hand out for Ini in a futile attempt to bring him back. “COME BACK HERE! I still have a lot of questions for you!” Weakly falling to her knees, she hurled her problems at the sky. “How am I supposed to find the spirits and collect their power?! At least let me contact my world!” she cried.

But alas, the man showed no signs of turning back. So much for always watching over her.

However, Nichika was the type to recover fast. Jumping to her feet, she grasped Oswald’s hands. “Master! I would like to inquire something of you, if I may!”

“You’re only going to call me master in a situation like this?”

Nichika took the opportunity to finally recount what had occurred in the subspace zone. After hearing her out, Oswald frowned as if he had just heard something that sounded like a load of crap.

“You’re the Spirit Priestess? What the hell is that? A new scam?”

“I thought so too, but those who are drowning will grab any rope tossed to them, right?”

“You’re really grasping at straws here.”

“U-Ugh. A-Anyways! He said he’ll send me back home if everything goes well.”

“Don’t you think that’s a convenient consolation prize, considering that he’s the one who summoned you here against your will?”

“Blegh... You’re right, but...but he might get rid of the Fake Lover for me! Which I did to myself,” she added. Thinking that showing him would help explain, she pulled the magic orb from her pocket and handed it to him. “Apparently, I need to collect the uh—great spirits’ power into this thing.”

Oswald accepted the ball, which was about the size of his hand. He examined it in various ways, holding it up to the sun and rolling it around on his palm. Then, he deliberately split it in half with a pop.

“Oh my gosh?! You destroyed it!”

“Idiot. How do you plan on learning more about it without opening it?”

As Oswald continued to stare at the halves, his eyes widened slightly. Though Nichika was surprised to see him react that way, she quietly watched him so as not to interrupt his train of thought.

“What is this...?” Oswald mumbled, “I thought it was a simple storage device, but what’s going on inside...?” The look in his eyes shifted, and, finishing his inspection, he snapped the orb shut.

Tired of waiting, Nichika urged him on by asking, “So? Did you learn anything?”

“Not much, aside from either that man has more to him than meets the eye, or he’s a swindler who happened to get his hands on something ridiculous.”

I don’t really follow, but I get that it must be something extraordinary. Well, the guy did summon me to this world, so he can’t be a nobody, Nichika concluded, storing the magic orb Oswald returned to her.

Then, looking her master right in the eyes, she declared, “I think I’m going to try it.”

“.....”

“He just showed me what a wretched, miserable state this world is in. I don’t have the slightest clue why somebody like me was chosen, but I feel like if someone’s coming to me for help, I have to answer that call. That’s why—”

“We should go our separate ways now.”

A distant voice replayed in Oswald’s ears—a fragment of a memory from long ago. Conflicted feelings buried deep within screamed at him, howling for his attention from where he had left them untouched beneath the layers of dirt and dust...

“I know I’m probably going to cause you all sorts of problems from now on, but, um—Oswald?”

“I don’t need you anymore.”

“Wait!” The hand he desperately flung out didn’t reach her.

“I wish you were never here from the very beginning.”

Her silver hair fluttered in the air like snow. She left him behind with nothing more than, *“Farewell.”*

“...!” He grabbed hold of Nichika’s arm without thinking. Her startled face overlapped with the person in his memories.

How long did they stay there in that frozen position?

With his eyes trained on the ground, he asked her in the faintest voice, “...Are you leaving? On your own?”

Barely catching what he had said, Nichika ran the words through her head and came to a separate conclusion. “Why would I?!” she shouted hysterically.

What part of their conversation had led him to ask that? Nichika had no idea. Frowning, she grabbed his cuff and shook it.

“Can’t I come with you? Don’t you break your promise to me now!”

Oswald gasped, his mind finally catching up to the present. The girl simmering with anger in front of him had dragged him back to reality. Just what had he been thinking about again?

“...What promise?” he asked blankly.

“Even if you try to abandon me now, it won’t work! I’ll stick to you like gum to the sole of your boot!”

The phantom that had haunted him momentarily had already vanished. Yet, he still felt rather jumbled up inside. “Y-Yeah, that’s true,” he agreed hastily, before he had thoroughly processed what she had said.

“...You won’t suddenly up and leave me behind?”

The anxious expression Nichika peered up at him with sparked his teasing nature. Smirking wickedly, the witch haughtily folded his arms. “Don’t you know that’s what society refers to as a stalker?”

“Wha-?! Who’re you calling a stalker?! I’d much rather pursue a swamp frog than you!”

“Poor froggy. What a horrible fate, to have a girl like you pester him for kisses.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Oswald’s mood lifted as he teased his offended apprentice. *That’s it*, he realized, *I just have to cover up the bad memories so that it’s like they never even existed. Humans are forgetful creatures, after all.*

“Good grief!” Nichika huffed.

“.....” A genuine, peaceful smile touched Oswald’s lips as the wind brushed past him—a truly rare expression. *She’s laughing one minute, crying the next,*

and getting angry right after that. She's really a girl with ever-changing expressions. "I never get tired watching you," he commented.

"...How am I supposed to take that?"

"I feel like I'm observing a rare animal."

"I knew it!"

Oswald decided it'd be best to change the topic before she started screaming in his ears again. Besides, their destination had come close enough to see with the naked eye.

"On another note...you're in luck. The Sacred Fire Temple is located in the Cherry Blossom Kingdom we're headed for."

"Fire Temple?"

"Might be a good place to pick up a clue on those spirits of yours."

Nichika's face instantly brightened as she earnestly rejoiced, "Then! Then you'll help me out? Thank you, Master!"

"Of course. Doesn't hurt to help if it means I can bid farewell to my adorable little apprentice even a day sooner. Not to mention, I will of course add it to your ever-growing tab."

"...The way you put it bothers me."

In any case, she had a plan of attack in place and her destination was decided. Nichika raised her fist into the sky and let out a hopeful cheer.

"Let's do our best!"

Watching her from behind, Oswald thoughtfully put his finger to his chin. "Nichika?"

"Hm?"

"I don't mind helping out, but under one condition."

Act 3: Fire Spirit

Chapter 14: Girl, Fantasizes

LARGE Aerial Vessel Whale arrived at the docks of Cherry Blossom Kingdom around the time the sun set behind the mountains. Lacking a cliff aerial port like Seaside Blue's, Maria landed on the ocean and docked at the seaport. Mihm lowered the ramp and efficiently assisted the disembarking passengers. Nichika's group was last to set foot on land, and Mihm flashed them a thumbs-up.

"Call me whenever you need a ride. I'll take you for free."

"Thanks, Mihm! Take care!"

"May you be safe on your journey," Mihm said, saluting them. "Till we meet again!"

She winked and nimbly returned to the cockpit. Whale swiftly rose in the air and melted into the night's indigo sky.

Watching them go, Nichika felt a warm, sincere joy coming over her. "Meet again, huh? I hope we can meet again somewhere, someday."

"Her words were nothing more than lip service. It's expected of her station," Oswald pointed out.

"There you go saying stuff like that again."

"Lip service?" Wolfie piped up, "Is that a new way of eating? A type of food?" He started to drool, imagining an all-you-can-eat lip buffet.

The group continued squabbling over trivial things as they strolled through the whimsical townscape of Cherry Blossom Kingdom's capital city. Nostalgic déjà vu enveloped Nichika when she looked up at the rows of blossoming cherry trees.

"This kingdom reminds me of Japan," she said.

Flames came to life inside the hanging lanterns as darkness fell, releasing a

soft glow that only enhanced the red light district feel of the refined townscape dotted with brick paths and stone fences. It looked as if the scenery had been pulled straight from an old Japanese movie set. However, the contrast between the Japanese-style city and the people who populated it with their fantasy clothing and hairstyles made for an unusual spectacle, vaguely reminding Nichika that this was indeed another world.

“Oh yeah, Wolfie, is it okay for you to be in that form?” she asked, realizing he had stayed a wolf.

“Good question,” he responded, tilting his neck up as he walked on his four long, furry legs. “Say, Master, don’t I have to shapeshift?”

Oswald glanced over his shoulder at the question and shrugged. Apparently, that was his way of saying it was already too late to do anything about it anyway.

“Cherry Blossom Kingdom and the surrounding region are openly accepting of Hasse. Shouldn’t be an issue for them to have a creature like you walking around town.”

Now that Oswald pointed it out, Nichika spotted many people passing by who were clearly not human. She saw everything, from lizard people with scales to beast people with fluffy ears.

So there are some who stay half-beast and half-human? She concluded she needed to learn more about the world as soon as possible, when she fell behind Oswald and noticed he seemed to be heading on a direct course for somewhere in particular.

“Hey, where are we heading? All I see this way is the castle.”

“I’m to meet with Princess Yura whenever I come to this country.”

“Princess Yura?”

“She’s the princess of this kingdom.”

NICHIKA was astonished to be shown to a formal Japanese tatami room. It looked as if it had come straight out of a period drama. She was enraptured by

the sweet-smell of soft rush grass and the sight of lacquered joists paired with folding screens covered in gold leaf.

“Hey,” she began, “Why do you know the princess?”

“She found the Witch’s Items I make to be of great interest to her, so I’ve had the pleasure of conducting friendly bartering with her since.”

“My claws catch on these tatami floor things,” Wolfie whined.

The kimono-clad woman who had guided them through the castle to the room excused herself by saying, “Please wait here for a short while,” and withdrew gracefully without appearing disturbed by their noisy yapping.

They each sat on the tatami mat while they waited. Nichika dutifully sat in the traditional Japanese manner, with the tops of her feet flat on the floor and her bottom resting on her soles.

She looked askance at Oswald’s slouched posture beside her. “You have bad manners, sitting crossed-leg, when you’re about to have an audience with a princess.”

“Who asked you? I have a hard time doing that seiza sitting position. How come you can do it, anyway?” he questioned.

She was about to answer him, when the sliding screen slid open and a woman elegantly entered the room.

Nichika doubted there was anyone in the world who was a more perfect fit for the word *bewitching*. Glamorous black hair poured down the woman’s back like a waterfall; her eyelashes swooped in a gentle curve above her downcast eyes that glistened like deep, dark pools. The layers and layers of her kimono swished and rustled softly with each step she took.

She slowly lifted her reddish gaze at a deliberate pace and blessed them with a beguiling smile.

“Welcome to my humble abode.” Even the voice cascading from her full crimson lips was sensual.

Nichika could only gape before her flawless beauty; it transcended any standards. Meanwhile, contrary to his apprentice, Oswald smoothly sat up

straight with practiced ease and courteously returned her greeting.

“It has been too long since I last had the opportunity to be graced by your presence, Princess Yura. You look well.”

“I am most pleased to see you in fair health too, esteemed Witch of the West. I have longed to rest my eyes upon your visage again.” Princess Yura’s gaze slid to the still awestruck Nichika. Covering her mouth daintily, she let out a light chuckle. “I see you have brought quite the adorable companion with you this fine evening.”

“Ah!” Nichika rushed to introduce herself, “How do you do?! My name is Nichika!”

Princess Yura acknowledged her with a blossoming smile. “Oh? Miss Nichika, is it? May your name perhaps be in reference to the day flower? What a truly beautiful name you have been graced with. From where does it originate, if I may inquire?”

“U-Umm...”

“Yes?”

“...Japan? Or would you know it as ‘Nippon’?”

SLAP! A quick whack to the back from Oswald made Nichika bite her tongue. Sensing the silent pressure to avoid speaking of anything abnormal radiating from him, she obediently remained quiet.

Wolfie took the opportunity to speak, “Guess who I am? I’m Wolfie!”

“I warmly welcome you as well, Mr. Wolfie.”

Nichika’s heart throbbed in admiration of the princess and her gentle, ladylike smile. If her charm could produce this kind of effect on members of the same sex, men were surely goners.

“Now that we are all acquainted, might I ask what has brought you before me this day?”

Oswald gazed at her with a prim expression that held not even a shadow of his usual laziness. “Princess Yura, may I impose upon you to hide us for a time?” he requested humbly.

After listening to his summary about being pursued by the Witch's Council, Princess Yura gave her consent. "Very well. Cherry Blossom Kingdom is a land of liberty, with a free people. We have no desire to seek the guidance of these councilors, and as such, you may take refuge here in peace."

"You have my utmost gratitude."

Nichika imitated her master's deep bow and lowered her head.

Determining his business here was settled for the time being, Princess Yura turned a teasing smile toward Oswald as if she were about to approach him with a secret deal, and abruptly changed the topic. "Now then, will you be so kind as to introduce me to your new merchandise? Being the man that you are, I can be certain you come bearing an arsenal of goods, no?"

"Of course. I have prepared a large quantity of new items for your perusal this time as well. It is my hope that there will be items to your liking among the selection."

She giggled behind her sleeve. "In that case, please do accompany me to our specially designated room."

Nichika wasn't sure what to do as the two of them stood and began to leave through the sliding door. Sensing her confusion, Oswald looked over his shoulder and flatly ordered, "I have business to discuss. You two, return to the city ahead of me and get us a room at a local inn."

He exited the room for good with those words lingering behind him. Seeing him leave with Princess Yura leaning coquettishly on his arm formed a frazzled lump in Nichika's throat for reasons she didn't understand.

"Wh-What's with them?" she mumbled restlessly.

"They're having a private conversation. It happens often," Wolfie answered, tugging his claws out of the tatami.

"...Hmm."

WOLFIE and Nichika descended from the castle into the city and rented a fairly high-class room to rest in. The hands on the clock were already pointing

past 9:30 p.m. Though they had long since finished eating dinner, Oswald remained nowhere in sight.

“Master’s late.”

“Mm-hm,” Nichika agreed halfheartedly as she leaned on the second-story window’s red banister, absently staring outside.

People boisterously walked by, chattering away as they were absorbed inside the different red-paper lantern adorned restaurants.

“Maybe he’s having a make-out session with Princess Yura.”

“Make-out?”

“Uh...never mind...” She quickly dismissed it, but she couldn’t forget the way Princess Yura had turned her passionately hot gaze on Oswald. Nichika rested her elbows on the banister and her chin on her hands. “Does he sleep with his clients as a part of his business? But Princess Yura was so gorgeous. Oswald’s personality is, well, indescribable, but his face is at least...just a tad...on the cool side. Around now, they’re probably—GAH! I need to get my head out of the gutter!”

The clock struck eleven while Nichika lost herself in making groundless guesses at what was preoccupying Oswald’s time. She stared distractedly at the antique clock face, until a dreadful realization hit her and she sharply sucked in her breath.

“Oh no! Have we not done *it* yet today?” Scraping together her memories of their last kiss, she recalled that she had yet to wake up from her fever this time yesterday. “Hang on, does that mean I’m in a real pinch here?”

How much time did she have before the Fake Lover seed sprung back to life inside her? Icy chills ran along her spine, and she dashed several steps in a flustered panic to where her wolf friend slept curled up on the rug.

“Wolfie! Wake up! I need to ask you something!”

“Mnn.”

She frantically shook the sound asleep wolf, but he merely rolled over to show his belly, grinning happily in his sleep without stirring. Nichika imagined

the rose vine wriggling under her skin, working its way up her arm, and the blood drained from her face. Fear surging back from the memories of her near-death experience replaced her reason with an impatient rashness.

“Why haven’t you come back yet...stupid!”

Tears in her eyes, she replayed the scene of Oswald and Princess Yura walking snugly together down the castle corridor. The vision snapped something within her—getting to her feet, she furiously wiped away her tears.

“That’s right! It’s not like I can only take his body fluid! I can do something about my problem on my own!”

With her mind made up, Nichika hastily slipped on her mantle and stampeded down the stairs leading from the old room to the outdoors. Slamming the sliding door to the side, she vaulted herself into the streets with her hood pulled low over her face. But after a short spurt, she became aware she didn’t have any idea of what to do.

It’s great and all that I left in the heat of the moment, but how do I broach the subject with someone? Won’t you please kiss me? That just makes me a pervert.

Not sure what move to make next, she stopped in her tracks. In her desperation, she found herself wishing that male brothels existed for a moment, but she quickly chased the thought away.

Honestly, she didn’t want to do this. But what other option did she have? It was all that man’s fault for forgetting their deal and not getting back on time. It was absolutely impossible for a girl with a bomb inside of her, which was going to burst at any moment, to have any composure at a time like this.

I don’t have the luxury of caring about how I look. Anybody works as long as they’re male! Right, anyone at all...

Though she was disgusted by her thoughts, Nichika reached out to one of the three men crossing the street in front of her and grabbed onto his sleeve. Feeling the tug, the man stopped and looked back at her.

“Huh? Whut? Do you need something, miss?”

“What’s going on?”

The two men with him peered around him to see what was up. Feeling like she was going to explode from embarrassment, Nichika pulled her hood down lower. The sight of a small girl flushing bright-red under the dim lights aroused the men, and their eyelids peeled back.

“U-Um, won’t you...with me...” Nichika clutched the front of her shirt and glanced to the side. The voice she finally mustered came out a little hoarse, “Will you...kiss me?”

A sweet smell rose from her body. The men swallowed hard, exchanged looks, and put their arms around her shoulder with a no-good smirk.

AN explosive bang resounded throughout the vast dry-scape garden covered in white sand. Princess Yura stood motionless for a time before she deeply exhaled and lowered the gun she held at the ready. The sharp falcon-like glint in her eyes released their tension, softening as her expression gave way to a smile that danced upon her lips.

“Well done.”

The princess who flashed a bold smile at Oswald’s praise gave off a wholly different air than the bewitching aura she had greeted him with earlier. Now, she wore her long hair pulled tightly into a ponytail and had traded in her heavy, multilayered kimono for a hakama—loose trousers with many pleats in the front. Though many would find it hard to believe, the impressive woman standing before him was the real lady of this land. Despite being a woman, she sat at the top of her kingdom’s military as a strong commander and leader.

She loaded another bullet into the magazine. “These bullets are truly what’s splendid. They’re exquisite.” She fired another shot. Her second target followed the same fate as the first; it was blown to pieces. Convinced by the bullet’s path she had traced with her eyes, she confidently said, “The bullet breaks upon contact and shatters in four directions, slicing up the target, correct?”

“These bullets have been engraved and enchanted with wind magic, allowing them to tear the target into pieces upon contact. They are costly, but I believe their strength corresponds to the price.”

“They seem effective on soft enemies.”

Princess Yura entrusted her gun to a nearby attendant and led Oswald to the long garden arbor. They crossed over a bridge as she continued, “I will buy the blueprints at asking price. In return, don’t sell it to any other country.”

“As you command—is what I’d like to say, but upon one condition.”

Surprise flickered across her face. “Oh, now *this* is unexpected. What is it?”

Princess Yura turned toward him at the end of the bridge and awaited his next words. The man was renowned for his bad reputation in the underworld, and she knew well enough that he picked who he did business with very carefully.

He’s not so incompetent as to present a good customer such as myself with a recklessly greedy condition, is he? As she mused over the possibility, the witch, now slightly taller than her due to his elevated position on the bridge, voiced his request.

“I would like your permission to browse the reference rooms.”

“...I see.”

Valuable books and documents containing records on the founding of Cherry Blossom Kingdom were archived in a particular reference room that was built in the city outskirts. Though valuable, stray copies of the items in that particular collection could be found elsewhere if one searched hard enough. Books of truly immeasurable worth were safely stored inside the castle instead.

Princess Yura placed a hand on her dainty chin. After thoughtful consideration, she settled on making the witch feel partially indebted to her. “Normally, no one aside from high-ranking officials are granted access, but I will make an exception for you.”

“You have my thanks.”

A playful grin tugged at the corner of her mouth as she teasingly inquired, “Is this for that girl?”

“.....”

His instant sullenness broadened her smile. She was tickled pink to have exposed even a fraction of the man’s true personality, since he rarely revealed

his cards, not to mention the emotions he experienced. Giggling, she hid her mouth behind her hand.

“So my guess was right. I *did* think it was unusual for you to have a woman accompanying you. Do you mind me asking what the girl is to you?”

“Some trouble that I picked up. I’m in the process of working out how to discard her as soon as I can.”

“Hahaha! How rough that must be for you.” Princess Yura waltzed out from under the arbor and pulled the tie from her hair, letting it cascade down her back. Then, with a seductive air, she faced him. “Now that our business negotiations have finished and night has fallen, what would you like to do?”

“Do? Like what?”

Princess Yura coyly cast down her eyes and pulled his arm to her chest. “Where are you staying tonight?” she breathed.

Every move she made was a calculated tactic to arouse a man’s instincts—not that the deceived men ever realized. Using her charms was her favorite weapon as a military commander.

Oswald stared down in silence at her for a moment before scoffing, “Regrettably, I don’t have a cent to spend.”

“Aw, too bad. Your coldness never changes.” Princess Yura aloofly turned her head aside, but her gaze remained trained on him. Her next invitation was purely out of personal interest. “How about if we keep business out of it? I won’t bore you.”

Oswald glanced at the rising moons. “I appreciate the offer...” The face of his peacefully idiotic apprentice came to mind. He released an exaggerated sigh. “But I must decline, because it is time for me to give medicine to my water flea.”

Chapter 15: Girl, Wails

NICHIKA'S terror flared as two of the sneering men suddenly put their hands on her shoulders. They crowded her in from both sides, hiding her tensed body from any passerby.

"Sure thing, baby. This ain't the place for it, so let's go somewhere else."

"It's a real turn-on, getting hit on by a cute girl like you."

"Stupid, don't be too greedy."

They forcefully moved her into an alleyway where the illumination from the streetlights didn't reach, and the sounds of the hustle and bustle of the main road were muffled. They pushed Nichika into the wall, and she sharply inhaled.

She strained a faint smile and focused on getting herself out of the situation in one piece. "Um, I think you've got the wrong idea. All I need is for you to give me one kiss, out on the main road."

"Huh? What are you goin' on 'bout, when you're the one who invited us?"

"You're not a kid. You know what you've gotten into."

Nichika froze.

"You keep lookout first," ordered the guy who had her against the wall.

"Sure thing. Gimme a turn later."

It was too late to undo her actions now—the men looked even more titillated by her turning stark white.

"Oh yeah, baby. That's the look. Getting cold feet after luring us in?"

"Is this your first time or something?"

"Seriously? Your first?"

"It's not..." Coming up with an excuse was hard.

Presuming she couldn't talk them down, she shoved the guy in front of her

away and tried to make a dash for the street. But before she could even take a step, he seized both her wrists, wrenched them above her head, and pinned them against the wall.

“No!”

Next, he shoved a hot hand under her skirt. She flinched as he rubbed her thigh. “St-Stop it. Please...” she pleaded, tears stinging her eyes.

“Don’t arouse me more. I won’t be able to contain myself.”

The grinning man caught her cheek in his hand. In his eyes, she could plainly see his lust asking, *“How horribly should I ravish you?”* His breath against her ear sent panicked shudders of disgust down her spine.

“I’ll take my sweet time enjoying you.”

“...!”

His eyes locked on hers, he slowly leaned in until their lips...almost met.

“What a greedy bitch we have here.”

Everyone looked up with a start when that low voice fell upon them. Against the backdrop of two hovering moons, a man sat on top of the building, eyeing them.

Nichika’s eyes bulged, and she uttered his name, *“Oswald!”*

Without even the slightest reaction to her voice, Oswald wordlessly tossed something down at them. It exploded midair and flooded the narrow alley with thick, white smoke. A refreshing smell passed through Nichika’s nose.

The men choked. “What...the ‘ell...is this...?! Damn...!”

“W’at did...ya do...?!”

The wicked witch rested his chin on his hands with a bored expression. Swinging his index finger through the air, he explained as if he were a lecturer and the would-be rapists his disobedient students. “What I just chunked down there inhibits intracranial arousal, suppressing male sex functions... In summary, it’s a drug that prevents erections.”

“W’at?!” The men immediately grabbed their nether regions.

Oswald smiled suggestively at them and held up another explosive vial. “The effects of the previous one are temporary, but the drug I’m holding now will make it permanent. Want to give it a go?”



“EEEEEEK!”

The men tripped over themselves racing away from the threat of something several times more frightening than a physical fight. Oswald hopped down from the building and snorted in the direction of their mad escape. “Making scum like them impotent would’ve been better for the world at large though.”

“.....”

Sliding down the wall to her butt while trembling, Nichika’s eyes met Oswald’s. She cowered under his hard, judging gaze. Fidgeting nervously, she tried to straighten out her disheveled clothing.

“U-Um, I...”

The moonlight shining from above cast a distinct shadow from the man clad in all-black. Eyes colder than any iceberg pierced her. “So? Did those fiends satisfy you?”

“...!” Heat flooded her cheeks the second she processed his words. Throwing the weight of her shame behind her anger, Nichika lashed out to protect her dignity, “Wh-What’s *your* problem?! Whatever I do is up to me!”

“Is it now? In that case, you would’ve preferred me to leave you as their plaything? I’ve sure picked up a crazy nymphomaniac.”

“Wh-Who in their right mind would say that?!”

Nichika pushed herself off the ground and tried to stand just as Oswald moved in. She shrunk back from the tall shadow closing in on her and fell back down, her back pressed to the wall. He angrily slammed a fist against the wall, right beside her head. She gasped.

“*Why did you do something like that without my permission?*” he growled, his menacing tone hissing as it crawled its way up from the depths of his gut.

“B-B-Because...” Nichika didn’t trust him enough to confess that she had been anxious and terrified. Unable to continue her sentence, she hung her head as low as it could go and held her silence. “.....”

“Lick it.”

“Excuse me?” Doubting her ears, she raised her head. Thrust before her was the back of his hand—blood trickled from a small cut he inflicted with his knife.

“I want nothing to do with another man’s leftovers. This is all you’re going to get from me.”

“What kind of a reason is that?!”

“Don’t need it?” Oswald challenged, pulling his hand back and licking it himself. The way he moved his tongue across the wound was so fascinating—she couldn’t look away.

Needs must when the devil drives. After a period of silence, Nichika trembled as she took his hand. She hesitated for as long as she could then softly ran her tongue along the cut. The taste of blood filled her mouth.

“Mm...ngh...”

A strange sensation raced down Oswald’s spine as he watched—and felt—her lick his hand rigorously with an eager inexperience. His blood and her saliva swirled around the tongue that slid out of her full lips. A viscous strand stretched between his hand and her tongue, dripping onto her thighs, catching the moonlight. She was on her knees, licking him; it was a terrifyingly erotic sight.

In contrast, Nichika was disconcerted by the metallic taste in her mouth. She pulled back, thinking she had obtained enough liquid to survive the day—only for him to wrap his hand around the back of her head.

“Huh?!” she cried out, startled.

Oswald pulled her up toward him, kissing her before she could resist. His tongue penetrated the gap in her lips, muffling her cries.

“Hey—stop, Oswa—” He was about to push her up against the wall, so she thrust him off with all her strength. “I told you to *stop it!*”

Pin-drop silence fell between them. Nichika felt like the chilling gaze of the man she had rejected was going to freeze her in place, but she wasn’t willing to give in to its intimidation.

“If your blood works, then there’s no need for a kiss! I don’t want Princess

Yura's leftovers, either!"

"Huh?"

Oswald's thoughts were thrown for a loop. *Why's she bringing up Princess Yura at a time like this?*

Nichika stood staunchly at a distance without answering his confusion. A hot lump formed in her throat as she rattled on nonsensically, "I-I'm sure the two of you were making out! It must've felt so good for you to forget all about me..."

She was sobbing now. She hadn't even given him time to deny her accusations. Oswald could only stare at her in dumbfounded shock as she broke down.

"I know I did something incredibly stupid! But I was just so uneasy and scared, I couldn't stop myself...! *I didn't want to **die!***"

Nichika was overwhelmed; she didn't even know what she was feeling at the moment. Inside her, jealousy and fear jumbled messily together, swelling past their limits. The torrent of her wild emotions poured out in tears.

"Y-You c-contracted...with me!" she got out between sobs, "Y-You should... keep your promises...jerk!" Shoving all her anxiety at him left her with little more than cringe-worthy embarrassment.

"Are you a child?" Oswald pulled the head of his apprentice, who was wailing with childish abandon, to his chest.

"Hic...waaah...." she continued to sob.

"Troublemaker..." He sighed over the quivering girl he held against his chest. Gingerly, he placed a hand on her head.

That's right, he reminded himself. She's just a bratty kid. She's a defenseless, optimistic child who came from a peaceful world.

Keeping that in mind, he spoke to her in the gentlest voice he could manage, "Nichika, do I seem like the kind of man who would break a promise I made?"

"...You do."

"Oi, you're supposed to deny that."

She doesn't even trust me a little? Oswald raised his face to the night sky and stared at the clear blue moon, puzzling over how he could word what he wanted to say in a way that would get through to her. *Aah, I've really gone and picked up a troublesome one this time. But I can't leave her to her fate, because* —

“Witches protect the promises they make until death. A promise is a contract and a spell for us.”

Though everyone blasted Oswald left and right for being a crooked scam artist, he had, in his own unexpected way, a deeply held principle: he would never go back on something he said he'd do. Such was his self-imposed rule.

His deep, gentle voice slowly eased Nichika's sobs. However, she still wouldn't lift her face from his black coat.

“We're in a contract. I'll protect you. If you understand that, never do something like this again. Got it?”

For someone who typically lacked tact, he had managed to do a good job of picking the right words this time. She gave a tiny nod, and he sighed with relief. Then, taking the opportunity, he cleared up another big misunderstanding.

“And while we're at it, I don't know what weird things you imagined, but Princess Yura and I don't have that kind of relationship.”

“You...don't?” Nichika timidly lifted her head. Her eyes were tinged red, and her tear-stained pupils glistened like obsidian.

“She's just a business partner. And who knows what that kind of woman would make you do if you spent even a single night with her—”

“I'm so glad.”

She showed him a smile as bright and dazzling as a sunflower on a summer's day. For some reason, he choked on the rest of his sentence.

“Oswald?”

She's really an odd woman. Her expressions change with each passing second, and just treating her to a few kind words can make her act like this. Someday, her unguarded feelings will be the end of her. This world revolves around

caution; you have to be suspicious of everyone. But—

“Hmph, simple-minded girl,” he said. He grabbed her face and squished it.

“Agh!” Nichika turned bright-red and flailed. “Hey! What’s that for?!”

“Stop while you’re ahead. It’s useless to be jealous of Princess Yura. The difference between the princess and you is that of the moon and soft-shelled turtles—wait, the turtles don’t deserve to be compared to you.”

“Oh, come on!”

Oswald smiled—not his usual cynical grin, but an honest smile. Nichika’s heart raced over seeing him wear that expression for the first time.

So he can smile like a normal person too...

She felt like the gap between them had grown a little smaller, but it was a feeling that was soon ruined when he replaced his innocent smile with his usual wicked grin. He pinched the fabric of his coat, where she had buried her face, and pulled it back and forth to demonstrate the damage.

“You got your snot all over it. What’re you gonna do for me if it doesn’t come off?”

“My nose didn’t run,” she denied.

“So you say.”

“.....”

A shadowy figure was watching them from above. Standing on the rooftop, the white-hooded outfit obscured the gender of their stalker—it was questionable if they were even human.

“I don’t believe it. I’ll never accept it!”

He—or perhaps she—gritted their teeth and quickly swung their hand through the open air. Instantly, the breeze swirled into a tornado.

MEANWHILE, back at the inn, Wolfie awoke alone and blinked in the empty

pitch-black room. Now it wasn't just Oswald who was gone, but even Nichika, who had been leaning on the banister last he checked. When had she upped and disappeared?

"Nichika? Master?" He trotted over to where he had last seen Nichika. "...Weird. Where'd they go?"

Leaping over the banister, he landed in the alley and proceeded to track them with the nose he took great pride in. Catching wind of their familiar smells right away, he frolicked in their direction.

"Ooh, they're pretty close by!"

He hopped into a back road interposed between the main streets and jumped for joy when he spotted the backs of the two people he loved most.

"Hellooooo!" he howled. They turned toward him at his innocent shout. "Thank goodness! This is where you were, huh?"

"Wolfie?" Nichika said.

In that exact moment, Wolfie noticed something flying down at them.

"Eh...?"

The projectile was headed straight for Nichika's head. But she was smiling, unaware.

"I'm sorry for worry—"

"WATCH OUT!"

He sprung to action faster than he could think. Knocking Nichika to the ground, he took her place. The sound of something shredding buzzed in his ears. An unbelievable amount of blood gushed from his belly.

"Wol...fie...?"

His blood rained down on the face of the girl who was now staring at him in horror. With a loud thud, he collapsed, his consciousness rapidly descending into the darkest of abysses.

Wolfie's vision blacked out with Nichika's distant screams as the last thing he heard.

IN an instant, the clamor of the busy city fell away. Nichika couldn't move. There was so much blood; it looked like it was part of some sick gag. But a weak moan from the wolf brought reality rushing back. She frantically pulled Wolfie onto her lap. He had flopped over limply, and his eyelids didn't even flicker when she moved him.

"Wolfie?! Wolfie!"

"Who's there?!" Oswald barked fiercely. The person on top of the roof disappeared in a single flutter of their white robe instead of answering. "Curse you! You think I'll let you go?!"

Oswald launched off his right foot to chase after the attacker, but Nichika's scream pulled him back.

"OSWALD! Wolfie! Wolfie is...!"

He glared at the roof and clicked his tongue once before backtracking to her. Kneeling, he confirmed his familiar was still barely holding on to life.

"He's lost a lot of blood. Nichika, return to the inn and borrow every cloth they have on hand."

"Can you save him? Can you?!"

She clung to his arm as he moved to further confirm his familiar's condition, and he shook her off while loudly rebuking her. "Get moving if you want to save him! Do you think worrying or praying can save a life?!"

Nichika flinched but pulled herself together. Wiping away her tears, she dashed off. Oswald frowned at the sight of the wolf's life rapidly draining away before him. He pulled a vial from his pocket, yanked out the stopper with his teeth, and poured the contents messily onto Wolfie's wounds to begin first-aid.

"I keep telling you people, *I'm no doctor*, and I *definitely* ain't a vet!" he griped aloud. Then, speaking directly to his familiar to tether his consciousness to the waking world, he shouted, "Don't you go and die on me, stupid mutt! What kind of servant goes and dies before their master? Huh?"

THE sliding door opened and Oswald stepped into the adjacent room. He had finished treating Wolfie. Nichika bolted from the seat she had been restlessly waiting on, and immediately bombarded him with a million questions.

“How is he?! Is he okay? Will he live?!”

“For now, yeah. He’s fortunate the damage didn’t reach his internal organs—he’s got the devil’s luck, all right.”

“I’m so glad to hear that...” Nichika sighed in relief as she sank to the floor.

From what Oswald went on to explain, though there had been a lot of bleeding, the cut had only pierced through one layer of skin, so stitches had been able to close the wound.

“But we can’t relax yet. He’s still feverish from the injury...” he trailed off.

“Let’s stay in this city for a while,” Nichika suggested, her mind much more at ease. “We don’t have to worry about the Witch’s Councilors coming for us here thanks to Princess Yura, right?”

But Oswald’s expression remained grim. He pulled an object from his pocket and tossed it lightly on the tatami mat. “Look at this.”

“What is it?” She gingerly picked up the foreign article rolling on the ground, careful not to let it make too much contact with her skin. It looked like an empty black cartridge case, with the tip crushed where the bullet had launched.

“This was on the ground in the alley. Looks like this is what the idiot wolf got shot with.”

“He was shot? But...”

Wolfie’s injuries clearly looked like gashes, like the ones generally caused by sharp objects such as swords. The damage done to him didn’t look like a typical gunshot wound.

Before Nichika could ask for more details, Oswald confessed, “That’s a weapon I made. It’s enchanted to tear the target to shreds upon contact.”

“*What?! I can’t believe you! Why are you making such a dangerous weapon?! I*”

Running out of words to blame him with, Nichika grabbed his coat. But he didn't answer her, and on top of that, he didn't even brush her off like he normally would have.

He put his hand to his chin, the worst-case scenario crossing his mind. "...This is very bad."

"What is?"

"I've only sold these cartridges to Princess Yura. We might have to leave this city much sooner than we planned."

"Wh-Why would Princess Yura target us?!" Nichika asked, alarmed.

Oswald restlessly headed for the door. "Who can say for sure? But I can think of plenty of reasons. Perhaps she wants to erase my existence because I'm the only other person who knows how to produce the cartridges. Maybe she can't stand you. Or it could simply be the most obvious possibility: she just sold us out to the Witch's Council."

"I can't believe it..."

How could someone with such a friendly smile sell us out? Struggling to accept that they had been betrayed, conflict tumbled in her belly.

"But how can we run away with Wolfie like this? ...Isn't it dangerous to move him?!" she asked, raising her voice without meaning to.

The wolf partially opened his eyes from his deep slumber. His golden pupils aimlessly wandered around the room until they fixed on his master and the apprentice. Relief washed over his face as the two responded to him.

Nichika shook away the tears forming in her eyes again. "I'm so sorry. You ended up like this in my place..."

"Wolfie, can you walk?" Oswald asked. The question got a slight smile.

"I think that might be a tad outta the question. But I'll be fine on my own. You two can leave ahead of me."

Nichika's eyes rounded at his unexpected suggestion. "Are you telling us to abandon you and go off on our own?"

“That’s not what I’m saying, Nichika. I noticed it earlier—that attack was clearly targeting you, and you alone.”

“I was...the target?” Shock paralyzed her thoughts.

With his eyes half-shut, Wolfie continued, “You were. That’s why I think it’s best if I be a good boy and wait here alone until I get better. Either way, I’m going to slow you guys down.” His mind was still in a haze, because he spoke slower and calmer than usual. “You two can go...search...for the Great Spirit together...and come for me...before you...leave for...good...”

He finished his thoughts and fell back into a deep sleep. They fell into silence before Wolfie’s peaceful breathing.

Oh yeah... Wolfie’s words reminded Nichika of the magic orb. She pulled it out of her pocket. *We also came to this country to find a Great Spirit.*

Oswald stood. With a decisive air, he said, “Let’s go. Seems like we don’t have the time to linger.”

Chapter 16: Girl, Rescues

THEY left the city at dawn, when the delirium of the pleasure quarters had just begun to cool down to a quiet simmer. Walking through the brush to cut around the city, they arrived at the knoll behind the castle. The sun had completely risen in the sky by the time they made it to their destination, stinging Nichika's eyes after a restless night of no sleep.

"I didn't know there was a hill behind the castle," she muttered.

They climbed the steep knoll trail winding between the sparsely grown trees and walked on in silence for a long time. Looking at her feet as her boots crunched the ground, Nichika muttered again, "I wonder if Wolfie's doing okay."

She had said it more to herself than to Oswald, but unexpectedly got a response from the man walking several steps in front of her.

"I set up several contraptions for him before I left, so I'd say he's getting along fine."

"Contraptions?"

"Don't worry about it. Anyway, you should spend more time worrying about yourself than Wolfie right now."

"Why?" She looked up from her boots, surprised by his reply, but he was taking big, fast strides ahead without glancing back.

"Fire mana is infamous for its bad temper. I heard there've been cases of people carelessly approaching the Fire Temple and getting shot at by flames, or even entirely catching on fire."

"Are you kidding me?!"

Now that he mentions it, it does feel like it's getting hot. Feeling an unnerving sweat spill down her back and arms, Nichika's feet dragged like there was lead in her boots.

“If you upset the Fire Spirit then—Oi, what’re you slowing down for? Keep up the pace.”

“I-I have business with the spirit. I’m not being careless, so... I’ll be okay, right?”

“...Just pray that the spirit feels like hearing you out before roasting you alive.”

“At least *tell me* it’ll be okay, even if it’s just a lie!” She chased after Oswald on the verge of tears.

They hiked up the hillside for a while longer until the temperature spiked.

“It’s so hot...” she mumbled.

“We’re close. Stay on guard.”

Though he said that, withered, charred trees were the only things around. Where was the temple? Nichika was about to ask him, when her ears caught wind of someone moaning.

She glanced around and asked Oswald, “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“Moaning—there it is again!”

Oswald, however, heard nothing. Without wind, stillness hung over the area, making it unlikely he couldn’t hear what she did. He gave her a skeptical look, but, determining she wasn’t trying to play a trick on him, he answered honestly, “No, I don’t hear it.”

“I can hear it! It’s probably coming from there—” Nichika lifted her hand to point, when a woman’s shrill, drawn-out scream ripped through the copse of scarred trees.

Nichika and Oswald exchanged looks and sprinted toward the scream fast enough to send the sweat flying off their bodies. The screams continued.

“Whoa!”

The ground abruptly dropped off into nothing—Oswald grabbed hold of Nichika as she was a hairsbreadth away from falling off the ledge. The top of the

knoll had given way to what was apparently an open pit.

“Watch where you’re going!”

“S-Sorry. Hm? That’s...”

Nichika strained her eyes toward the bottom of the pit. A large sacred tree towered in the center, with a small arrangement of rocks around it. By all appearances, it was the entrance to the Fire Temple they were headed for. Her eyes focused on the figure of someone who had collapsed onto the ground a meter from the tree.

She screamed upon recognizing who it was, “Princess Yura?!”

Her glamorous kimono had been scorched so badly the damage was visible from a distance; terrible burns marred her exposed right arm, where the kimono entirely incinerated off. Soot smeared her beautiful face.

Nichika immediately tried to run to the anguished woman. “We have to help her!”

“Wait!” Oswald caught her arm, forcing her to turn toward him. Narrowing his eyes, the suspicious man scrutinized the woman on the ground. “It may very well be a trap. We can’t be sure Princess Yura hasn’t sold us out—”

“Now’s not the time to be hung up on that!”

“Agh! Come back here!”

Unlike her master, Nichika acted on her emotions. Swatting his hand off, she skidded down the cliffside into the pit, kicking up a sandstorm behind her, and sprinted to Princess Yura in one fevered rush. Wrapping her arms around the woman, Nichika propped her up and called her name over and over.

Princess Yura cracked her crusted eyelids open and stuttered hoarsely, “Y-You are...”

“Please stay with me! What happened?!”

Princess Yura’s eyes bulged and she seized Nichika’s arms. Startled by her unbelievable strength, Nichika instinctively tried to shake her off, but before she could, the words of a desperate appeal reached her ears.

“Leave this place right now!”

“Why?”

“You’re going to be burned to death!”

By who? Nichika opened her mouth to ask, but her words were engulfed in a thundering boom. Pillars of fire shot out of the ground without warning—before she knew it, they were in a cage of wild, dancing flames, and it was closing in around them.

“What in the world is this?!”

“*NNGH!*” Princess Yura cried out, the heat too much for her open burns.

Red-hot winds ripped at their clothes and hair. The columns of flames intensified, cordoning off the twenty meters of open space marking the temple’s center. The wall of flames prevented Oswald from being able to see inside and Nichika from seeing beyond the orange barrier.

Nichika protected her face from the flames sweeping in almost close enough to lick her skin and shouted over their roaring blaze, “Princess Yura! What is this?!”

Princess Yura ignored her question and instead desperately appealed to the temple in front of them. Facing the distinctly tempestuous mass of blazing flames, she begged, “Please stop this, Emperor of Flames! This girl has nothing to do with what has angered you so!”

“I SHAN’T. All humans must be burnt to ash!”

Nichika was taken aback by the oppressive roar booming through the pit. Suddenly, from the center of the flames, a brightly burning man appeared. He was a shirtless, muscular man rising over two meters tall, sitting cross-legged in a meditative pose with a frighteningly stern visage. His entire body burst with wild flames, compounding his surreal and intimidating air.

Is this the Fire Spirit?

The flaming man shot her a death glare, paralyzing her with fear. At the wave of his finger, fire accumulated above his head—he launched it right at the two girls.

“Perish.”

Nichika couldn't move. The fireball would blast her to pieces once it hit her, but facing true, hateful bloodlust for the first time had debilitated her reflexes.

But right before the terrifying torrent of fire hit, Princess Yura jumped in front of her. Immediately after came a dying scream so traumatizing that she wanted to cover her ears.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGGHHHH!”

Nichika leapt to the writhing woman's side.

“P-Please hold on, Princess Yura! Princess Yura—ah!”

Though rolling around in the dirt had put out the flames, there were hideous burns blackening her back when she limply laid face-down like a charred corpse. Her stunning, long black hair had seared off, filling the air with an indescribably horrific scent.

Something snapped inside of Nichika.

“You're still standing? Worm. I'll smite you to dust!”

“Wh—What?! What's YOUR problem?! I'm not scared of the likes of you!”
Nichika burst out, bristling with anger.

“Hrm?”

Nichika's shaking had stopped. Climbing to her feet, she stood upright and furiously thrust a finger at the blazing spirit. *“You have some nerve to do this to Princess Yura! Weren't you worshipped here?! Why are you doing this?! WHY HAVE YOU DECIDED TO GO MAD!”*

“.....” The fire spirit was at a loss for words, bewildered by her fearless accusations. After a momentary pause, he spoke hesitantly as if delirious, *“Why, indeed? ...Why did I suddenly come to despise humans?”*

“You don't know?!”

“I do not know. I cannot comprehend. But my hatred is so great...IT WON'T END! RRRRAAAARGH!”

At his bestial howl, the flames burned ten times hotter as they coiled around

his threatening figure, transforming him into a white-hot dragon.

ROOOOOAAAR!

The fire dragon went berserk, slamming its long tail in multiple directions, sweeping away dirt, rocks, and burnt trees. The flames blurring her vision intensified further, until they blotted out everything else. All she could see was the red of a violent firenado.

ROOOOOOOOAAAAARR!

“BURST OUT, MY FLAMES! INCINERATE EVERYTHING IN THIS WORLD TO NOTHINGNESS!”

I can't last much longer...it's hard to breathe... Something was flickering among the flames, faintly calling back Nichika's fading consciousness.

“GRRRRRAAAAAHHHH!”

What is that?

An arrow was jammed into the tip of the dragon's whipping tail. Straining her eyes against the glare of the flames, she could make out an ominous purple aura emanating from it.

I feel like I've seen that color before... Rewinding her thoughts to a rather recent encounter, Nichika gasped. The conversation with Ini, who she had met on the Whale's deck, rushed back to her. Wasn't this the very poisonous purple aura he had pointed out to be devouring this world?

What can I do? If I could at least get a little closer to it, I could do something...!

She was frustrated that it took all her energy just to remain standing on her feet. Her boots sunk into the red sand as torrential winds struck against her. Suddenly, a familiar voice cut through from the other side of the flames.

“HEY, STUPID APPRENTICE OF MINE! You still alive down there?!”

“Oswald?! ...GHK!” Responding to the distant, yet close voice made her accidentally breathe in the blisteringly hot air, and she choked on it hard. However, her hacking seemed to convey her location to him.

“That's where you are, huh? Listen to me well. I'll make it rain once. I can't

keep the rain going long, so come out here while the flames have lost some of their intensity.”

“WAIT!” she coughed out, then, between sharp inhales of smoky air, she asked, “Can you...focus...that rain...on one spot?”

“Why?!”

It hurt so much to breathe that she couldn’t risk an explanation. Wringing out her last breath, she wheezed, “Concentrate it...a quarter to the left from where you are!”

“...Alright, here we go!”

Black rain clouds manifested from thin air, gathering over a section of the furiously burning sky. A humid, nauseating odor racked her nose as water came pouring down from the clouds like someone had flipped a bucket over. Directly under the downpour, the flames coiling around the dragon’s tail weakened.

NOW! In a final burst of strength, Nichika made a mad dash for it. With the rain mercilessly pelting her, she lunged for the uncanny arrow and seized the dragon’s tail. *I’m almost there. Stick with me!*

Praying internally, she wrapped her hands around the shaft. The tail swung wildly, but she clung on tightly, enduring the pain as she focused any remaining strength she had into the hand clutching the arrow. She felt it slip out of his scales and heard something gushing—the dragon roared.



“YAAAAAGH!”

Nichika was sent flying with the arrow she had finally managed to extract. She collided with the ground on top of a wet patch of moss. Oswald ran over to her as the flames abated with the dragon’s pain.

“Nichika!”

“How’s the dragon?!”

Nichika struggled painfully to her feet and jerked her head toward the center of the smoldering flames. She watched the blazing dragon writhe agonizingly in prolonged pain before it succumbed at last and sunk to the ground with a resounding thud.

“Is it dead...?!” Nichika gasped, choking on the smoke still in her lungs.

“You think a spirit would die that easily? You oughta be more worried about the one over there.” Oswald pointed at the heap known as Yura.

The flames encompassing the area slowly petered out after the possessed spirit lost consciousness. Once the fire had dissipated enough to let them through, Oswald and Nichika rushed over to Princess Yura’s side.

“Please get a hold of yourself!” Nichika entreated, pulling the lifeless Yura onto her lap. “Open your eyes!”

“This is bad...” Oswald muttered.

At that moment, they heard a leaden voice, making Nichika jump.

“Why, is that not the Cherry Blossom Kingdom’s Yura? Who in this universe would dare to harm her so?” it inquired.

Nichika fearfully looked over her shoulder. The eyes of a flaming dragon were fixed on her from where he was still laying on the ground. His lack of guilt sent the blood rushing to her head.

“It wasn’t just *anyone*! How could *you* ask that?!”

“Hrm?”

“*You’re* the one who did it!”

He blinked at her accusation. Though it was hard to read a dragon's expression, she sensed he was perplexed.

"You claim this handiwork is mine?" he inquired, truly unaware of the situation.

"You went on a horrible rampage trying to fry us to death moments ago... Don't you remember?" Nichika asked, gesturing to her burned clothing and the flame-scarred walls of the pit.

The fire dragon didn't answer her but stared hard at Princess Yura as if to assess her wounds. Shortly after, he acquiesced with shock lacing his tone, "Certainly, those are the marks left behind by my flames. Could you move aside for a moment?"

Oswald yanked on her mantle, pulling her off the ground and away from Princess Yura.

"Whoa!"

Quit yanking on my collar! Nichika whined internally, *I'm not a cat!*

Air whooshed through the area in a low rumble. The dragon snapped open his jaws and began to suck something in. Instantly, a red haze was extricated from Princess Yura's body and flew into the dragon's mouth.

After swallowing the haze, he proceeded to explain in a deep, peaceful voice, "I've absorbed the heat and the burns from her body for now. The pain should be at a tolerable level."

"Princess Yura!" Nichika shook off Oswald and darted over to her, confirming that her pain-contorted features had indeed softened considerably. Her breathing had relaxed as if she were in a deep sleep. "Th-Thank you? But that doesn't seem like the right thing to say now...um... Why did you do it...?"

Why did he attack her if he's going to heal her? The dragon picked up on Nichika's unspoken doubts and sighed, a puff of steam escaping from his nostrils.

"I doubt you will believe me, but I have not even an inkling of a recollection of attacking you."

“You don’t?”

“I should’ve been asleep, yet when I came to, I was in this predicament. What did I do? Will you enlighten me?”

Nichika found it hard to believe him, but tranquility filled the eyes of the serene fire spirit, leaving no room for any of the insanity that had sent him rampaging earlier.

NICHIKA agreed to detail all the events that had occurred since she had arrived, although she still retained a wary distance from the fire dragon.

“You really mean it? You aren’t going to suddenly take a chomp out of me?” she had asked several times, confirming that he was still sane through her narrowed, doubtful eyes.

“I shall not,” he assured her.

“You were being controlled by someone, Fire Spirit,” Oswald calmly informed him, having finished examining the broken arrow beside them. “This arrow has been enchanted to derange the flow of mana.”

“Are ye certain?!”

“Um, what does that mean?”

Oswald looked at his ignorant apprentice with eyes full of pity as if she were the most pathetic thing on the planet. “You’re so slow on the uptake. If you’re really my apprentice, why don’t you open your mouth *after* you’ve thought things through a little more?”

“Wh-Why do I have to be mocked over a question?!” she stuttered, then countered, “It’s your fault for refusing to teach me even *the basics of the basics* of being a witch!”

Her master produced a glass ball from his pocket. Blue smoke swirled inside, flickering between light and darkness. “Let me word this in a way your pea-sized brain can comprehend. This is the Witch’s Item I used to make it rain. Breaking it causes smoke to rise and directs water mana existing at higher altitudes to accumulate in the desired location.”

“Neat! So that’s why rain clouds suddenly formed on such a clear day. You’re like a wizard,” she said in awe.

But her words instantly soured his mood. “Don’t be stupid. I keep telling you, I’m a *witch*. Wizard is an occupational title that refers to people with the ability to issue direct orders to mana.”

“Hmm? Isn’t that the same thing?” Nichika cocked her head, then tried to summarize what he had said in simpler terms, “Okay, so, you’re saying that you use magic by giving commands to what’s called ‘Mana’ in this world. The difference between the occupations is that wizards directly give the commands, while witches enchant items with them. Is that what you mean?”

For some reason, Oswald was pulling a wry expression, but he didn’t refute her. He pocketed the glass ball and held up the arrow, which was still unleashing a sinister purple aura, in front of his chest instead.

“...Getting back on topic—essentially, Witch’s Items are supposed to output a specific, determined command, but the commands enchanting this thing you removed from Mister Almighty Fire Spirit here are incoherent nonsense. Normally, this would be counted as a failed item and chunked into the trash.”

“...What’s the problem with that?” she asked, taking a slight pause to consider the facts again, “If the commands are a mess, doesn’t that mean it wouldn’t even function?” She received a painful flick to the forehead. “Ow!”

“Wrong. Wrap your head around this: the all-powerful lord spirit we’ve got here is the manager and boss of fire mana—you can think of him as a gigantic pool of mana that’s taken shape. Just try shooting a screwy command into him and see what pops out as a result.”

“Ah!” Nichika blurted, finally getting the idea.

The fire dragon, having listened attentively till then, puffed out another sigh and slowly flicked his tail. “You’re insinuating that I was unable to defend against that command and went on a rampage as a result?”

“That’s the idea.” An evil glint flickered in Oswald’s eyes, a devious sort of curiosity coloring his expression. He fiddled with the arrow with the excitement of a boy who had gotten his hands on a new toy. “But you’ve got to wonder,

what else is at play? What made it possible to pierce an incorporeal spirit with an arrow? If I can figure out how they applied this technology, I'll be able to create goods that could easily level kingdoms—"

"I'll be taking that," Nichika announced, confiscating the arrow.

"Ah! Hey!"

She dropped it on the ground and stomped on it hard. The ill-omened purple aura instantly dissipated, leaving the remains as nothing more than broken junk.

"*You little water flea!*" Oswald snarled, infuriated. "What good is it to ruin such useful material?!"

But Nichika had no intention of standing down. "And what good comes of spreading something so dangerous? Are you sure *you* weren't the one who created it?" she retorted, glaring at him.

Oswald thrust his finger at her nose and spitefully laid into her, "Sheesh! Now look what you've just done. The *stupidest*, most *wasteful* thing possible. How did I *ever* get stuck with an idiot apprentice like you?"

"Stop inventing things that attract the wrath of others! It'll come back to bite you in the butt someday!"

"Hah! Too late for that! You think you can feed yourself just by doing good and merrily throwing away your efforts for world peace, trashy novel heroine?!"

"What's your problem, quack?!"

They went for each other's throat like dogs, until a moan at their feet interrupted their argument. Nichika crouched and worriedly called, "Princess Yura! How are you feeling?"

Princess Yura had regained a hazy consciousness, which cleared when she noticed the peacefully swaying dragon. She gave him a weak smile. Though her stunning kimono and fabulous hair were in tatters, her smile was still beautiful.

"Emperor of Flames...I am so relieved to see you have regained your sanity."

"Yura...my apologies, child. All of this is the result of my weakness..."

“No, it is not,” she reassured him, “I believed in you all along.”

Princess Yura sat up by herself and listened to Nichika’s summary of what had gone down while she was unconscious.

“I see... It was you who brought Emperor of Flames back to his right mind, then.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. I was just so frantic, I’m not really sure what happened. Ahaha.... I’m glad everything worked out in the end!” Nichika bashfully exclaimed.

Behind her, Oswald gave an exasperated sigh and flicked her right where she was sheepishly scratching her head. “You always act rashly without planning things out. You wouldn’t have had any bones left to bury if you had been off the mark by even a smidge.”

“Ugh... Well, all that ends well is well, right?”

Princess Yura giggled behind her hand at their squabbling, but her face stiffened when her eyes came across the broken arrow’s fragments on the ground. She knew the Great Spirit hadn’t been acting normal by all accounts, but she never fathomed that he had been pierced with such a sinister item.

Tapping the soot off her seared kimono, she revealed, “Before dawn, I had a strange premonition come over me. In the moments following, I heard the most chilling moan, and consequently, I came to the temple to confirm the situation. But our Emperor of Flames was already going on a violent rampage... Who might dare do such a thing?”

The moan Princess Yura had heard most likely belonged to the Fire Spirit and was the same noise Nichika had picked up on. The group sunk into silence, each contemplating the circumstances of the mysterious attack. It was broken by Oswald, who swiftly cut across the clearing in huge strides and grabbed Princess Yura by the collar. Nichika jolted in shock and rushed to stop him, but he held out a stopping hand.

“I have a question for you. Last night, someone attacked us in an alleyway. This was dropped at the scene.” Oswald dangled the cartridge in front of the princess, earning a wide-eyed look. He continued in an icy voice, “Wolfie was

shot by the bullet I just sold all the rights of to *you*. Would you care to explain?”

Despite his polite tone, his choice of words squarely laid the blame upon the princess. Saddened, she smiled softly and placed her hands on top of the one clutching her collar.

“I see, the mighty witch doubts me.” She seized his free hand and brought it to her throat. “Very well. Please strangle me to death as you desire, here and now.”

“You acknowledge your guilt, then?”

“I do not. But I *do* believe that any words I may use to explain myself shall inevitably sound like excuses to you.”

“P-Princess Yura...” Nichika whimpered pathetically.

Princess Yura offered a small smile to comfort her, then faced the man before her, locking him in a steely gaze. From within her deep-crimson eyes, the light of dignified resolve glimmered. “However, you must have confidence in this one fact: Cherry Blossom Kingdom’s Yura never betrays. Please make your decision with that in mind.”

“.....”

Quietness fell upon the clearing, leaving no sounds other than the occasional crackle of flames from the fire dragon’s body and the puffs from his nostrils. But Nichika moved faster than Oswald could make his decision—she hurtled herself on his arm with reckless abandon.

“Stop this! You already heard her defense!” she fervently pleaded.

“Tch! You’ve been deceived by her obvious act,” Oswald scoffed.

“Either way, nobody died! Isn’t that all that matters in the end?!”

“Is that something someone who almost lost their life should say? You’re something else, all right. Are you some kind of saint?”

Nichika recoiled from his scornful, judging glare but continued holding onto his arm. Looking straight into his eyes, she spoke with confidence ringing clearly in her voice, “I’m not a saint, but Princess Yura protected me from getting fried. Someone who was trying to kill me would never put their life at risk to save

me.”

Oswald skeptically scrunched up his nose at her reasoning. Though honestly, he was weak when it came to these eyes of hers. They reflected her will to remain unbroken no matter the pressure and a pure heart he had abandoned long ago.

“This doesn’t work in my favor...” he muttered under his breath, turning his face aside.

“...?”

...I’m hesitant to make a decision here. I know there’s someone pulling the strings behind everything, but I don’t have any proof yet. In any event, I need to draw the line between personal emotion and business, and—

Oswald squeezed his tightly clenched hands and decided. Right at that moment, noise broke from the brush behind him and a black shadow lunged for him.

“What?!”

Caught off guard, he fell to the ground when the shadow landed on his back and shoved him forward. Oswald rapidly spun around to fight back, only to be dumbfounded.

“MASTEEEEEEEEER! **Master!** *Master!* M-A-S-T-E-R!”

“Wolfie?!”

The brown furry beast that had “attacked” him was only the familiar he had left back in the city to recover from serious injuries. The wolf’s snout dripped with snot from crying, and he excitedly licked Oswald’s face all over until it was sopping with drool.

“I finally found youuuuuu,” Wolfie howled. “This area reeks of burnt stuff, so it was so hard to find youuuuuu!”

“Stop it, mutt! You’re...heavy dammit, you big fat wolf!” Oswald grabbed the wolf by the scruff and tried to throw him off, but couldn’t do it because he was in the wrong position. Taken aback by the master and familiar tumbling around kicking up a fuss, Nichika ran over to them.

“Wolfie! Don’t you need to stay in bed?!”

“That’s right! What about your wounds?!” Oswald quickly checked where the wounds had been when he had operated on the wolf, but the marks had disappeared entirely, even from where he had left stitches. His eyelids peeled back.

Completely nonchalant, Wolfie answered, “Somehow, they all healed when I licked them.”

“...How did you remove the stitches?”

“They snapped, so I removed them with my teeth.”

Oswald punched the wolf square in the head—he didn’t hold back either. “*Don’t screw with me*, mongrel! Pay me back for all the hard work and worrying I wasted!”

“Oooowie,” Wolfie whimpered, “Animal abuser! Master hit me, Nichika!” He ran over to Nichika, sobbing dramatically, and wrapped himself around the back of her legs.

She smiled dryly and pet him on the head. “There, there. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Hmph. He would’ve gotten better even if we’d left him on the road to die, damned wild animal.”

“Now, now. That’s not true,” Nichika reminded, “He got better because you treated him. He would’ve bled to death without you.”

The wolf, who had recovered from near-death at a frightening speed, happily wagged his tail at the woman standing slightly away from the group. “Oh? Princess Yura is here too? Why are you covered in soot?”

Still not convinced of her innocence, Oswald snorted and warned, “Don’t go near her. She might be the one who shot you.”

Wolfie, however, flashed a wolfish grin and downright rejected the theory, without even an ounce of doubt. “Eh? She’s not. You’re an awful person for doubting Princess Yura, Master.”

“Excuse me?”

“The person who shot me gave off no smell at all. Princess Yura has a unique odor. I’d never mistake it!” Wolfie confidently bragged, silencing Oswald.

“.....”

Nichika took over and prompted her brown furry friend for more detail, “What’s her unique odor?”

“Maybe she’s wearing some sorta sweet, sweet perfume? She can be one kilometer away and I’ll still know exactly where she is.”

“I certainly do perfume both my kimono and body with a particular rose fragrance, but to hear that it reveals my location to that degree...”

Oswald bitterly screwed up his face for a long while. Finally, he acquiesced and deeply bowed his head to her. “You have my apologies. If he says you are not the culprit, I’m inclined to believe it is true.”

“You trust Wolfie?” Nichika interjected, astonished. Oswald had believed Wolfie so quickly this time that she couldn’t help but ask.

“I acknowledge how good his sniffer is,” Oswald replied, without lifting his head, “After all, its precision allows him to track down even those he’s never met, provided that they’ve come in contact with someone he knows.”

Oswald seemed bothered by his mistake, but Princess Yura smiled and kindly forgave him. “Please lift your head. It is I who is responsible for losing some of the bullets.”

“You ‘lost’ some of the bullets?”

“Unfortunately, yes. Somehow, a box disappeared during transport to our armory.”

Princess Yura’s first thought was that the box had simply been misplaced, but after hearing about what had happened to Wolfie, it was evident that its disappearance had been deliberate. In all likelihood, the true culprit had stolen it during transit, in order to frame Princess Yura.

Nichika and Oswald both thought back to the person cloaked in a white robe, who had ambushed them before vanishing into the air.

This time, it was Fire Spirit who interrupted, having patiently observed their

interaction until now, “Is this connected to the being that controlled me?”

“We don’t have proof yet, but we can’t deny it either,” Oswald admitted.

“Then, does that mean the culprit knew we were coming here?” Nichika asked, then gasped, “Oh yeah!” Pulling the fist-sized orb out from her pocket, she held it up so the fire dragon could get a good look. “Great Fire Spirit, I have a favor to ask of you!”

“Hrm?”

“I’m on a mission to collect the powers of the Great Spirits. Would you be willing to cooperate with me?”

Princess Yura had been smiling calmly, but hearing Nichika’s request turned her blue in the face. Rushing over, she caught Nichika’s arm and whispered a warning, “Do you understand how presumptuous it is to ask for such a thing? And of all things, you are requesting the Emperor of Flames, one of the very pillars of the Four Great Spirits, to serve you!”

“Serve me? Serve how...? Ummm?” Nichika had been totally unaware of just how insolent her request was when she made it. Embarrassed, she wildly waved her hand in front of her as she took it back. “I’d never be absurd enough to ask you to serve me! I’m so sorry! I’m ignorant to the customs of this world!”

Princess Yura made a confused face. “This world?”

“E-Err...”

Fire Spirit laughed heartily at the flustered girl. Once the rumbles akin to distant thunder had ceased to resound through the pit, he made a big nod with his long neck. “Very well. ‘Tis the request of the very person who preserved my honor. I can’t turn ye down now, can I?”

“You mean it?!” Nichika’s face lit up at his ready consent...and was promptly put out by a cynical remark that slapped her from behind.

“Pft. Being ignorant about the ways of the world can sometimes be a weapon of its own, eh?”

“And *whose* fault do you think it is that I know nothing?!”

She glared vindictively at her master, but he averted his eyes as if it was no

concern of his. *I seriously think he's not telling me on purpose, so he can get a kick out of my bumbling into one disaster after another!*

Miffed, she squinted as he kicked some dirt with the tip of his boot, when the Fire Spirit stolidly inquired, "I am to imbue this magic orb with my power?"

"Yes! Please do." She hurried over to him and held the magic orb under his nostrils.

Fire Spirit blew his breath into it, instantly filling the transparent orb with a swirl of magical red light.

"Gorgeous..." She was enchanted by the gentle warmth of the light. Constantly changing, it rose and fell between light and dark tones as if it were breathing.

"That is now evidence of our bond. Even if ye are far away, I shall be able to lend you my power. By the way, child..." Fire Spirit paused, snaking his face abruptly close to hers and gazed deep into her eyes as if seeing through to her core. "You are hiding a tremendous power within. But the shackles around your heart have rusted."

"Pardon?"

"You will not be able to adequately draw out my power as you are. Allow me to take a closer look." Faster than Nichika could react, the dragon placed his sharp-clawed paw on her head. She stepped back, afraid he'd crush her, when —

"...!"

The world opened before her.

What Nichika experienced was similar to flipping on all the lights in a pitch-black room. Her vision rapidly cleared, and she became capable of seeing her surroundings with striking lucidity. More than seeing with her eyes—she felt it with her entire being. Something glittered and glowed in Fire Spirit, in the trees around her, in the ground spanning below her feet, and, most abundantly, in the atmosphere.

"Butterflies?"

Crimson glowing butterflies were fluttering together, surrounding Fire Spirit and Nichika. One landed on her finger, and its form unraveled—only for it to fly away as a light and reform.

“Great Fire Spirit, um, what is this?”

Butterflies flitted all around her body, gathering in abundance to the orb that had received Fire Spirit’s power. The dragon fondly watched them as he answered her in a gentle, timorous voice, “Those are what humans call mana. They are the origin of all that breathes in the world, the great coursing current.”

“Current?”

“Try giving a command.”

Randomly being told to give a command to a luminescent creature, rather, to a butterfly, utterly bewildered her, but Nichika tried to speak to the red butterflies landing on her hands anyway. “Will you lend me your power?”

The butterflies burst into flames, transforming into fireballs as if answering her call. They burned with intense heat, but curiously, did not feel hot against her skin. Nodding with satisfaction, Fire Spirit gave his stamp of approval.

“Well done. This power shall protect and assist you henceforth.”

“Amazing! Thank you oh so very much, Great Fire Spirit!”

“Be careful out there,” he said in parting, then burst into flames and disappeared into a literal swarm of butterflies that took off in every direction. She stood there watching the breathtaking scene, a look of pure astonishment on her face.

Chapter 17: Girl, Drinks Tea

THE next day they visited Cherry Blossom Kingdom's finest reference archive.

Staring up at the large, slightly aged building, Oswald mentioned, "I've received permission from Princess Yura to access the archives. Cherry Blossom Kingdom is well-versed in new medical treatments, so you might be able to find a treatment method for Fake Lover."

"Really?! All right, let's do this!" Nichika cheered.

"You're so motivated, Nichika," Wolfie observed, watching her roll up her sleeves.

"Of course I am!"

Contrary to her energy, Oswald yawned listlessly beside her. Then, of all the nerve, he turned on his heel and headed back down the road they came. "Well, good luck with that."

"Help me out!" Nichika grabbed his sleeve, stopping him. She hadn't realized he was *that* opposed to assisting her. Looking up at his sleepy face, she frankly confronted him with something that had been bothering her for a while now, "Let me say this now because it's relevant... Aren't you, even just temporarily, my *teacher*? I think you have the responsibility to *teach* me things!"

"....." He stared back at her with an arched eyebrow that plainly said he found the idea annoying, but then, as if he were struck by a great idea, his expression changed. "I don't mind teaching you, but you don't even know how to read or write the letters of this world. That's something you need to know before I can start teaching you."

"Well...yeah, when you put it like that."

Indeed, Nichika couldn't read any of the letters belonging to languages in this world. She could, however, understand the general spoken language. Though she sincerely wished whatever made that ability possible would help her with

reading and writing too—it didn't—and she didn't know who she could file the complaint with.

"This reference room doesn't serve much purpose for you if you can't read either. Let Wolfie teach you for a while first."

"Seriously?!"

JUST like that, Nichika ended up taking a seat at a long wooden table situated in the sunniest spot in the reference room and began taking reading lessons from Wolfie.

"Now then, young Nichika, put your listening cap on. You are to call me Professor Wolfie," he instructed.

"Please teach me your ways, Professor Wolfie..." Nichika entreated.

To think the day would come when I'd be learning my letters from a talking wolf. Nobody knows for sure what life has in store for them.

"Commence copying each letter a thousand times!"

"Bleghhh."

SEVERAL hours passed with Nichika repeating the same process of copying down a huge list of foreign letters—similar, in her mind, to the Japanese syllable table used in primary school—while Wolfie orally explained each letter to her. Her studies went surprisingly well.

"You're amazing, Nichika! You're tens of thousands times better at remembering than me!" Wolfie praised, stamping her writing sheet with a paw of approval.

"You think so?" she said humbly, a strange feeling settling over her. English and other foreign language lessons went right through one ear and out the other in her world, but, curiously enough, this world's language stuck with her right off the bat.

Why does it feel familiar?

It felt more like she was trying to recall knowledge she had forgotten rather than trying to legitimately learn a new language, even though she shouldn't have ever seen these letters before.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter," she concluded.

In the end, learning fast was a good thing. It didn't take too long after that for her to become capable of constructing simple sentences with the letters she was studying.

"Say, Wolfie, what's this letter—"

SNORE.

"Mmm... Zzzzz."

"Hey..."

The concentration of Nichika's great furry teacher appeared to have failed him, because he had dozed off into deep sleep mode while she was working. Exasperated, she glanced at the evening sunlight pouring in through the window and was surprised by how much time had passed since morning.

"Mn! I'll take a short break too!" she said, stretching to her feet. Wanting something to pass the time with, she walked over to one of the many bookshelves lining the walls. She traced the spines of the different books in search of one at her reading level.

"Oh, this might work." She pulled a picture book from the shelf that she thought she'd stand a fair chance at reading, since it was meant for children. "Spirit...Goddess....Yuna..." she read aloud, sounding out each letter and syllable.

Long, long ago, this continent was engulfed in chaos.

Nothing existed here: neither sound or light, nor the past or present, nor anything living.

One day, God appeared in the pitch-black world and left a single egg there.

After taking what seemed like an eternity, the egg hatched.

The fire bird that hatched from it took flight into the sky, illuminating and heating the land.

A single cry created sound, a flap of its wings moved the atmosphere into place, and time began to flow.

“Is this a creation myth?” Nichika sat down on a step leading to the books upstairs and flipped the pages.

Only the sound of turning pages resounded in the still reference room.

And then the Fire Bird Phoenix decided to rest on the ground below and laid eggs.

Monsters burst from the eggs in droves.

New life after new life came into existence, eventually ending with humanity, who timidly walked out of the shadow of the egg.

Watching the cycle of births through till the end, Phoenix curled up on the ground and burned away in its own flames.

From those ashes, the Fire Spirit, Water Spirit, Wind Spirit, and Earth Spirit came to be. Aside from the Great Four Spirits, many other lesser spirits were born too.

The world grew in proper order.

Monsters increased in number, and the elemental spirits took on the burden of making sure the world continued smoothly.

Nevertheless, after five hundred years passed, problems arose.

Humans grew too clever for their own good, and from among their ranks, greedy men moved to take over the world as if it belonged to them alone.

They abused the power of magic and began subjugating monsters.

Before long, their power grew beyond that of the spirits, destroying the balance in the world.

In some lands, blizzards capable of freezing the ground ten meters below the surface continued for a year straight, while in others, scorching heat withered the plant life into husks.

The humans didn't stop their evil deeds, despite all the destruction around them.

That is when a single girl appeared from out of nowhere.

Announcing herself as Yuna, she dished out punishment to the evildoers with her mysterious powers.

No matter how evil the person, they were unable to oppose Yuna when she stared them down with her upright and honest eyes.

The look revived their forgotten pure hearts, which they had imprisoned deep within themselves.

Freeing all the spirits from captivity, Yuna graciously accepted their request to act as the ruler over all spirits.

Thus, having become the ruler of the spirits, Goddess Yuna continues to watch over the world to this day.

"Lady Yuna is so cool!" Nichika exclaimed.

She shut the book, ruminating over how heroic the myth was, not even realizing that she had read through it as smoothly as she would a Japanese book.

"Okay, time to get back to the inn! Wolfie, wake up."

"Awoo?" Wolfie moaned sleepily.

SEVERAL days since they had begun their stay in Cherry Blossom Kingdom, Nichika was running down the road with her hands full of the books she had borrowed from the reference archives. Upon hearing the sound of her name, she skidded to a halt, catching the tower of books under her chin before it nearly toppled over.

"Oh my, Nichika, that's quite the pile of books. I see you are still hard at

work.”

“Princess Yura!”

Sitting on a red terrace sipping tea in a beautiful kimono, Princess Yura looked like she was modeling for a photo-shoot. Her ankle-length hair had been charred so badly that she had to cut it to shoulder-length, but the new look did nothing to dampen the brilliance of her beauty.

Nichika ran over to the terrace and energetically greeted her, “Hi! Err, I mean, how do you do, fair lady? My lady? Your Highness? Uh...”

“Hahaha,” Princess Yura giggled behind her free hand. “You needn’t be so formal with me. Today is my day off, so please behave as is natural to you.”

Princesses have days off too?

Nichika’s question must’ve shown on her face, because Princess Yura supplied the answer between sips of tea. “In Cherry Blossom Kingdom, ‘Princess’ is a title given to the person serving as the leader of the military. On my days off, I’m a normal citizen, no different from a *dango* seller’s daughter.”

“Nah, I think I’d need to get my eyes checked if I saw someone like you acting like one of those pretty girls trying to get customers to come inside her father’s shop.”

Actually, now I kinda want to see what that’d look like. What would she look like dressed as a waitress? I’m sure she’d look so stunning that male customers would line up outside the shop just for a peek.

Princess Yura interrupted her thoughts by patting the seat beside her in invitation. “Do you prefer *yomogi dango*? Mushroom? My recommendation is *mitarashi dango*.”

“Oh, I love *mitarashi dango*!”

“Ma’am, bring out two sticks of *mitarashi dango*—wait, add my share to that too.”

“You’ve got it, Yura!” the spry hostess called back in a plummy voice, returning inside the shop to fetch their order.

Glancing at Nichika’s pile of books placed on the chair beside her, Princess

Yura softly commented, “I really owe you for what you did for me at the temple. Is your research coming along all right?”

“Yes, as much as it could be. Oh, yeah! Thank you so much for giving me permission to enter the archives!”

Princess Yura was so astonished by Nichika’s honesty—she was used to having to bargain and haggle with people who owed her or she owed—that a quiet laugh slipped out. “I’m quite embarrassed to have you see it. Our nation hasn’t been around for long, so I fear I may have disappointed you with the dearth of technical and specialized books.”

“I’m not disappointed at all! Oz—er, I mean, my master praised your collection. He said Cherry Blossom Kingdom’s medical and herbal knowledge is second to none.”

Princess Yura gently smiled and gazed up at the sky. Nichika followed suit, lifting her eyes to the heavens where the vibrant contrast of the deep-blue sky framed by blooming cherry trees etched a lasting impression. She often saw this scenery in Japan, but rarely had she ever taken the time to appreciate the simple everyday sights. In retrospect, the blue of this world’s sky was a much deeper shade than any she saw on Earth.

“Nichika, do you know how this country was established?”

“Umm...nope.”

“Cherry Blossom Kingdom was originally a place where prostitutes who escaped from other cities gathered. Prostitutes have to take care of their own health, which inevitably left many of them with at least a basic understanding of medicine. Our nation may very well have that to thank for our medical knowledge.”

“That’s interesting.” Nichika’s eyes rounded at the unexpected topic.

Seeing her reaction, Princess Yura knitted her brows and apologized, “I’m sorry. I suddenly brought up an uncomfortable topic.”

“That’s not true! Because that means this city is like a refuge for prostitutes, right? I believe just having the hope of escape must’ve been a huge emotional support for many woman across the world!” Nichika insisted with clenched

fists.

Nichika might have found herself in a similar position if she hadn't succeeded in getting Oswald to take her under his wing as an apprentice. She viewed it much more personally than Princess Yura could ever know.

But, realizing how what she said may have come across wrong, Nichika froze. Ashamed, she shrunk down in her chair. "...I'm sorry. I have no right to talk when I don't know much about what they've been through."

"Haha," Yura chuckled. "You truly are an intriguing person. I can understand why the great witch would want to keep you with him."

"He does?"

"Here you go, girly!" the hostess interjected, cutting their conversation short as she carried the *dango* over to their table, "Thanks for waiting for your *mitarashi dango*!"

Nichika was pondering about what Princess Yura's words meant, but her thoughts were disrupted by what was set in front of her.

"Please dig in. The dango here are the best in the kingdom," Princess Yura encouraged.

"....."

The warm, soft, grilled *mochi* balls were glazed with a glossy, sweet soy sauce. By all accounts, they looked like absolutely scrumptious *dango*. They really did, but...the problem was their sheer quantity. One quick look and Nichika was sure there were more than fifty skewers piled directly on top of the tray.

Princess Yura dug in without reserve. "Heavenly! These truly are a treat. I just can't get enough of this flavor!" she exclaimed.

"P-Princess Yura? Hello? Princess Yura?"

"Mmph?" Princess Yura turned to her, with three skewers in her right hand and five in her left. "What?" She looked like she was having the time of her life with glossy sauce smeared across her lips.

"Are we really going to eat these?" Nichika asked in disbelief, "All of them?"

"Dango are a blessing. They come in handy during mock battles and training, because they keep you full."

"I'm sure they do, but..."

Aren't you eating too many? Nichika left the rest of her question unsaid. Watching the *dango* disappear down the princess' throat like they were being sucked into a black hole, she hesitantly picked up a skewer from the ever-decreasing pile on the tray.

Princess Yura repeated the process of stuffing her cheeks with *dango* like a chipmunk, swallowing them, and following it up with more, all the while complaining resentfully between bites, "That's why...mph...I'm trying to...endorse...mmph...using them as emergency rations...mm...during away missions...mmh...but the statesmen keep shooting me down!"

I get why they would. Dango don't keep fresh for a long time. Nichika smiled dryly as she sympathized with the senior statesmen's plight.

"WHAT? *This is where you've been?"*

A familiar voice echoed down the street after Nichika had been chatting idly with Princess Yura for a good while. Nichika took a look and found her master shooting her an incredulous stare, holding some sort of object under his arm.

"Allow me to apologize to you, Princess Yura. Has this rare animal offended you in any way?"

"Who're you calling a rare animal?!"

"Haha. I had her accompany me for a spot of tea. I enjoyed our time together."

Nichika was in the midst of huffily standing from her chair, when she caught sight of something behind Oswald and stopped. Something was crushed under a mountain of bags.

"Wolfie?!"

Her four-legged friend slowly raised his head under the heavy load, his eyes spinning. His eyes weren't focusing, but he weakly sniffed the air. "Sniff, sniff

sniff. Nichika? You smell good.”

Nichika furiously glared at Oswald and yelled, “Hey, why are you putting so much strain on him! He’s being crushed under the weight of all your junk!”

Oswald scowled at her deafening shout, plucked a *dango* skewer from her hand, and held it out before his wolf’s nose. “Here.”

“Dango!” Wolfie tugged a *dango* off the skewer with his teeth and rapidly regained his lively energy with every passing bite. When he was finished, he easily hopped to his feet with a big, satisfied sigh. “Yummy! ...Weird? Why did all my strength come back?”

“Because you darted out of the inn without breakfast, stupid dog.”

His weakness was just from hunger?

Having finished all the *dango* on the skewer, he jumped up and down with the heavy bag bouncing on his back. “Master! What else do we have left to buy? I can carry more! We’re leaving in the afternoon, right? Right?”

“We are? I didn’t hear about that.” Nichika looked at Oswald. He shrugged.

“I’ve gone through and memorized most of their books and documents. Unfortunately, it seems like we won’t be able to find any leads from the books of this country.”

“That’s a shame...” Nichika had hoped they’d be able to grasp some sort of helpful clue on the Fake Lover parasite. She hung her head dejectedly, until something clicked and made her look up with a start. “You looked into it for me?”

“We’d be ten years older before leaving this country if I left all the work to you.”

“Haha,” she laughed dryly. He had phrased that horribly, but she didn’t have it in her to tell him off for it, since it was the truth, and he had helped her out in the end. Instead, she huffily turned her head away from him.

Princess Yura giggled at her. “You will be warmly welcomed should you ever drop by our humble kingdom again. I shall be praying that your travels are safe. Oh, and I’ll be sure to have some *dango* boxed up for you to take. Will fifty

skewers do?”

“N-No, thanks! We’ll be fine without it!”

WITHOUT much fanfare, they left Cherry Blossom Kingdom behind them a little past noon. Snacking on the ten skewers of *mitarashi dango* Nichika had unbelievably persuaded Princess Yura to agree to after much effort, they walked to the northeast.

“Cherry Blossom Kingdom was a great country for how small it is!” Nichika cheerfully brought up, “They even had hot springs.”

“You fit in frighteningly well,” Oswald remarked.

“Yeah, because its culture was just like where I’m from.”

Casually conversing, they hiked on. As they progressed, the trail grew steeper until they came across a moderately deep ravine, where a clear river was rushing along below them.

Giving that scenery a good sidelong glance as she walked, Nichika questioned Oswald about their destination, “Where are we headed next?”

“I don’t have a specific place in mind, but we can’t go anywhere unless we cross this mountain.”

Oh yeah, Cherry Blossom Kingdom is protected by a range of mountains. Conjuring up the image of the world map she had seen in the archives, her shoulders sagged at the prospect of the tiring journey ahead.

“Blegh. I hate hiking mountains. I hope I don’t lose steam halfway up.”

“Don’t fall off the ledge. I’m not going down there to pick you up if you do.”

“No, you should save me if I fall!”

She wanted to believe Oswald was just kidding, but her past interactions with him only made her afraid that he might actually leave her to die. She was staring suspiciously at his back, when Wolfie, who was trotting beside her, glanced up and started to beg.

“Hey! Hey! Let me see the magic ball again! It’s all sparkly and shiny.”

Nichika smiled at him and brought the orb out from her pocket. When she held it up to the sun, the light shined through the glass, drawing a red circle on the ground. Wolfie playfully hopped around and skidded along the mountain edge, chasing after the red light.

I'm so glad I asked the Fire Spirit to lend me his power. I just need to keep up this pace, Nichika thought. Mana in the shape of butterflies fluttered over to the magic orb in her hand and disappeared inside.

"It's neat that mana takes on the form of a butterfly. It's so strange that I can see them if I try to now," she marveled aloud.

Ever since the Fire Spirit had opened up the world to her, she'd become acutely aware of the mana that existed everywhere around her. Though they weren't normally visible, she could spot them here and there when she strained her eyes.

Unsettled by her casual remark, Oswald looked over his shoulder and abruptly asked, "Butterflies? Is that how you see it?"

"Yeah, you don't?"

"Apparently, mana takes on different forms depending on the viewer. I see it as a bird."

"Birds, huh? What about you, Wolfie?"

Wolfie quit chasing the red light and cocked his head. "I'm not that strong when it comes to magic, so at most I can only see faint lights sometimes."

"Huh."

Nichika carefully studied Wolfie's big, furry body. There were dim brown lights gathering around him. When she examined Oswald in the same fashion, she got the impression there were little blue birds flying in his vicinity.

Do different types of mana like different people? She surveyed the area around her body, but the only mana she saw were the red butterflies flocking to the magic orb.

Suddenly, a golden butterfly cut across in front of her. Curious what element that mana corresponded to, she thoughtlessly followed without watching her

surroundings. It led her to the ledge.

“Ah!” The ground suddenly gave out under her feet.

“Wha—you idiot!”

“Nichika!”

Oswald and Wolfie’s horrified expressions vanished from view. She desperately tried to grab hold of the cliff terrain zooming by as she fell, but every time she managed to catch something with her hands, it fruitlessly crumbled away.

“WAAAAAAHHHHHH!”

Her ears filled with the sound of her scream rebounding off the ravine walls above. With a shocking shift in temperature, she splashed into the rushing current of the river that should’ve been far below her.

Act 4: Makina Logical

Chapter 18: Girl, Picked Up

THE river appeared tranquil from above, but it was monstrous once she plunged into the water and was pummeled mercilessly by its rapid current.

“Wah! PUH!” Nichika gagged on the water as her head resurfaced, only to be pulled back down again.

Nichika wasn't a bad swimmer, but she certainly wasn't a professional one either, so her struggles against the raging current were futile. Swept away, she tried to swim for the riverbank, but being jostled around by the rapids had thrown off her sense of which way was up.

Shoot! Where's the surface?!

She kicked hard toward the light, but both her movements and thoughts were sluggish from suffocation. Just as she felt she was in dire straits—

Something caught on her mantle behind her neck and lifted her out of the water. Her view slowly shifted up and her back was pushed slightly forward as if she were hooked on something spherical. Thinking someone must've rescued her, she turned her neck to get a look at them, but it wasn't a person; it was a large wooden contraption.

“...Waterwheel?” In the midst of her haze, the wheel pulled her to its peak, then proceeded to gradually drag her back down toward the water. “W-Wait!”

Frightened by the possibility of being returned to the rapids because she was hooked on the waterwheel, she kicked her legs and flailed her arms in hopes of knocking herself loose. Suddenly, an arm came out of nowhere and wrapped around her waist.



Yanking her forward, they both fell onto the bank. Feeling her back collide with solid ground brought Nichika a wave of intense relief.

She gasped for air and let the tension ooze out of her tired muscles, taking a moment to realize someone had fallen on top of her. Wiping the water off her face and out of her stinging eyes, Nichika squinted to bring the blurry figure into focus. She found herself face to face with a kind-looking young man wearing round glasses. He was holding himself up to keep from squashing her under his weight.

“What a relief. I’m glad you seem to be okay now.” A voice matching his gentle appearance showered down on her like warm rain.

He appeared to be around the same age as Nichika. For some reason, soot smeared the brown hair he had pulled back in a ponytail, but even if that detracted from his charm, his face was still very handsome. He wore moss-green coveralls and stared down at her with eyes as brown as his hair.

“U-Um, thank you very much!” Nichika hurried to sit up, but she was soaked to the bone, which made every limb feel like lead. And she wasn’t just soaked; she was chilled to the bone too.

Seeing the shivering girl, the young man held out his hand and offered, “I don’t know your story, but you should probably change and warm up. Come to the village with me.”

“What village?”

“It’s close. It’s less than a five-minute walk.”

“But I’ve been separated from my friends. I carelessly slipped and fell into the river...”

Debating what to do, Nichika looked to the cliffs above the winding, surging river, but she couldn’t find the silhouettes of a man dressed in black or a wolf anywhere. It looked like she had been washed a good distance away from where she had fallen in.

The young man turned his face in the same direction. To confirm the situation, he asked, “Did you come from Cherry Blossom Kingdom?”

She gave a big nod. A faint smile touched his lips. The expression wrinkled the corners of his eyes, and with that alone, he exuded a terribly compassionate air.

“Then you don’t have to worry. Anyone who comes from that direction has to pass through my village. I’m sure you’ll see them again if you wait in the village.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I doubt the people who are traveling with you would want you to stay here and catch a cold, either.”

Nichika had to really wonder about that one. She could almost hear Oswald’s infuriated voice griping, *“You never fail to amaze and disgust me. A careless idiot like you should just go catch a cold so you can learn how to behave for a bit—oh, wait, idiots can’t catch colds, can they?”*

“...Even I catch a cold sometimes...” she mumbled in protest to her auditory hallucination.

“What was that?”

“Oh, sorry. Is it all right for me to take you up on your offer then? My name is Nichika.”

“I’m Makina. It’s nice to meet you.”

Nichika’s heart skipped a beat over his carefree smile. Her type of guy had always been someone sweet and sincere, and somehow or another, this young man felt close to her ideal prince.

“The terrain is rough there, so watch your step.” He offered her his hand and escorted her like it was only natural. Being treated courteously was a new sensation, and it gave her butterflies in her stomach.

When it comes to that teacher of mine, he’d sooner shove me on the ground and use me as a bridge than escort me. Would my life be quieter if I had met Makina first instead? Oswald’s wicked smirk crossed her mind, and she shook her head back and forth to rid herself of the image. *Annoyingly, that guy’s just the teeniest bit my type when it comes to his looks, but it’s wasted since his personality is beyond difficult!*

“That’s right!” she said to herself, “Not only that, but he causes trouble left and right, and he comes up with dangerous ideas on the go. And let’s not forget how much he loves to look down on others and make a fool out of them on a daily basis!”

“Nichika?” Makina asked, hearing her mumbling.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was just talking to myself. Ahaha.” Nichika snapped out of her daydreams and blinked at the view before her.

Several steps ahead, Makina swept an arm out to introduce the village. “Welcome to Lolo Village.”

The direction of the wind changed, carrying the scent of bittersweet flowers to them. Lolo Village was a simple village, but the flowers blooming in profusion around it transformed the area into a splendid sight to behold.

With Makina as her escort, Nichika stepped foot into town and heard what sounded like hammering, pounding, and other noises related to construction work. When she took a closer look, she noticed that the villagers were making frames and stages out of wood as if preparing for something big. Their bright smiles and the atmosphere of restless excitement for the festivities to come rubbed off on Nichika, filling her with the sense that something fun was afoot.

“The village festival is close,” Makina explained, seeing the sparkle in her eyes. He gestured, “My house is this way.”

Various people sparked conversations with them as they strolled through the peaceful, high-spirited village. They came in droves from the left and right to speak to Makina, which made the pair’s walk take much longer.

“Oh my, Lord Makina! What happened to your friend there? She’s soaked from head to toe!”

“Young Master! I finished repairin’ the watchtower like ya asked.”

“The flower festival is the only huge event we get every year! We gotta make it go off with a bang!”

Makina took the time to politely respond to each villager while he led Nichika to his house. Nichika was surprised to hear people refer to him with such

formality.

“Lord Makina? Are you someone important?”

“I’m not the important one, my father is. You could say it’s like I’m riding on my father’s coattails,” he replied with a strained smile before shaking it off. The way he scratched his sooty hair and smiled like he didn’t have a care in the world certainly made him look indifferent to power. “So you don’t have to call me lord. Acting polite is a no-go too!”

“Just Makina then?”

“Yup.”

Their close age seemed to help them converse naturally without feeling awkward. Nichika revealed that she was traveling from city to city to accomplish a certain goal, taking him completely by surprise.

“You’re on a journey at your age then?” he asked, awed. *“That’s incredible.”*

“Is it? I feel like it’s just the way things turned out for me.”

“It is! Going on a journey at this age is a big deal. In comparison, I...” His expression abruptly stiffened, perplexing Nichika.

She cheerfully filled in the silence with a casual remark, “The way I see it, you’re a lot more incredible than I am.”

“I am?”

Nichika shifted her gaze from Makina to the villagers, who were seeing the two of off with broad smiles. Everyone warmly watched them—she didn’t sense even a sliver of hostility or wariness, despite her status as a stranger.

“An outsider like me is walking around without experiencing any suspicion or contempt from the people that live here. Isn’t that because you’re standing beside me? Everyone loves you, Makina, and they trust you so much. Trust is one of the most fundamental things we need, but it’s a lot harder to earn than talent or courage, in my opinion.”

“Trust...”

“You even saved me, and you’re going on to help me out like this. I can

understand why all the villagers say you're a great man."

Nichika's wide, flowery smile accelerated Makina's heartbeat, captivating him with its childlike innocence. She was a completely different type of woman from any he'd met before. He knew he had to say something instead of just standing there and blushing, but he stumbled over his words and only managed a formal, "U-Um, thanks."

"Ahaha! I'm the one who should be thanking you for saving me! Silly guy."

"I guess that's true. Haha!"

Time flew by as they enjoyed their peaceful chat, and they were soon at the front of a massive western-style mansion that was sitting on top of a hill. Strangely enough, gloominess hung over the property. A woman waiting beside the overdone, decked-out gates politely bowed to them.

"Welcome home, Master Makina."

She was a mysterious woman, with violet hair elegantly tied in a bun on top of her head and long eyelashes that bordered her violet eyes. Her supple white skin looked like porcelain, engendering an inhuman aura. Moreover, she seemed to be no more than two or three years older than Nichika and Makina.

"Violette..." Makina's expression clouded over, but he strode past the woman and promptly ordered, "This girl is an important guest of mine; treat her cordially. She has the shakes from falling in the river, so draw a bath and prepare a change of clothes."

"As you command."

"Okay, Nichika, go with Violette. I'll see you later." Makina briskly disappeared into the mansion as if he were running away.

Left behind, Nichika timidly glanced at the woman next to her. The woman's posture was so perfectly straight that Nichika wondered if there was a rod stuck down her back. She stared at Nichika with emotionless eyes.

"H-Hi. I'm Nichika. Sorry for dropping by unannounced like this."

"Don't be. Such is my lord and master's wish."

"*Lord?* You're Makina's wife, Violette?!"

“.....” She didn’t react to Nichika’s sudden loud outburst. After a short pause, she somberly shook her head. “No. I am merely a maid who serves Master Makina. Being his wife would be an honor too great for me.”

“Oh, I see. You surprised me there, because I thought you meant you were his wife when you said it that way.”

A master-servant relationship—Nichika thought back to Oswald and Wolfie’s relationship. Though Nichika referred to Oswald as her master too, she said it in respect for him as her teacher, whereas Wolfie and Violette used the term to indicate that they were in a subservient position.

So this is what a real maid looks like, huh? Nichika thought, checking her out.

Abruptly, without any prompting, Violette calmly confided, “For that matter, I am not even human.”

“You aren’t?”

Right after admitting such an absurd fact, the maid deliberately pulled down the front of her dress, baring her chest. Nichika quickly tried to avert her gaze from Violette’s voluptuous bust, but her eyes locked on a crystal embedded in the maid’s chest. A faint, pale glow shined from a gem the same violet as her eyes.

“What is this?”

“I am a homunculus who moves because of this core.”

“A homunculus?”

“You are welcome to think of it as a doll moved by magic.” Finished with her technical explanation, Violette pulled her dress back up and finally showed Nichika inside the mansion. “Forgive me for taking up your time with this unnecessary detail. I shall prepare a bath for you at once.”

“**PHEW...** The water feels so nice,” Nichika murmured to herself, her aimless comment bouncing off the bathroom walls. She sunk into the bathtub. Engulfed in the hot water, she felt her freezing limbs and core slowly thaw. “Baths really are the best thing in the world. I wish there was a portable bathtub in this

world. Maybe I should have Oswald make me one?”

In good spirits, Nichika scooped up the steaming water and happily watched it spill down her hands. The clawfoot tub she used sat in the center of the room. Feeling guilty for wasting water, she regretfully pulled the drain plug. The water swept past her as it rapidly went down the drain.

“It feels like such a waste, but it’s not like I can shower outside.” She hopped to her feet and turned on the bathtub’s showerhead. Taking the flower-scented shampoo off the hanging rack, she diligently scrubbed the top of her head. Next, she rubbed a bubbly soap bar all over her body.

“Mm...!” she unconsciously moaned as a sudden sensation ran through her body, giving her goosebumps. Shocked by her own reaction, she turned bright-red and scrubbed herself hard enough it hurt to prevent it from happening again.

Oh my gosh! How could I moan over soaping myself up?! It’s like I’ve become a pervert!

The thought brought back the memory of a conversation she’d had with Oswald right after they’d left Cherry Blossom Kingdom.

“I didn’t find anything on how to get rid of the parasite, but I came across an account of events that seemed like it could be related.”

“Really? What did it say?” Nichika asked, jogging to catch up to the black figure walking in front of her. From the sound of it, Oswald really had done research on her behalf. Grateful for his help, she urged him to tell her more.

“Did you know that Cherry Blossom Kingdom was originally a refuge for prostitutes?”

“Oh yeah, I heard about that from Princess Yura. She said the first people here were women who escaped from other towns.”

“Apparently, among those prostitutes was a woman who had been parasitized by the Fake Lover seed. It was a typical case, where an owner had forced her to take it as an aphrodisiac. That happened quite a bit in the past.”

“What...happened to her?” Nichika asked hesitantly, a bad feeling tugging at the back of her mind.

Oswald coldly described the poor woman’s end, “She staved off the parasite with her male customers for a time. Around the time Cherry Blossom Kingdom was founded, she decided to accept the condition as her fate and committed suicide. The book said she died peacefully.”

“...So she never found a cure...”

Nichika hung her head, squeezing her fists until her knuckles turned white. Currently, the parasitic seed nesting in her stomach was behaving due to Oswald’s temporary treatments. But as long as they didn’t have a way to remove it, she’d have to live in constant fear of it someday bursting out of her again. The grim reality weighed heavily on her.

Oswald noticed his apprentice’s despair, but he didn’t offer any words of comfort. Instead, he indifferently continued listing his findings, “The book I was reading used the woman’s notes on the parasitic seed to summarize its effects. First, if the patient doesn’t consume bodily fluids from the opposite sex once every twenty-four hours, the seed will germinate, killing them. You know that one well, don’t you?”

“I live in fear of it every day.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ll give you so much love every day that you’ll *wish* you were dead,” he gleefully promised, stressing the last part. He turned only his eyes on her, their icy depths glinting with his mischievousness.

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she processed the double meaning in his words. “Don’t be sarcastic about it! And don’t talk about ‘death,’ even as a joke! I’m sensitive to that word right now!”

“Yes, sensitivity—that’s the first side effect.”

“Excuse me?” She blinked at the unexpected turn of conversation. “What’s going to be sensitive?”

“The parasitic seed is after men’s bodily fluid. If it hasn’t been fed yet, it’ll force sexual excitement onto its host.”

“Huh? What? Seriously?!” Nichika thought she’d misheard him—rather, she was hoping she had—but Oswald (un)helpfully went and restated it for her in detail.

“Sexual excitement—biologically speaking, the urge to procreate. It causes the host’s body to put out pheromones that lure in the opposite sex by making them aroused. Naturally, to get what it wants from the opposite sex, it makes the host sexually sensitive toward every—”

“P-Pervert!” Nichika yelled at him, turning redder than a tomato.

He leveled her with a biting glare the temperature of absolute zero, his mood soured beyond repair. In a deep growl, he warned, “...You know, you should watch what you call people when they’re providing you with valuable information.”

“Aaaaah! I’m just kidding, Master Oswald! Please go on!”

“Sheesh. In short, men will blindly flock to even an urchin with zero sex appeal like you, provided that the parasitic seed is starving. Watch out.”

“Okay, I will—HEY, don’t call me an urchin!”

IN other words, this is a sign that the parasitic seed is starting to get hungry?

Nichika sprayed herself down with the showerhead and washed all the bubbles off. She climbed out of the bathtub, slipped on the bathrobe set aside for her, and stored the magic orb in her pocket. Finally, she stepped into the hallway and tried knocking on each door near the bathroom in search of Violette.

Luckily, she found Violette two rooms down. Seeing Violette folding clothes and putting them in a basket, she assumed it was a laundry room.

“Oh, here you are, Violette. Did you wash my clothes yet?”

“No, I was just about to. Did you forget something in your clothing?”

“Thank you for washing my clothes. Um, I think I left something in my skirt pocket...” Nichika retrieved her clothing from Violette and pulled out a round, folded paper from her school uniform. She was struck with relief to find it

hadn't been swept away by the coursing river. She had clung to the magic orb like her life depended on it, so she had ensured its safety, but she figured it'd be smart to get a proper case for it soon.

"Are you done? I need to close the lid."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Here you go." Nichika returned her skirt and saw something so foreign next to Violette that she doubted her own eyes. "Is that a washing machine?"

It looked like a tall box with a large horizontal handle attached to the side of it. Turning the handle rotated the drum inside the box and stimulated the flow of water. Though it obviously wasn't the same as the washing machines on Earth, it seemed fairly modern for a world that appeared to be around the Middle Ages in terms of technology.

"Master invented it and gifted it to me. I do not know the official name for it."

"Cool, Makina made that? How talented!"

Now that Violette said so, Nichika realized that she hadn't seen anything like a shower in all the inns she'd stayed at since arriving in this world. Had he created the setup in the bathroom too?

Her thoughts were interrupted by Violette, who spoke with the same unreadable expression, "By receiving this box, my work time was reduced by a third. Are you knowledgeable about objects like this, Lady Nichika?"

"A little?"

In any case, the modern world she was from had machines and technology everywhere she looked. She couldn't deny its convenience, but a part of Nichika also liked the analogue ways of this world. She found it relaxing not to be bombarded by technology at every corner.

"Then I suggest you tour the workshop located in the courtyard. I believe you will find it fascinating."

"There's a workshop?"

"Yes," Violette answered, walking into the adjacent room without Nichika. She returned soon after with a deep-red dress. "You mustn't walk around the

mansion dressed in a bathrobe. Please wear this instead.”

“Thank you for everything...”

Nichika began changing into the dress, feelings of guilt nagging at her conscience for all she received from them. First, she tugged on a simple blouse that had cute frills decorating the chest piece. Then she slipped the dress over the top of it, and had Violette tie the bow behind her. Suddenly, Violette placed her ice cold hands on Nichika’s neck.

“EEK!” Frightened, Nichika fearfully looked over her shoulder. “S-Something wrong?”

“.....”

The violet eyes that lacked even the faintest emotion sent chills down her spine. Violette squeezed Nichika’s neck ever so slightly before quickly releasing her.

“Yes, we should tie your hair up with this ribbon...” she said, holding a ribbon up for Nichika to see.

WH-WH-WHAT the heck?! What was that all about?!

Nichika ran through the mansion while quelling her still-pounding heart. By all appearances, no one but Makina and Violette lived in the mansion, because she didn’t run in to anyone else on her way out. Outside the eerie aura and under the warm sunlight, she could finally stop and relax.

I feel bad thinking this about her, but Violette is scary! She’s pretty, but it only really triples her dreadfulness!

Sighing, Nichika opened what she assumed was the door to the workshop. Despite its old appearance, the door opened quietly as if it had been recently oiled.

It’s dark in here...

The workshop had high ceilings, and the only windows were a tiny row at the top to let in the light. Nichika quietly pressed on within the building that reminded her of her school’s gymnasium. When she snuck a peek inside some

of the many unorganized wooden boxes stacked along the walls, she found gears and screws packed to the brim.

Oh...

At last, she picked out the shape of Makina's back as he leaned over an old, large desk in the darkness. He appeared to be earnestly writing something.

"That's not it. This won't work. This method won't do..." he muttered.

"‘A Proposal for a New Energy Alternative to Replace Magic,’ huh?" Nichika spontaneously read aloud, using her newly developed mastery of the language's written form.

"Whoa!" Makina jolted right off his chair. When he recognized who she was, he pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled nervously. "Oh, it's you, Nichika. Don't scare me like that."

"Sorry. Say, what is that?" She intently peered down at his diagrams, brimming with curiosity.

Bewildered, Makina let her see his plans. "Umm, this is just a theory I'm currently considering, but...um! I really only just randomly came up with it and —"

"Neat! This is a proposal for an energy source that doesn't rely on magic at all, right?"

The civilization of this world was currently at what Nichika considered equivalent to Earth's Middle Ages—in other words, it lacked either electricity or steam power. At night, they had to depend on candles or magic to light the darkness. Yet, in a world like that, the young man before her was trying to come up with an energy source that wouldn't rely on magic from scratch.

"This is remarkable! If you can make this possible, everyone's lives will be much better," Nichika remarked, giving her honest opinion.

Makina gaped at her in return. A long pause hung between them before he suspiciously asked her outright, "...You aren't going to ridicule me?"

"I'd never ridicule you. Why would I?" she replied inquisitively.

Makina removed his glasses and rubbed his misty eyes. "I'm only doing this as

a hobby, and everyone I've ever told about it laughs at me," he confided, "They all mock me by asking why I'm wasting my time on useless research when we already have magic and Witch's Items for these purposes."

Witch's Items undeniably came in handy. Nichika thought back to all the various items her teacher and master, Oswald, had pulled out on different occasions. Magic items made the impossible possible.

"Yeah, but Witch's Items and magic can only be created and used by specific people, right? But what you're coming up with is something everyone can use equally. That's a groundbreaking invention, Makina! You should be more proud about this in my opinion! Be confident!" she insisted.

Makina's face lit up to hear she thought his inventions were something to take pride in. Taking both her hands in his with zeal burning in his eyes, he exclaimed, "That's right! You understand me, Nichika!"

"Whoa!" she said, startled.

"You're absolutely right. Right now, the disparity between those who can and can't use magic is growing bigger. People need to be equals who make the most of the talents they were born with. That's what this new energy will make possible! It'll close the gap! Not to mention, lately mana has been unstable. Humans need to have technology they can use without relying on the spirits for help, in case worst comes to pass!"

Nichika could see his eyes twinkling as he spoke passionately about his technology. He beamed at her in his excitement. "Thank you, Nichika! You're the first person to agree with my stance!"

"Ah, no problem. You're welcome."

Had magic advanced so far in this world that scientists and researchers like Makina were laughed at for their inventions? Would it be the same if Nichika went back to Japan and proposed that magic existed? At any rate, she obviously couldn't tell him her understanding resulted from her being from a technologically advanced world, so she smiled reassuringly back at him instead.

"Don't worry. Your efforts will definitely be fruitful someday, Makina."

"....." He wordlessly stared at her.

The kind confidence ringing in her voice made Makina's heart leap once then violently hammer away in his chest. To him, it appeared as if this slender and elegant girl was glowing brightly in the dark and damp workshop. Her cheeks looked softer than pillows, her shimmering eyes like a gorgeous lake's surface at night. The faint aroma of flowery soap wafted from her shiny hair.

"Were you possibly at the waterwheel for your research?"

The innocent voice slipping its way through her parted, plush lips tickled his ears. Without even registering it, Makina swallowed back the lump forming in his throat.

"Makina?"

"Ah, um, sorry. I zoned out there."

"Don't you think it's because you've been cooped up in here too long? Working your butt off in a dark place like this will do that to you. Say, if it's not a bother, would you mind showing me around the village? It can double as a chance to get you out of here for a bit!"

The young man felt ashamed of the lust that had temporarily surged in him when he had seen her vivacious smile. He forced himself to smile and stretched to his feet. "Good idea. It's still too early for dinner, anyway. Why not?"

THEY went outside to find that the sun had already begun to set, dyeing the village and the surrounding fields a soft orange. A gentle breeze blew by, sweeping up their hair.

"Wow, it's so beautiful here!" Nichika breathed.

The mansion was situated on higher ground than the village, revealing a 360-degree view of the landscape. Makina couldn't take his eyes off of Nichika as she leaned over the fence.

"Oh, there's the river. I might've been swept past this point if you hadn't saved me, Makina. Ahaha!"

"Even if I hadn't picked you up then, I would have found you eventually."

"You would have?" Nichika queried, clueless to his tone of voice, "You really

are a nice guy.”

Her red dress fluttered in the soft winds. He was about to muster the courage to say something as she held down her blowing hair, when—

“Lord Makina! We’ve got trouble! Big trouble!” A villager was running up from the foot of the hill. The red-faced, middle-aged man panted heavily and bent over to catch his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Makina asked.

“The devil! They’re saying the devil that makes flowers wilt to death has appeared in the village!”

“The devil?” Instinctively drawn by the term that was out of place in this peaceful village, Nichika came closer to the villager.

The man wiped his sweat with the cloth he had hanging from his neck. “Yah. It’s a man dressed in all-black, and the instant he entered the village, all the flowers at the entrance withered away at once!” He trembled and rubbed the sides of his arms as if holding himself. “An’ according to the village girls, he’s got eyes colder than ice and a face so handsome that whoever looks at it swoons! That’s gotta be the devil! The devil, I tell ya! May god help us all!”

“That’s...” Nichika held a palm to her forehead. These were characteristics she knew all too well. She was 99.999 percent sure she knew who it was.

“Something wrong, Nichika?”

“Sorry, I’ll go check what happened!” she shouted, racing off.

Makina hesitantly reached out for her, but she didn’t wait for his response as she made a mad dash down the hill.

Chapter 19: Girl, Betted On

LOLO Village had two entrances, but Nichika headed, without hesitation, straight for the entrance she'd come through—the only one accessible by the ravine. The peaceful wind she had been enjoying until moments ago grew hair-raisingly disturbing as it whipped up dead flower petals and blew them overhead.

“Oswald!” Nichika aggressively shouted to the figure she spotted staring at the field of flowers just beyond the village fence line. The man slowly turned toward her and raised a skeptical eyebrow.

“Where'd those clothes come from? Did you steal them?”

That was the first thing he had to say to her? Nichika tripped over a pebble, caught herself, and resentfully raised her head to face him. “For Pete’s sake! I’m not you! I don’t do things like that.”

“How rude. I don’t steal.”

“...Really now?”

“I merely borrow without returning.”

“That is *theft!*”

Within five seconds of reuniting, they were already bickering again. *I knew it! I’m just not compatible with this guy!* Nichika thought indignantly then gasped when she saw a dead rose petal floating in the wind, which reminded her of why she had run here in the first place.

“That’s not what matters now, anyway!” She accusatively thrust her finger at him. “Why did you kill the flowers? Those flowers were going to be used in Lolo Village’s festival!” Her accusation got her a snort and his usual pompous smirk in return.

He accepted her challenge to a showdown of words with a ridiculing look. “What are you gonna do about it?”

“Why do something so horrible?!”

“Who knows?”

“‘Who knows’? Shouldn’t you know? It’s your handiwork, isn’t it?”

“When, where, and who said it was?”

“Come again?”

Sneering as if to say she should hate the game and not the player, Oswald slowly closed the gap between them. “Where’s your proof? What’s the motive? What merit is there for me to kill the flowers in this godforsaken village?”

“Y-You could’ve been hired by someone to do it... Or it might just be your hobby...”

He walked right up to her and karate chopped her head. “Put more thought into it, stupid!”

“Ow!” She instinctively clamped her hands over the dull, aching lump. As she glanced up under her lashes, she saw him staring down at her in exasperation.

“Numskull. Don’t be swept up in rumors.”

“Ugh, sorry,” she said, her eyes still misty from the pain.

Oswald held his ground with a stern expression, but the corners of his eyes softened slightly at her honest apology. He roughly mussed up her hair and said in what could almost be taken as a kind tone, “I’m glad you’re safe.”

“.....”

Astounded by his unexpected words, she stared at him wide-eyed until he added on with a nasty smirk, “The grand river doesn’t have to be contaminated with your corpse now.”

“I knew that was coming!”

I was an idiot for expecting something more! She puffed out her cheeks and irritably turned her head aside. Then, realizing that they were missing a person—or rather, missing a shapeshifter, she scanned the surrounding area for her furry friend.

“Where’s Wolfie?”

“Oh, he’s—”

“Nichika!” someone called for her from the village, cutting her master off.

Nichika looked behind her and saw the young man she’d left behind at the mansion running over to her, short of breath. “Makina?”

“It’s dangerous for you to run off on your own. Oh, who is that...with you?” Finally noticing Oswald’s presence, Makina’s expression darkened.

The man who looked like an embodiment of a pitch-black shadow certainly had a chilling aura that matched the villagers’ description. Pierced to the core by his shrewd, ice-blue eyes, Makina was seized by an illusion of being frozen to the ground. However, Nichika showed no signs of fear as she introduced the man to Makina.

“Ah, this thing is my master and teacher.”

“What’s going through that puny head of yours that makes you introduce the man you call master as ‘this thing’? Huh?”

Oh, the friend she got separated from at the ravine was this man? Makina had been under the misconception that Nichika’s friend would be another girl. Abruptly, Makina took Nichika’s hand in his and defensively tugged her toward him.



“Whoa!” she said, stumbling.

“Please don’t take offense at this question, but you are...human, right?”

Oswald’s face contorted slightly at Makina’s hostile gaze. But the reaction was immediately replaced with cold laughter and a scathing remark. “How can I *not* take offense? What do I look like aside from human? Please, do tell.”

“A devil...” Nichika muttered.

“Nichika, be ready for your punishment later.”

“Eek!” She hid behind Makina’s back.

Makina shielded her as if it were second nature and continued his accusation with an unyielding, rigid attitude, “The village flowers died all at once as soon as you arrived. Isn’t it natural to think that there must be some sort of connection between the two events?”

“That doesn’t give you the right to blame me without proof. It wasn’t me.”

“You can defend yourself all you want, and that doesn’t make it true either.”

“.....”

Nichika was flustered by the tense mood rapidly growing between them. While she was racking her brains for some way to smooth over the situation, Makina turned to her and kindly said, “Say, Nichika, can I ask you to bring your master to my house? I want to hear him out.”

“Hmph,” Oswald scoffed, virulently answering before Nichika could reply, “That’s a nice way of trying to get me under your control. I’d consider dropping by if it’s a job request, though.”

His arrogant attitude stunned Makina and made his apprentice sigh. “Oh, brother...” Nichika commented, “You know, it’s because you act this way that you make enemies.”

“Job request? What’s that about?” Makina asked.

“Oh yeah, Oswald is a witch and—”

Nichika stopped mid-sentence, since Makina was staring at her with his jaw set on edge and his facial muscles taut. *I forgot! Makina is researching a new*

energy source that'll compete against magic and its users and might replace them altogether! I bet he doesn't have a high opinion of witches.

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to hide it," she said honestly. By saying her master was a witch, she had just admitted that she was a witch's apprentice.

"It's okay. I know you're not a bad person already."

"I can't say the same for this fishy man though." The words insinuated by his tone wound the tension between them even tighter. Nichika greatly lamented the fact that her wolf friend, who normally served as a great icebreaker, wasn't there to disrupt the atmosphere.

"In any event, standing around talking about it outside won't help us," Makina pointed out. "Come to my mansion." Firmly holding Nichika's hand, he turned and headed for the mansion with her in tow.

"Eh? Hey!" Caught in his hold, she had no choice but to leave with him.

Uh, um? Am I being taken hostage here?! There's no point! You're wasting your time, Makina! Oswald is a man who'll readily let go of his apprentice! See! He's turning to go—huh?

Contrary to her expectations, her master was following them. And there, she could see a slight smile quirk his lips up in spite of the fierce coldness in his eyes!

Exposed to his penetrating, cold glare, Nichika screamed internally, *Oh my gosh! He's definitely furious with me! Because I got caught so easy!*

Even so, she was hesitant to shake off Makina's hand after all he had done for her, so the unlikely group of three plodded their way to his mansion together.

If we have a proper discussion about it, I'm sure they'll both come to an understanding...I hope.

But Nichika had yet to realize what the real problem between them was—and that she was at the center of the ensuing maelstrom.

AROUND that time, professional icebreaker and mood-crasher Wolfie was trotting the village's perimeter.

"We don't know if this village will tolerate a shapeshifting beast like me. Better enjoy a walk until Master summons me."

Ambling along while swaying his fluffy tail in the air, Wolfie eventually came across a flower field. The climate in the area seemed perfect for flowers, because they grew everywhere around the village, and where he found himself now was particularly a sight to behold. Blue and red flowers grew en masse, forming a multicolored rug, dyed crimson by the setting sun.

"Holy cow! So pretty! I wanna show Nichika!" Wolfie was enjoying the sweet aromatic flowers when he suddenly spotted something violet crouched down in the field. The violet-colored something abruptly stood up straight, and with its back to him, began laughing manically.

The freakish laughter paralyzed him with fear. Was it a person? But if they were, they were also clad in an awfully bewitching, disturbing aura.

The head slowly jerked toward him, multicolored flowers spilling from its mouth. Its lips were smeared with red as deep as blood.

"Haha...hahahaha! AHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"Y-YIKES!"

WHAT do I do about this mood?

In the end, not a word of conversation had been shared between them the entire way to the mansion garden. Fed up with the dreary silence, Nichika tossed out a random topic in hopes of lifting the antagonistic air.

"Err...oh yeah! The flower festival! Guess what, Master?! There's gonna be a festival taking place in this village soon! Since we're here already, I want to check it out. Can we?"

"There's no time for frivolous sightseeing. We're leaving this village the moment we gather everything we need."

Nichika had expected that answer, but she was dejected she couldn't

persuade him. Despite Oswald's refusal, Makina gently pulled her toward him and smiled down at her.

"By all means, please stay and enjoy the festival. It's a sight you will never forget."

"But I—"

"If you like," Makina said in Oswald's direction, "I can send her to catch up with you once it's over. You are more than welcome to leave first. How does that sound, O Great Witch Master?"

Oswald's cheek twitched at his taunting.

"Makina?" Nichika said hesitantly.

"Besides," Makina continued, shifting his provocative gaze from Oswald to fondly look at Nichika, "I have so much I want to talk to you about still. I want to spend more time with you." He lifted her hands to his lips. "Are you opposed to that?" he asked sincerely. Nichika couldn't stop the heat from gathering in her cheeks.

Oswald's displeasure and disgust was further amplified by his apprentice's reaction. He took a step toward her, and—

"UHYAAAAAAHH! NOOOOOOOOO! IT'S ALIVEEEEEEE!"

A brown fluffball suddenly leapt over the fence and onto Oswald's back, knocking him to the ground.

"GUH!"

"Wolfie!" Nichika cried out.

"You stupid mongrel! How many times must you use my back as your landing pad?! Huh?!" Oswald snapped at Wolfie, angered by the repeated transgression, but his familiar was trembling for another reason entirely.

Foam frothed from the corner of Wolfie's mouth. He was deeply agitated. "M-M-M-M-Master! It appeared! It's ALIVE!"

"What is?"

"Miss Flower! I know that's what I saw!"

Miss Flower? Nichika thought, *Is that some sort of ghost? Monster? Or is it just a name for an unnatural phenomenon?* Conveniently, Wolfie elaborated without prompting.

“Legends of Miss Flower were passed down in the village I was born in! She’s a beautiful woman who stands all alone in the middle of a flower field at nightfall.” The fur on his back stood on end. “If you find her eating blue flowers it means good luck, but death will come for you within a week if she’s eating red flowers. *And I found her eating red flowers!* Awoooo...” he howled with woe.

Oswald scoffed, “Sometimes, I just want to cut my familiar contract with you.”

Familiars shouldn’t believe in superstitions, Oswald grumbled in his head. At that moment, a woman came from the direction of the fence Wolfie had hopped right over.

“Hello, everyone. What are you all doing gathered here?” she asked, pushing open the gate leading from the flower fields into the mansion garden.

Nichika recognized her. “Violette?”

“SHE’S HEEEEERE! It’s Miss Flower!” Wolfie whimpered and hid behind Nichika.

Suspicion crossed Makina’s face as he looked in the direction his household maid had come from. “Why are you coming from the fields?” he questioned.

“I was picking flowers to decorate the dinner table with...”

She held up a flower bouquet, and the entire group stared down at Wolfie.

“**I’M** telling you the truuth,” Wolfie yowled, “That woman was really eating flowerssss.”

Oswald coldly shot down Wolfie’s tearful plea, “Stop pestering me. What if she was? She might just be a woman who has a weird taste for eating flowers.”

The group was currently inside a guest room at Makina’s mansion, and it was the nicest room at that. The master of the house had temporarily withdrawn from the room with his maid, leaving them more than enough space to talk

things out to their heart's content.

"Oh, but Violette said she's not even human anyway," Nichika mentioned.

"What?" One of Oswald's eyebrows rose skeptically.

"It's true. She said she's a homunculus. She even showed me the energy core embedded right in her chest." Nichika pointed at her own chest to demonstrate.

"Homunculus? That woman is one?" Oswald muttered.

He said no more after that. Nichika worried she might've said something she shouldn't have, but their conversation was interrupted anyway by the sound of the door opening.

Makina had finally returned to converse with the guests he had kept waiting. "Sorry for leaving you alone for so long. I had urgent paperwork to attend to." He entered the room with a bundle of papers under his arm.

"You said your name was Makina something or other, yeah?" Oswald asked bluntly, "Are you the village chief here?"

Makina made a stiff smile at his question. Passing by where they were sitting, he placed his papers on a desk in the back of the room and humbly replied, "I'm not that important of a person. This is simply land my father owns. I have no authority over in my own right."

In other words, his family owned the land the village was built on. No wonder why the villagers were so polite and courteous to Makina.

"Although, I should say, the final decisions for everything related to this village have been entrusted to me for some reason." He took a seat on the sofa across from Nichika and Oswald. He pushed his glasses up his nose and broached the main topic, "I apologize for the rude attitude I took toward you earlier. From what I hear, you are a famous witch, Oswald?"

"I've never called or considered myself famous, but if that's what people have to say about me, then it must be so."

With the confidently snickering witch in sight, Makina dropped a bomb by offering an unexpected invitation, "How would you like to play a game with

me?”

“A game?”

A smile still plastered on his face, Makina crossed his legs and put a hand on top of his knee. With his other hand, he pulled out the flower sticking out of his pocket and spun it by its stem. Petals drifted from the withering flower with that ever-so-gentle movement.

“I have received reports from the villagers that the flower fields are steadily decaying, beginning from the west. They fear that the flowers won’t manage to survive even the two days before the festival. So, I was thinking of hiring you to investigate the matter for us.”

“You sure about that? I don’t come cheap,” Oswald mockingly warned. “Scraping together loose change from your piggy bank ain’t gonna cut it—”

THUD! A pouch Makina tossed landed on the table between them with a distinctive noise. Even Oswald’s eyes bulged a little at the weight of the bag, his condescending grin suspended on his face.

“This is advance payment. If this isn’t enough to cut it, shall I add in a little extra to top it off?”

Oswald’s eyebrow twitched. To him, the heavy sound of gold coins clinking against each other inside the bag seemed out of reach for such a slender, helpless-looking boy like Makina. Regardless, Oswald pulled the pouch across the table and checked the contents, before pulling the string taut and tossing it back to Makina.

“Nah, this is enough. You can pay me once the job is done. Anyway, why don’t you tell me the terms of this ‘game’ of yours?”

Makina cracked a crafty smile and proposed the unanticipated, “Should you fail in your investigation to pinpoint the cause of the flower decay, will you give me her—give me Nichika?”

Having been reminded on countless occasions not to interrupt Oswald’s negotiations, Nichika had been patiently listening to the conversation—but now she had suddenly been dragged into the middle of it. She was flummoxed.

Panic rose in her as she wrapped her head around what Makina had said. “Eh? M-Me? Whaaaaat?!”

“I don’t know where she studied it, but Nichika is surprisingly well-informed when it comes to technology and machinery. I want to have her stay in this village as my assistant, by all means possible.”

“J-Just because you want me to, doesn’t mean I—” Nichika hurried to turn him down, but one look from his sad eyes shut her up.

“You acknowledged my ideal world. Is it selfish of me to wish for you to stay by my side?”

Oswald glanced at the frozen Nichika, snorted, and agreed to the terms. “I have no idea how this carefree idiot could possibly help you achieve your dreams, but I’ll take you up on your bet.”

“Hey!” Nichika reflexively protested.

There were so many things she wanted to bring up, like what about her opinion on the matter and what about their contract, but her master quickly stood and strode to the door.

“Master?” Wolfie was waiting by the door, cocking his head.

“Wolfie, we’ve got work.”

“Aye aye, sir!”

Oswald whispered something to his familiar, and his familiar promptly bolted from the room.

“Wait for me!” Nichika called, trying to catch up to them, but a hand caught her wrist and held her back. When she glanced down, she saw her own reflection in Makina’s serious gaze.

“What I said wasn’t a lie or a joke. Please think it through.” He let go of her wrist.

“...!”

Her face dyed redder than a rose, Nichika lightly bowed her head and ran out of the room. After closing the door behind her, she brought her hands to her

hot cheeks.

What should I do? How do I react? This is the first time a man has ever said something like that to me! How am I supposed to respond?!

She slapped her cheeks to clear her thoughts and pursued the tall black figure disappearing around the hallway corner.

“Hey, Oz!”

He continued walking fast despite her call; she had to jog to catch up to him.

“What do you think I should do?” she asked, walking next to him. The way he wouldn’t even glance at her stung. “Answer me...”

She reached out to cling to him, seeking his help, when he startled her by grabbing her hand. Yanking her into a narrow passage, he shoved her against the wall. Frightened, Nichika slowly raised her eyes to meet his. He was looking down at her face with ice in his eyes, almost close enough to touch.

“So, how far did you go with him?”

The moment she registered what Oswald meant by that, the heat that had finally receded from her cheeks flared back up—or more like exploded onto her cheeks.

Bright-red, she immediately protested, “A-Are you stupid?! I don’t have that kind of relationship with Makina—”

“But it looks like he’s come to think very highly of you, in such a short period of time.”

“...!”

Nichika didn’t know what excuse she could make; his accusation was accurate. Searching for the right words, she directed her gaze at the floor and answered, “Even if he has feelings for me, we haven’t done anything...” Her voice dropped off. Then, in a barely audible whisper, she said, “I told you I’d believe in the contract I made with you...”

Oswald heard her quiet voice, but kept his silence.

Is he mad? Is he going to ridicule me again? With those fears coursing through

her head, she stiffened at his sudden touch—he had put his hand on her cheek. Instinctively, she lifted her eyes to his. His expression wasn't the angry glare or mocking smirk she had feared, but one of unshakable seriousness. *I can't tell what he's thinking or feeling. What is he thinking about right now?*

He slowly closed the space between them...

“Wait!” Nichika threw out both hands to push him away just before their lips touched. Trying to justify her actions to her now scowling master, she said, “I have the candy you gave me. See? I’m good today.”

Nichika quickly pulled out the round, folded paper she had retrieved from her skirt pocket before Violette had washed it that morning. Oswald had given her the candy wrapped in unexciting, plain paper right when they had left Cherry Blossom Kingdom. He had made three of the candies that would serve to placate the Fake Lover seed if she put them in her mouth.

“I told you those were for emergencies only. Save it for when you have no other option.”

“Let’s just make a ton of them instead! I’ll make it myself if you teach me how. Okay?”

“.....”

“That way is much—mph!”

His lips swallowed the words right off hers. Her thoughts instantly melted into pleasure, and the hands that had thrust him away progressively lost their will to resist. He kissed her much longer than usual, and she lost herself entirely in his insistent kisses.

“Haah...haah...” She gasped for air when he finally released her lips. But then, “Ahhh!”

She cried out in the most exaggerated moan when he lightly nibbled on her ear. Not sure what had just happened, she reached a hand toward her ear, but Oswald swiftly caught it, entangled his fingers with hers, and pushed her hand against the wall.

“And I gave you such a stern warning about not tempting men, too. You didn’t

keep your promise.”

Nichika shuddered as the breath from his deep voice tickled her intimately sensitive ear; it racked her body with a thrilling tremble. Though she tried her best to deny his words, her voice melted into a feminine moan. “No...I didn’t tempt....”

“You need to be punished.”

His icy eyes penetrated her whole body, and she tensed. It was like she had been doused in cold water—her mind recoiled, but her body was burning like fire, pulled flush against his body.

“*Ahn!* Don’t...!”

Oswald playfully nibbled along her earlobe and blew on it. Her excited, high-pitched voice didn’t sound like it belonged to her any longer.

“He’ll hear you if you moan too loud,” he whispered in her ear.

“...!” She clasped her hands over her mouth.

Oswald laughed. “Well, not like I mind him hearing.”

Nichika felt like she could hear the sound of her blood draining away before his satisfied grin, an expression she’d never seen him make before. Now stifling her physical voice, she screamed as loud as she could internally—

This sadistic jerk!

SEVERAL minutes later. Released at long last, Nichika’s palms hit the ground when she sunk down the wall, panting so hard that it shook her shoulders. Red flushed her cheeks, while her balled fists trembled with rage.

“Haah...! Hhaa...! I’ll *never* forgive you for this...!”

“What are you complaining about, at this level? There’s a limit to how horny you can be, getting all hot and bothered by a little ear nibble.”

“...I’m *not* horny! It’s this blasted curse!”

She shot him a death glare, but Oswald had already lost interest in her and simply continued on his way. Lifting his hand to nonchalantly wave farewell

without turning around, he left with a word of warning in his wake. “Learn from this and be more careful next time you go near men. It’s time for work now.”

Upset by the collision of feelings she couldn’t even identify from his hot-and-cold behavior, she stamped her feet in frustration. She furiously rubbed at where the sweet ache lingered on her ear and shouted at him, wishing her anger could materialize to skewer him through the back, “For crying out loud! I can’t *believe* you! Demon! Devil! Sadist! Inhuman trash!”

She threw every insult she could think of at him, but he didn’t so much as glance back. “Go help out Wolfie if you’ve got so much time on your hands,” he coolly replied.

“Oh my gosh! I ***hate* you!**”

Chapter 20: Girl, Jumps at Shadows

STARS began twinkling in the sky, but Nichika descended into the village once again after she had finished dinner.

She walked the road leading to the village's main street feeling like she was going for a stroll. Looking up, she saw the red and blue moons rising above the horizon in the sky, which was colored with a subtle mix of purple and pink. The beautiful view washed away the irritation that had been coursing through her earlier that day.

This world really is pretty. I barely ever had the time to look at the sky in my world. Her thoughts reeled to a stop, followed by her feet, as a feeling of profound confusion came over her. *Wait—I didn't have the time to look up? Why? Why didn't I have the time?*

Thinking back to her life, Nichika recalled that she had always walked with her head down, her eyes firmly on the ground—so that no one would see her face; so that no one would speak to her.

“.....”

A black shadow stretched over her as if permeating her heart.

What is this? Nichika grasped at her chest, feeling like she was about to remember something she shouldn't. She slammed her eyes shut. In her mind's ear, she could hear somebody snickering then yelling. Chaotic noises were crowding her head; a memory of that voice rose among them.

“Hurry and...it—”

“...!” Nichika gasped and jerked her head up. The ground abruptly started to warp beneath her feet like she might fall through if she didn't brace herself.

Wh-What was that just now?

She stumbled forward, nearly falling flat on her face, when something circled around her and held her up from below.

“Whoops!” a voice said, “That was close! Are you okay?”

“Wolfie...” Seeing the golden eyed, brown fluffy wolf reminded Nichika of where she was and what she was doing.

That’s right, I was sent to another world, and I’m traveling with my master now...

“.....”

“Nichika?”

She tightly clung to Wolfie’s warm, furry body.

Nichika hugged him close for a long time, but when she finally let go and looked up, she had her usual smile back.

“Sorry about that! I was just feeling a little dizzy is all.”

“But—”

“I’m fine, really. Anyways, why are you here, Wolfie?”

Wolfie was infamous for being incapable of reading the mood or the situation, but even he hesitated over whether to press her about what was wrong this time. Instead, he let out a weird-sounding wolfish sigh and sat down on the street.

“Can I cry now?” he asked.

“Why?” Finding his question strange, Nichika glanced behind him. Something was hiding behind a wooden box a little ways off. Surprisingly, it was the village children hiding in the shadow of the boxes while peering curiously at them. Darkness had long since settled in, but they seemed to have special permission to be outside despite the hour because of the festival.

“They’ve been doing that for forever now. But they run away screaming when I try to talk to them.”

Needless to say, Wolfie was fully in wolf form at the moment. Earlier in the day, Makina had put out an official notice that granted Wolfie permission to walk around the village as a wolf, but the villagers still kept their distance from

him. Nichika had grown used to having a wolf for a friend, but he was big enough to make anyone seeing him for the first time jump out of their skin.

“I’m used to it... I *am* used to it, but it makes me sad when they’re that openly scared of me.”

“But can’t you become a boy, Wolfie?”

“I can. But I’m not good at it. I’ll revert right back if I lose focus even a little.”

His admission brought bitter memories surging back to him. In the past, he had wanted to play with the nearby village children so badly that he’d shapeshifted into his boy form so he could try speaking with them. With his amazing athleticism, Wolfie had become an instant hit with the other children, and they had even let him join their ranks as a friend.

But the disaster occurred one day during a game of hide-and-seek. One of the kids had jumped out behind Wolfie and scared him back into his wolf form, sending screaming children running back to their parents, who then came after Wolfie with weapons and chased him out of the village for good... His fur bristled on his back till this very day whenever he remembered how he had barely escaped with his life.

Nichika watched Wolfie’s bushy tail curl between his legs in despair. After pondering over what to do, she suddenly clapped her hands. “I’ve got it!”

“Nichika?”

Nichika energetically hopped to her feet, put her hands around her mouth to act like a megaphone, and called out to the village children, “Hello! Are you kids from Lolo Village?”

The children looked questioningly at each other, but after a pause, several nodded.

“Will you guys hear me out? This cutie here is named Wolfie. Would you like to come over and meet him?”

“Is he...safe?” one of the older boys asked, standing protectively in front of the group.

“Yup! C’mon, Wolfie, say hello.”

“H-Hi.” He tried for an awkward wolfish grin, but it turned out to be a bad idea— the children’s faces froze upon seeing his sharp fangs glinting in the moonlight.

Nichika rushed to stop the children from running away. “Aww, don’t go! You don’t have to worry! He’s not scary!” To ease their fears, she added a little white lie, “This is a big secret, but Wolfie is actually a human boy like the rest of you.”

“That wolf is a boy? Really?”

“Really. It’s just that he’s been cursed by an evil witch—err, I mean, a devil, and that’s why he looks like a wolf. He hasn’t been able to make any friends because the curse made him look like this.”

“That’s sad...”

Wolfie stayed quiet as a girl with braided hair stared at him hard. The fear she had showed earlier was gone.

Nichika continued, “That’s why I wanted to ask a big, big favor of you all. Won’t you please become Wolfie’s friends?”

“We will!” the kids cheerfully agreed in unison.

It was as if Wolfie was dreaming. Even though he was in his true form, friendly hands fearlessly reached for him and petted him all over. Surrounded by their laughter, he witnessed the happiest of smiles.

Wolfie couldn’t believe he was at the center of the fun and joy for once. The friends he had longed for his entire life were now readily in reach.

“Nichika! Nichika! Thank you! Thank you!” he said, crying with joy, “I’m so happy!”

Nichika smiled and waved to the overjoyed, teary wolf as he frolicked in the field with his newfound friends.

“**MISS** Nichika, are you gonna marry Makina?” the girls asked.

Nichika dropped the flower crown she had been making with the group at the

abrupt question. In the distance, she could hear the excited shouts and cheers of children riding on Wolfie's big back.

"Wh-Wh-Why would you ask that?" she stuttered, red in the face.

The girls exchanged knowing glances and giggled. "I knew it!"

"The village adults were talking about it."

"He saved you from danger, right? So cool! Now that's romance!"

"How lucky!"

The boys gave the fangirling girls incredulous looks. However, one of them joined the conversation, noting in a serious tone, "But you know, if those rumors are true, then..."

"What rumors?" Curious, Nichika turned toward the boy.

The children loudly gulped and gathered around Nichika. Then they lowered their voices to whispers, as if to reveal secrets.

"Miss Nichika, you'd better watch your back when you're alone," one of the boys advised. "Isn't there a strange maid serving at that mansion?"

"You mean Violette?"

"What? What are you guys talking about?" Wolfie piped up, trotting over to the conversation circle with tiny children still clinging to his back.

The older boy who had brought up the topic firmly nodded to Nichika. "Thing is, everybody has been saying that that maid is actually a ghost."

"A g-g-ghost?! AROOOO!" Wolfie bayed, putting his paws over his eyes.

"Calm down, Wolfie!" Nichika quickly ordered, trying to keep him in check before he went into full panic mode. By the time he had settled down, the mood had totally transformed to set the stage for ghost stories.

"Long ago—well, not that long since it was two years ago, but anyway—this is a story from when Makina first came to this village. There was a family who had been caring for the mansion he now lives in. They consisted of a dad, mom, and their only daughter. He hired the family as his live-in servants."

"The daughter was known as the prettiest girl in the village," the boy next to

him continued in a hushed voice. “She got along great with Makina, and everybody thought they’d get married to each other. But...” He paused, and a mournful air spread through the children. Not knowing what had happened, Nichika quietly waited for them to continue.

“It happened on a freezing day during the summer. The whole family went out on a shopping trip to the neighboring town. But on their way there, they were attacked by a pack of wild dogs... Word came that the dad and mom had died on the spot, and the daughter, barely escaping alive, arrived halfdead at the town.”

Nichika gasped. The girl sitting beside her sniffled.

“We all felt so bad for Lord Makina at the time. When he received the message, he bolted from the village, his face paler than a ghost.”

“What happened next...?” Nichika had a general idea of where this was going since no one else lived at the mansion.

The children solemnly shook their heads. “Even the medical technology of the big cities was no good. The best they could do was let Lord Makina return home with the corpse. Though dead, it was as pretty as a doll.”

“That’s horrible...”

“The entire village held a funeral for their family. They buried them in the western flower field, and that should’ve been the end of it.”

The course of the conversation changed rapidly from there. The boy who had started the story leaned forward in their circle and conspiratorially whispered, “Six months after the funeral, Makina’s family sent him a new servant.”

“And that was Violette?”

The children nodded, their expressions mixed with fear and excitement.

“She looks just like her,” the boy revealed.

“Like who?”

“That maid looks exactly like Miss Sumire, who should’ve died in that dog attack!”

“...**THAT’S** what they said at least,” Nichika concluded, recounting the story for Oswald after returning to his room at the mansion. Wolfie had completely taken to the children and was sleeping over at one of their houses for the night, so Nichika had come back alone.

“That maid, huh?”

“Does that work as a clue for who’s behind the dying flowers?”

“In its own way, yeah.” Facing the window outside, Oswald became lost in thought.

Nichika wanted to confirm her suspicions. “Violette called herself a homunculus, but what goes into that? Does that mean she was created by somebody?”

If she remembered correctly, when she had first met Oswald, he’d told her that he made homunculus artificial life kits on order for clients.

Oswald answered her distractedly, “Artificial lifeforms are still deeply saturated in the realm of the unknown. I’ve tried creating them before, but the things I’ve made are no better than a failure slime.”

“And you sold that?” She arched a judgmental eyebrow at him.

“I was selling artificial life *kits*, after all. I think of it as letting people buy their dreams.”

“Your shameful business practices have always been the same, I see...”

Oswald ignored her exasperation and muttered, more to himself than to her, “That’s exactly why I have my doubts about that woman being a legitimate homunculus. How could a landowner out in the hicks like this, come to own a homunculus with a flawless human form—which even I can’t create? Something doesn’t feel right...”

“So, how do you make them then?” Impatient, Nichika set both hands on the window frame where he was resting his arm, chin in hand. Her proximity finally pulled him back to the moment, making his eyes widen.

“How do you make them? Well, there are various theories out there, but I

went the orthodox way by using various herbs, horse dung, and sem—”

“H-Horse dung?!” she exclaimed. She pulled a face as she tried to imagine the gorgeous Violette rising from a recipe that included horse dung. “So gross! Isn’t there any other way to do it? Like, um, using a human corpse before you bury them? Argh, even saying that gives me the heebie-jeebies!”

That was one step too close to a world she’d never want anything to do with. Meanwhile, Oswald’s expression turned grim.

“Oz?”

“...Is that how it was done?”

“Did you figure something out?”

“I don’t have positive proof,” he said, avoiding a clear answer.

Annoyed by being kept in suspense, she stared him down, when she noticed that something was amiss. “Oh, what happened to your glasses?”

Oswald wasn’t wearing the glasses he usually wore whenever they went into towns and other populated areas. His expression turned ugly at the question.

“They make me clash with that four-eyed punk,” he snapped.

“...What? Are you talking about Makina?”

Sure, Makina wears round glasses, but...what’s that got to do with Oswald? Nichika wondered.

“I can’t believe it,” she snorted. “You’re not a child, you know.”

“It’s a matter of pride. Shove off.”

“Oh come on. Why are you always so snippy?” she quipped, earning herself a fierce glare. “Wh-What?” She flinched, which for some unknowable reason or another, made him sigh louder and longer than ever before.

“...Nothing.”

“Really? In that case, I’ll be heading back to my room.” She walked over to the door and had just put her hand on the knob, when he suddenly called out to her from behind.

“You’re welcome to sleep here. Want me to cuddle with you?”

“K-Keep your bad jokes to yourself! I have my own room and I’ll be using it, thanks!” She quickly retreated as flashbacks of the “punishment” he had threatened her with earlier replayed in her head.

Reading her thoughts right off her red face, Oswald snorted and scoffed, “What’re you so on guard for? Relax. Your seductive charms aren’t something to write home about. At least I won’t be falling for them.”

“GRRR! Shut up! You sexual harassing devil!” Nichika slammed the door behind her and loudly stomped off toward her room.

*He ticks me off! He ticks me off! He ticks me off **so damn much!** Sure, I don’t think I’ve got much in terms of sex appeal, but how can he have the nerve to say that, after all he’s done to me?! He’s the enemy! The enemy of all women!*

“Nichika? Why do you look so upset?” A voice suddenly came from the staircase, interrupting her angry act of stomping through the hallway with the most bloodcurdling expression she could muster.

It gave Nichika such a fright that she leapt right into the air. “*Oh my gosh!*” she yelped.

Shocked, she glanced up the staircase to find Makina staring down at her. Fresh out of the bath, he had a towel around his shoulders and had let his usually tied-back hair down, changing his usual impression.

“G-Good evening. Um, did I look upset to you?” Nichika asked timidly.

“You looked like you were ready to kill someone.”

“.....”

She wished Makina wouldn’t say something like that with such a radiant smile. As a girl in the first flush of youth, her mood only dropped even further now that she had let someone see her acting so unsightly.

“I want to talk to you for a bit. Let’s go upstairs,” Makina invited.

“Upstairs?”

SHE ascended the stairs behind Makina. The staircase ended at a door that was only wide enough for one person to barely squeeze their way through. At his insistence, Nichika swung it open.

“Wow!”

A refreshingly sweet aroma hit her nose as a stunning view unfolded before her eyes.

Blue flowers bloomed in abundance on the mansion’s rooftop, underneath the lustrous glow of the night sky. Flowers about the size of her palm with dainty, almost transparent flower petals unleashed a sparkling glow from their stigma. Every flower was in full bloom, creating an utterly breathtaking, magical sight underneath the light of the two moons.

“They’re called Moonlight Flowers, because they only bloom at night.”

“.....” Nichika was so in awe that she forgot how to speak.

Makina chuckled at her expression. Plucking the closest flower, he slipped it in her hair. “You look beautiful,” he complimented.

“Oh...”

Makina put a hand on her reddening cheeks. “I want to hear how you really feel.”

“How...I...”

“Is it a nuisance if I ask you to stay?”

She shook her head. “No, I’d never call you a nuisance. Your feelings make me happy, but...”

The miraculous scenery enthralled her. A secret date in a blooming flower garden at night used to be something she fantasized about.

His eyes fixed on her hesitant face, and he leaned in closer as if drawn to it. Nichika instinctively closed her eyes.

“Four-eyes is just under the spell of the parasitic seed’s temptation.”

Oswald's warning suddenly came to mind. **“Don’t!”**

She pushed Makina away just before their lips touched. Realizing what she had done, Nichika glanced up in a panic. Makina looked heartbroken from her rejection.

“Um, I’m sorry! It’s not that I dislike you, Makina, it’s just that...”

“So it’s true then. You love him, don’t you?”

“‘Him’? Him who? ...Wait, Oswald?! Why would I love him?!” she demurred.

Makina uncomfortably averted his eyes. “Sorry. I saw you two earlier. I watched you kiss him, Nichika.”

Shame rose inside her knowing she’d been seen. She flapped her lips, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Makina smiled sadly at her. “See, I knew that was the case.”

“Y-You’ve got it wrong! I have a complicated reason for this.”

“What reason?”

Nichika racked her brain for how to talk her way out of this situation, but couldn’t find the right explanation. After her attempts ended in futility, she gave up and dropped her shoulders.

“Makina, do you know about Fake Lover?” she asked reluctantly.

After she had explained everything, Makina stared at her with a mixed expression. “I’m surprised such a cursed plant exists out there,” he remarked. Then, looking relieved, he continued, “That means there’s still hope for me then.”

“...!”

Makina took her hand in his and gazed ardently into her eyes. No traces of teasing or condescension were present, only sincerity. Looking straight into her eyes, Makina confessed from the bottom of his heart. “Nichika, I love you. I want to take the place of your master until your peculiar disease is healed—no, I want to be with you even *after* it’s cured.”

Chapter 21: Girl, Sows Seeds

LUMINESCENT spores scattered from the blue flowers and danced into the air above the rooftop garden. Her thoughts half-frozen, Nichika unconsciously asked, “What about...Sumire?”

Makina’s expression stiffened. He squeezed her hand a little harder. “Where did you hear that name?”

“I heard about her from the village children. About how she looks exactly like Violette.”

Makina’s expression grew even tenser as if all the muscles in his face had frozen that way. Nichika prepared herself for the worst and pressed him for the truth. “Violette called herself a homunculus, but is that the truth? What in the world is—”

“She’s just a doll that my family sent to me. Dad gave her that appearance to torment me...” He released her hand and turned his back to her. Then, more to himself than to Nichika, he muttered, “Sumire died. She’s dead.”

Recognizing the conflicting emotions hidden away in his words, Nichika could say nothing more. When he looked back at her, he was wearing his usual kind smile.

“Tell me your answer on the night of the flower festival. Good night.”

Makina left Nichika alone on the rooftop, where she stood rooted to the ground amid the glowing light of the blue flowers. She pulled the flower from her hair and vacantly stared at its blue luminosity.

Makina is a nice guy, but the truth is that he still has feelings for Sumire... He’s probably only attracted to me because of Fake Lover’s temptation... The thought terrified her. Am I going to have to doubt everyone’s affections as long as this seed remains inside of me?

Nichika knew it was rude to doubt others’ feelings, but how could she think

otherwise in her situation?

Grabbing the front of her dress, she hung her head, a single tear streaking her cheeks. In the middle of the enchanting garden lit by the glowing blue flowers and the dazzling moonlight, Nichika stood completely motionless with only her misery for company.

OSWALD hadn't stayed in his room, but was instead taking the road into the village. As one would expect, no one was preparing for the festival at that late hour. The area was still as death, cloaked in the night's silence.

Oswald knelt on the ground and swiftly drew a simple magic circle with black charcoal. Finishing his stroke without hesitation, he deftly connected the pattern's final line.

"I order thee per our contract, O ye whom I grant my blood..." Oswald austere-ly chanted the spell over the magic circle and ended it in his own brusque words, ***"...hurry and get your butt here to help me with this job, slowpoke!"***

His short command complete, the ends of the charcoal black lines shined. Just as the light flashed at its highest intensity, something leapt out from the middle of the magic circle.

"Ta-da! Here to jump at your beck and call is your favorite Wolfie!" The wolf skid across the gravel as he landed with an extralarge yawn, baring all his sparkling white fangs. "Masterrrr," he bayed through his yawn, "You're such a meanie summoning me while I was sleeping. I was out cold with Eli and Dug tooooooo."

"Since when do familiars get time off? Help me out."

"What're you trying to do at this hour?"

"Grave robbing."

Wolfie tripped over his paws beside Oswald. Though a wolf, he was a big scaredy-cat when it came to anything scary. Wolfie jumped up on all fours, the fur on his back bristling.

“I don’t wanna do that! Especially at this hour! We’re gonna get cursed for sure! For! Sure! Let’s do it tomorrow morning...no, let’s go grave robbing in the bright sunlight of tomorrow afternoon! But not if it’s rainy! We can decide based on how cloudy the weather is!”

“I’m doing it this late *because* I don’t want people to see. Just try digging up a grave in broad daylight. They’ll drive us right out of this village in the blink of an eye.” Oswald grabbed hold of Wolfie’s tail and proceeded to drag him by it.

“Eep! I don’t wannaaaaaaaaa!” Wolfie howled pathetically.

Wolfie didn’t know where Oswald had got the thing from—probably borrowed it from a shed in the area—but he was carrying a shovel on his shoulder.

They finally arrived at the flower field where Wolfie had spotted Miss Flower—also known as Violette. Under the light of the two moons, the grand stretch of withering flowers looked undeniably unhealthy. Rumors of the field decaying from the west appeared to have been true.

“Okay, servant, it’s time for you to use that nose you’re so proud of. That family of dead servants should be buried somewhere in this flower field. Find their corpses.”

“Snuffle, snuffle. Tuuday...me nose’z...outta...com-mis-shin...achoo!” Wolfie sniffed repetitively as if he had a stuffed nose and rolled over on the ground like he was sick.

“.....” Oswald silently lifted the shovel overhead.

Wolfie promptly sprung to his feet, tears in his eyes. “I’m just kidding! Just kidding! Ugggh...I don’t wanna do this.” He reluctantly stuck his snout up in the air and sniffed. Some time passed, and he cocked his head. “All I smell is flowers.”

“They were buried years ago. I guess it’d be reasonable for their bodies to have long since decayed into skeletons... Try picking up on any other strange smells then.”

“Okay, hold on.” Wolfie concentrated on sifting through the smells until he noticed something out of the ordinary among the aromatic flowers. “I think it’s

coming from somewhere over here—the smell of metal.” He used his muzzle to point.

“It’s digging time.”

Oswald dug with the shovel, and Wolfie with his claws, until they hit something with a resounding clunk.

“What is—” Wolfie’s claws hit something white, long, and narrow. “GAH, bonessssssssss!” Wolfie was beside himself with panic. He dashed around in circles, hopping up and down frantically to get the sensation of cold bones off his feet.

Oswald continued digging the bones up, indifferent. He had anticipated coming across as much. “So there are bones after all. Hm?” A light purple object peeked out from the black dirt. Oswald latched on and started to haul it out of the soil, scowling. “This is...”

“Master, pull! Pull!” Wolfie cheered. Then he saw what it was. “GYAWAWAWOOOO! A corpse!” he screeched incoherently.

Oswald had unearthed the remains of a young woman. She had violet hair and elegantly curved cheeks—moreover, the body was far too clean. It fell limply on the ground when he let it go, but it looked as if it could spring to life at any moment.

“I-Is that person really, really dead?” Wolfie asked, timorously peeking his head around Oswald’s legs.

Oswald didn’t bother to answer and pulled a knife from his pocket instead. And then he stabbed the beautiful face with it.

“EEEEK! You shouldn’t defile the dead, Master! Huh? What’s that?”

Ripping like fabric torn asunder, the corpse’s skin peeled off under the knife. Underneath what had appeared to be skin was cotton and an iron frame. Prudent care had gone into adjusting the weight to be just right.

“I-It’s not a person?”

“It’s a well-made doll. So that’s how it was all along, huh?” Convinced by his findings, Oswald clapped the dirt off his hands.

He *had* thought it was strange. If someone really had successfully created such a perfect homunculus as Violette, she'd have been paraded around the public marketplace and announced to the world by now.

"That maid is living flesh and blood. I'd bet she's the real Sumire. I don't know what her motives are, but—" Suddenly feeling a chilling presence, Oswald swerved around.

He didn't know when she had appeared, but Violette stood among the flowers a meter away, her hands neatly folded in front of her. Emotionless violet eyes firmly held his gaze.

When she finally opened her perfectly shaped lips, an equally monotone voice came out. "This is not a time for walks."

"You think so? Regrettably, I have an aversion to sunlight."

Violet hair swayed in the wind carrying colorful flower petals.

In that very moment, a bizarre phenomenon took place—the undulating flowers rapidly withered away. Their deaths emitted a pittance of visible magic that absorbed into Violette.

"So, you're the culprit who's killing the flowers too?"

"Can I ask you to please hand that doll over to me?" she quietly requested, ignoring his accusation.

Oswald followed up with two more questions, "Weren't you and that four-eyes lovers? Why fake your own death?"

For the first time, confusion flickered in her violet eyes. Her face twisting in pain, she grabbed her head and started to moan. "Ah...no...stop it..."

"What?"

She stooped over for several minutes, moaning horribly. But, by the time she lifted her head, her trademark lifeless eyes had returned. "Because this is all for Master Makina."

"....."

"A lowborn woman such as myself could never be married to a man of such

rank. This is for the best.”

“Then, is an optimistic little girl with no brain or capacity for forethought like my apprentice any better?” Oswald questioned. Nichika would be enraged if she overheard him.

The maid slowly shook her head. “Lady Nichika is a wonderful person. She is honest and compassionate... I am sure Master Makina was drawn to those attributes.”

“.....” Oswald fell silent. Then, unexpectedly, he walked away from the fake corpse. “Do what you want with the doll. I’ll find another way.”

“M-Master?” Wolfie stammered.

“You have my utmost gratitude,” Violette replied.

Oswald and Wolfie departed from the field of flowers, leaving the woman alone with her lookalike doll. She stroked the doll’s cheek and spoke in a hollow voice, “This is the end... I want to be...disposed of already.”

THE following morning, suffocation forcibly dragged Nichika from the depths of a sound slumber.

“Mn. Mmph...!” Her eyes snapped open just as fresh air whisked into her lungs. The blue eyes right in front of her blinked once.

“Oh, you woke up?”

“Oh my GOSH!” Nichika tried to scoot away as fast as she could, but she was on top of a bed, locked in a cage created by Oswald’s body—he was hanging over her. Heat surged to her face as she came to comprehend her situation. “Wh-Wh-What are you doing to me first thing in the morning?!”

“It’s your fault for not waking up.”

Held hostage by his steady gaze at point-blank range, her heart hammered wildly. She was fascinated by him, and realizing that sunk her into a state of misery.

Agh, it’s so frustrating! His face really is the only cool and handsome thing

about him!

“I-It’s cheating to show me that face right when I wake up,” she mumbled.

“Huh?” He gave her an exasperated look but surprisingly moved away. “You can’t understand how thoughtful I’m being by doing it while you sleep, considering that you hate it so much?”

“That’s not a good enough reason! Anyways, didn’t I lock the door?! How’d you even get in here?!”

“Trade secret.”

“That’s a *crime!*” Nichika grabbed her pillow and chucked it at him, but he easily caught it with one hand. He smirked wickedly at her when she hopped out of bed, ready to pursue him.

“Enough fooling around. Get ready and help me out. We have a busy day ahead.”

“We do? What are we doing?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

NICHIKA changed into her usual outfit. When she arrived at the western, withered flower field, she couldn’t believe her eyes.

“Yay, it’s Miss Nichika! Morning!”

“We’ve got everything all ready here!”

The children she had played with the day before, along with their parents, had gathered in the field. They were noisily chattering away with each other, reminding her of how the neighborhood association’s cleaning committee would gather back home.

She greeted them, “Good morning. What are you all doing here?”

“Wolfie asked us to bring everyone here,” explained the child whose house Wolfie had stayed at overnight. Excitement glittering in his eyes, the boy innocently went on to add, “He said he’ll treat us all to a miracle!”

“I wonder what it’ll be,” another child chimed in.

“Me too!” a third agreed.

They were having a friendly chat, but Nichika couldn't ignore the twinge of unease roiling within her. What in the world was that devilish man going to show them?

“Morning, Nichika. Looks like something incredible is about to begin, huh?” a voice called out.

“Makina.”

His expression pulled into a tense smile as he politely greeted the villagers he passed by on his way over to her. Violette trailed behind him.

“Umm, I haven't been informed about what he's about to do either,” Nichika admitted awkwardly.

“You haven't?”

Right then, a lively, excited voice shouted out to them from the direction of the village.

“Everybody, thanks for waiting!” Wolfie, tugging a wagon twice the height of his withers, came to a sharp halt. Grabbing the jute bags piled up on the wagon with his teeth, he began to hand them out to people. “Okay, line up everybody. Pass it around!”

“What is this?” Upon opening the bag Makina had passed to her, Nichika found seeds of various shapes and sizes: triangular, square, circular, along with tons of other variations.

“Those are flower seeds. Master said he'll deliver the official explanation on it.”

At last, Oswald made his appearance wearing his businessman smile. Shrill screams erupted from the village girls over the Ice Demon who had caused the uproar in the village the day prior. Nichika restrained her desire to crack a joke over the whole farce.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,” Oswald said courteously, “You have my deepest gratitude for cooperating with us on such short notice. Now, what I would like you to do is very simple. Please remove the withered plants and

plant as many seeds as possible in order to make it in time for the flower festival.”

Everyone gaped at his instructions. After a brief silence, the adults timidly spoke up.

“Pardon me, but the flower festival takes place tomorrow...”

“Actually, we have the prefestival celebrations, so it starts tonight. You see, considering what we’re dealing with this year, we’ve decided to go with fake flowers.”

Oswald pointedly directed his fake smile at Nichika, dropping what felt like ice cubes down her back with his wordless pressure.

I got it! I got it, already!

She slipped out of the circle of people to face them from the front, where she took a deep breath. Then, in one fluid motion, she vigorously bowed her head before them. “Please cooperate with us, everyone! You might not believe him, but please take part even if you think you’re being deceived!”

Silence fell over the field. But it only lasted a second before the children flocked over to her.

“Okay! Since it’s Miss Nichika who’s asking! I’ll believe ya!”

“I wanna see a miracle!”

“I’ll sow more seeds than anyone else!”

The children immediately started yanking out the dead plants. After watching their diligent participation for a while, the adults exchanged looks and laughed aloud.

“You’ve got us this time. How can the adults leave all the work to children?”

“Welp, guess we should get to it. At the end of the day, we have to plant new seeds eventually, anyway.”

“That said, we need to get the tools. I’ll go grab what I can from the shed.”

“Then the other ladies and I will bring out some emergency rice. A lot of you haven’t had breakfast yet, right?”

Nichika tightly clasped her hands in awe of how quickly and easily the villagers set to work as one unit. “The people of Lolo Village really are nice!”

Oswald’s lips curved into a smirk. “That’s not it. The adults never would’ve gotten involved if you hadn’t said anything. The plan’s success is all yours, since you befriended the children.” He placed his hand on her head for a moment before walking away. “You did well. Good job.”

“Eh? Ah...” He left while she was still flustered. His words echoing through her head, Nichika brought her hand up to her messed up hair and quietly murmured, “Did he just praise me?”

Chapter 22: Girl, Works Miracles

SOWING seeds proceeded smoothly with the assistance of the villagers. By the afternoon, they had finished removing the dead plants, tilling the land, and putting oil cake fertilizer in the ground.

Surrounded by the smell of fresh, earthy soil that was strong enough to make her choke, Nichika beamed brightly as she pulled weeds in spite of the fact she was covered in mud.

“Nichika, you seem to be in a really good mood,” Wolfie observed.

“Do I?” she asked, turning toward the bewildered wolf with a big grin on her face.

“Did something happen?”

“Not really?”

Oswald’s compliment had definitely affected her, but Nichika hadn’t given it much thought as to question the source of her high spirits.

“It’s my first time gardening, but it’s a lot more fun than I thought it’d be.”

Working with the smooth and silky soil with its rich aromas had a way of washing away the mud clogging up her feelings. Taking a closer look at the ground, Nichika noticed orange mana drifting about the earth here and there, vanishing as if being absorbed.

“Digging holes is fun, isn’t it?” Wolfie animatedly dug his claws through the dirt, kicking piles of it behind his back legs. “Master and I also did that here yesterday—” He froze in the middle of his fun dig.

“You were digging yesterday too?”

Wolfie suddenly started to tremble. “O-O-Oh yeah, I f-forgot! I-It’s b-buried i-in this f-flower field!”

“What is?” Before Nichika could hear his answer—her attention was drawn to

another conversation.

“Miss Violette, are you feeling unwell?” a villager inquired.

“N-No...I-I am fine,” Violette replied.

Violette looked whiter than a sheet pulling weeds several plots over from Nichika—rather, her complexion had passed white altogether and gone straight to ashen. Nichika was becoming increasingly more puzzled by the deathly ill skin color of the normally unreadable woman’s face. Overhearing them, Makina stopped pulling weeds and looked over his shoulder.

“Why don’t you sit down and rest if you’re not feeling well?” he suggested.

“...Thank you very much for your...kind words. I will take you up on them for a moment.”

Makina and Nichika worriedly watched her unsteadily stumble away.

“I wonder if she’s okay,” Nichika said.

“It’s my first time seeing her like that. Who knew homunculus could fall ill too,” Makina noted.

Violette sat under the shade of a tree with her head drooped and her hands pressed against her chest. Her shoulders painfully rose and fell with her breathing.

“I should go check on her,” Makina said, rising to his feet.

“Okay, I’ll com—” Nichika tried to dash after him but was suddenly yanked backward by the hood of her mantle, making her choke out a weird sounding, “Gueeh!”

“...What an unattractive noise.”

“That’s your fault for suddenly pulling on my mantle! You choked me! Quit grabbin’ me whenever you feel like it! Sheesh.”

As expected, it was Oswald who was behind her. Only, he wasn’t letting go, but trying to drag her off somewhere by her mantle.

“Whoa! Hey!” Nichika protested.

“Come. It’s almost time.”

“Time for what?!”

As usual, he didn’t provide an explanation. After bringing her some ways away from the field, he instructed her on what she had to do next.

“First things first, a miracle isn’t going to happen. But we can make it appear like one has.”

“Okay, how?”

Oswald plopped a hand on her shoulder. “I’m counting on you, Spirit Priestess,” he said, tossing the problem into her lap.

“Excuse me?!” Nichika felt like he’d just punched her in the head. Enduring the disorienting feeling, she clenched her fists in anger. “Wh-What’s *that* supposed to mean?! W-Weren’t you going to use a Witch’s Item to make the flowers bloom?!” she sputtered.

“You think I’d make an item with no demand?”

“It’s in high-demand right *here* and *now*! HERE AND NOW!” She fiercely stomped her feet on the dirt.

Seriously, what a scam artist! Or should I say he’s got a nasty habit of doing whatever he wants without considering the consequences?!

“How could you go and make me speak so highly of you, when you didn’t even plan to make a miracle happen in the first place!”

“Put everything you’ve got into it if you want something to happen then. I’ve perfectly arranged all the conditions for you.”

“...What?”

Oswald bent over and scooped up a handful of dirt. Then, burying a single seed from his pouch in it, he elaborated, “The seeds I prepared are the fastest flowering type out of all the plant species suited to this environment. The fertilizer we mixed with the soil is of the highest grade and specially made to fine tune the balance with the original dirt to encourage growth. As you can plainly see, the most favorable conditions for growing flowers are now present in this field.”

“...Are you sure you’re not actually the son of a florist?”

“Don’t be stupid. This much knowledge is required for potion making. Back to the point. This is where we’ll be borrowing the power of mana.” He stroked the surface of the pile of dirt in his palm and called, **“Come!”**

Orange lights took on the form of birds and began to flock around his hand. One landed on his finger, and he gave a command as if speaking to it.

“O spirit of the fertile earth, please lend the sprouts of life your aid.”

The bird cocked its head then dove into the dirt, becoming one with it.

“Wow!”

Before their very eyes, a young green bud sprouted from the dirt in his hand. It grew rapidly, as if they were watching a recording with fast-forward on, until it finally bloomed into an adorable pink flower.

“And well, that’s how it works,” he concluded, holding it out to her.

“Cool! It actually bloomed!” Nichika accepted the flower, dirt and all, and poked at the pretty petals. It wasn’t artificial; it was a real, live flower. “All I have to do is ask the earth mana for help? I wonder if they’ll listen,” she said uneasily, as she planted the flower in the ground.

While the Great Fire Spirit had opened up the world of mana before her eyes, Nichika still didn’t have a firm grasp on manipulating them. It’d never occurred to her that she might have to do it on the fly at an important time like this, without any practice.

“Whether or not the flower festival can be held depends on your ability.”

Nichika glanced up at Oswald’s face. “...Do you want things to go well?”

If they failed to help the festival, it’d mean he’d lose his bet with Makina. In other words, Nichika would remain in Lolo Village.

Oswald stared down at her without answering. The wind played with their hair as it blew past. When he finally opened his mouth to speak, he spoke in a businessman’s voice, “...I forgot to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

“It’s possible for *you* to one-sidedly put an end to our contract.”

Processing what that meant made her eyes bulge. In other words, he was saying—

“You decide. Will you come with us? Or stay here?”

“B-But if I stay behind, the issue with Fake Lover will never be resolved...”

“You don’t need to worry about that. That four-eyes Makina is from a family that runs a huge enterprise based on magic. If you just want to gather information, staying with him might actually be more effective.”

“But...but!”

A lump formed in her chest from her bitter feelings of having him thrust this upon her. No, that wasn’t quite right. Really, Nichika just wanted to know what Oswald was thinking. What did *he* want? Why was he entrusting her with this choice?

Those questions surfaced within her but failed to form proper words that would break her silence.

Oswald stared off into the distance as he candidly asked, “Isn’t that...what would make you the happiest?”

“...!”

“Rather than...coming with me.”

Nichika couldn’t bear to have him see the emotions surging in her, so she made a run for it as if to flee. *Why? Why is he suddenly saying something like that?* She slipped in to the throng of people working in the field and stopped to catch her breath. *I knew it. I just knew it. Oswald wants to get rid of me. That’s gotta be it.*

She was furiously trying to hold back the tears threatening to spill over for reasons she couldn’t understand, when some of the children came over and worriedly peered up at her face.

“Nichika! Whatz w’ong? Do you have a booboo?” one of the girls asked, holding her hand.

“Are you sleepy? Wanna nap? We’ll work hard, so you can go nap!” one of the boys offered, rolling up his sleeve to flex a tiny arm.

Their innocent voices helped her wrench the faucet of her tears closed before it was too late. She roughly rubbed at the corner of her eyes with her dirt-covered sleeves and showed them the best smile she could manage.

“Nothing’s wrong! I’m perfectly okay!”

“You’d better be okay, ‘cause the flower festival is almost here!”

“The flower spirit won’t come if you aren’t smiling, you know!”

Nichika nodded once to their expectant faces and solidified her resolve. *That’s right—I need to make the flowers bloom, no matter what. I’ve got to push the bet to the back of my mind so I can do my best to help the villagers who are looking forward to the festival. Ignore the pain in my chest, concentrate on the problem at hand. I can think about what comes after this later.*

Nichika took a deep breath of the earthy air and searched for mana in the vicinity. Instantly, she located a vast number of orange lights. Not caring if she got dirty, she knelt on the ground and tried to offer her hand to one of the orange butterflies fluttering around her feet. However—

“W-Wait!” It swiftly flew away from her hand as if fleeing from her. The other mana reacted the same way, like they were avoiding her for some reason. “Why?”

At a loss, Nichika suddenly became aware of something out of the ordinary occurring in her waist pocket. It was strangely warm—or more like hot!

Consequently glancing at her pocket, she let out a shocked, “Hey!” The magic orb was glowing red—the red mana were violently zooming around inside the glass in a rampage. “D-Don’t do that! You shouldn’t intimidate the other mana!”

But the fire mana menacingly flapped their wings, driving away the earth mana. They were almost behaving like they were Nichika’s loyal guard dogs.

Why are they acting this way? How am I supposed to fix this?

The same pattern kept repeating, and the orange butterflies fled in fear whenever Nichika tried to approach them.

“OH no, the sun is setting!”

It was still too early for dusk, but the sun had descended quite a distance since Nichika had started. In less than a few hours, the flower festival eve celebration would commence.

Yet, the only flower that had sprouted around her was Oswald's. The village adults forced smiles, disappointed. Cynicism hung in the air as they reconciled themselves with the fact that nothing was going to happen. "We knew it," they said to each other.

"Nichika! How goes it?" Wolfie ambled up to her.

Nichika looked at him with tears in her eyes. "Wol...fie...! It's not going well at all..."

"Why?"

About to cry, she explained her predicament. After she finished, the brown wolf's ears perked up as if he'd hit on a great idea.

"Hmm, why don't you try giving the fire mana an order? Try telling it to go away for a while or something?"

According to Wolfie, wizards typically chased away the unnecessary elemental mana before activating their spells with the mana they needed. But Nichika didn't want to do that.

"How could I do that when these cuties are just trying to protect me? Driving them away is too cruel..."

"In that case, why not try asking them to get along with each other? Just like you did when you introduced me to the village kids yesterday!"

"Tell them to get along?"

With that in mind, she stared hard at the mana. Despite having been consistently chased away for the past few hours, the earth mana were still trying to approach her. The fire mana flared up threateningly in response, but they weren't trying to attack the earth mana.

"Um, listen guys," Nichika spoke softly to the red butterflies, "you don't have to be so heavily guarded against the other mana." The red mana stopped flying around and hovered, confused about what she wanted from them. "You see, I

want to borrow the other mana's power. I'd be really happy if you guys could help me out too."

She shifted her attention from calming the fire mana to reach out to the earth mana. "I'm sorry we scared you. It's okay now. Will you come here?"

Orange lights timidly approached her, reminding Nichika of how the village children had reacted the prior day. People and mana weren't all that different; her voice had reached them.

"Okay! With that settled, won't you please both listen to what I have to say?" she asked both the orange and red lights. "A flower festival is supposed to begin in a few hours. A ton of flowers are necessary for it, but the flowers that were originally growing here all died."

Now that she mentioned it, she wondered if Oswald had ever ended up figuring out the cause. She quickly brushed the thought away for the moment.

Thinking of all the kindness the villagers had treated her with and the children she had befriended, Nichika poured her heart into her request. "So please! Help me revive the flower field for all the villagers!"

The mana that had been swaying in the air during her plea—abruptly turned to move as one. The quarreling red and orange lights mingled with each other and spread out together across the entire flower field.

"Wow...!"

New green leaves immediately sprouted from the ground, absorbing the orange butterflies and red butterflies as they flew around the new buds to adjust the temperature. The earth mana seemed to have summoned its friends, because soon aqua butterflies appeared to provide the flowers water from the atmosphere. Green butterflies were stirring the air to blow a gentle breeze, weaving the colors throughout the field.

A miracle was taking place.

"Holy moly! What's going on?!"

“They’re blooming! Flowers are blooming!”

Below the startled villagers’ feet, countless flowers were blossoming. A rainbow-colored flower field unfurled before their very eyes; an almost mirror image of the different elements tinged every flower.

“Now that’s a surprise,” Oswald said to himself, watching Nichika from a distance, “I didn’t think you’d be able to get the earth mana on your side, much less all the other elements.” Without noticing him, Nichika twirled and rejoiced with the children in the middle of all the beautiful flowers.

Even controlling just two elements of mana at the same time usually required substantial training, but Nichika had unconsciously mastered the rarest of skills.

“Spirit Priestess, huh...?” Oswald didn’t believe in mythical existences, but what he had just witnessed that evening was at least enough to make him consider it.

Now the flower festival could safely go on without issue, and he had also pinned down the culprit who’d been killing the flowers. Nevertheless, he was going to leave the decision to Nichika; he didn’t have the right to tell her whether to stay behind or not.

Out of the blue, Oswald was struck with the realization that he’d taken actions very unlike himself. If he had truly wanted to rid himself of the flea he’d picked up, otherwise known as his apprentice, shouldn’t he have simply forfeited the bet on purpose instead of bothering to resolve the case?

Sure, that four-eyed little punk’s challenge had more or less taunted his pride as a man. But that fact aside, all that effort didn’t really seem worth it. Why had he not only deliberately gone out of his way to find a solution that would satisfy all parties, but also given Nichika the final choice?

If he had wanted to get rid of her, he could’ve made that happen. If he had wanted to keep her, he could’ve made that happen. But what *did* he want?

I... An unshakeable feeling warning him not to think about it too deeply came over Oswald. If he thought about it too seriously, he’d have no choice but to accept the full ridiculousness of the situation. I can’t believe I hoped that she might actually choose me.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

A sudden shrill scream brought Oswald’s thoughts to a skidding halt. The villagers, who had been dancing with joy around the flowers, turned toward the sound as well.

“Violette! What’s wrong?!” Makina cried.

“Aaaah....aghh...gaaaaaaaah!”

The villagers scanned the area for the source of the terrifying cries and found Violette, who should have been resting at the base of a nearby tree, wildly throwing her head back so far that it looked like it would snap right off. Children fearfully retreated from the tree where Violette was madly grabbing at her head and writhing around.

“Get a hold of yourself!” Makina ran to her side and held her upright.

Turning her bloodshot eyes on Makina, she wrung out, “P-Please run away... I’m—”

“What?! What in the world is happening?!”

In the final moments of her struggle, Violette shed a single tear. Her head lifelessly lolled to the side, like her neck had broken. Nobody moved. A creepy, humid gust swept through the area, lifting the colorful flower petals up with its current.

Violette, who had ceased to move like a marionette that had its strings cut in one go, abruptly began to cackle, hard enough to jolt her shoulders unnaturally. From her mouth, an utterly foreign voice rang out.

“What the hell?” it snarled, “Who went and laid this nasty little trap?”

“What?” Makina said.

Then it happened entirely in a single second. Violette slammed a sharp whirlwind kick right into Makina’s stomach. The force blew him away, sending him flying through the air in a wide arc. He crashed into the ground before he

could even prepare for the blow.

“Makina!” Nichika took off in a run, but Oswald stopped her.

“Don’t go near him!” he barked. Then his lips turned up in a nervous, tense smile. “I figured the mastermind would show up if the area was filled with excess magic, but I never thought they’d expose themselves so soon.”

“Excess magic? What do you mean? What’s going on?” Nichika asked all at once, without taking her eyes off the back that was turned to them—the back that supposedly belonged to the maid Violette.

“That maid’s no homunculus or anything of the kind. She’s a living, breathing human being. She’s likely being controlled by the Witch’s Item embedded in her chest.”

“Whaaaat?!”

“The culprit behind the deaths of the flowers is the one controlling her. They’re keeping the magic item active by having her regularly absorb magic from the flowers that grow here.”

“So what? You mean by having all the flowers blooming at once, it overloaded the item with magic?” Nichika demanded in a louder voice than she meant to.

At the sound of her voice, the person in the maid outfit mechanically turned toward them.

“...!”

Nervous, Nichika braced herself, but the person controlling Violette let out a jovial whoop upon noticing them. “Oooh, why isn’t that you, my upperclassman Oswald?! Long time no see!”

“...?!”

The puppet master undid Violette’s bun, letting her hair fall free as they saluted Oswald. Violette’s face was wearing a radiant smile filled with intimacy as she gazed at him.

Nichika looked to her master beside her. “Uh, know them?”

“.....”

“It’s me! Lambert!”

“I don’t know any frivolous man like you.”

“So you *do* remember me! You haven’t changed one bit!” Lambert’s voice sputtered from Violette’s lips. He moved her hands to her hips to reflect his exasperation. “Anyway, what’re ya doing here? Prexy’s been lookin’ for you in a mad frenzy, y’know.”

“Zip it. I’ve got my own circumstances to deal with.”

Still not following what was going on, Nichika ventured, “Your friend?”

His guard firmly up, Oswald kept his eyes trained on the body Lambert was using and quietly answered, “Not in a million years. More importantly, this is someone worse than what I was expecting.”

“Worse than you were expecting...?”

“He’s dangerous.”

Lambert twirled Violette’s fingers through her hair as he hummed and prodded Makina’s unmoving body with the tip of her shoe. “Oh, is this the Prof’s son? They don’t look much alike. Not that it matters much, anyway.”

Then, making Violette thud her hand against her chest, he dramatically rambled on, “Now look what you’ve made me do. It was all fine n’ dandy that I stuck an observer with him, but this kiddo has got zero magic, so I’d no choice but t’have her replenish the item’s energy with flowers. But keepin’ that up for *years* n’ the equipment went n’ started to deteriorate n’ have higher energy consumption, so I was just discussing with the Prof about g’tting rid of her soon. And then what happens? Magic jammed into the item past capacity, short-circuiting it! Ahahaha! Then when I came to check out what’d happened, my upperclassman’s here!”

A nasty smile twisted Violette’s lips as Lambert’s voice cruelly concluded, “Repairing the core’s a major pain. Meh, it was a good run. Fastest way to get rid o’ the problem is to have her throw herself off the cliff like Prof instructed, I guess.”

Violette’s body made a mad dash through the thunderstruck villagers. “Sorry

for the ruckus, boys and girls! You guys can tend to lil' master Makina after this is over!"

"Wai—"

Her body ran away faster than they could stop her.

Oswald was the first to move. "We're going after her! That guy lacks any kind of ethics! He's seriously going to have that maid throw herself off a cliff!"

Chapter 23: Girl, Heart Breaks

THE further west Lolo Village's flower field spread, the steeper the ground became, and it eventually ended where the ground abruptly gave way to nothingness.

"Found her! Over there!"

Beyond the hill of flowers was a sudden cliff that led to the ravine's river. The person they were after was standing perfectly still where one wrong step would send them plummeting off the edge to a fate from which returning alive was dubious. Their violet hair blew in the wind.

"Oh boy! You're all such fast runners! You just had to come, didn't'cha? This ain't an exhibition, people." Smiling against the setting sunlight, Lambert had Violette spread her arms wide and steadily inched down the cliffside. The edge was ten steps away—then five steps away. "But it might be fun to make it one!"

"Stop it! Please don't!"

The villagers struggled to stop a half-crazed Makina from reaching out for Violette.

Oswald glanced at Nichika who was at an utter loss. "What do you want to do?"

"What do you mean? What can I do?"

Her unbelievably calm and composed master whispered a plan in her ear, ending with, "...You can stop him if you do that."

"Will that really work?"

"Probably? But are you sure you're okay taking that path?"

Nichika paused mid-run to look back at him, seeking a clarification. "Why wouldn't I be?"

A heavy seriousness settled over his features. "You will likely be able to

become Makina's lover if that maid dies here. This is an ideal scenario for you. Do you want to let her die without helping?"

His words sent shockwaves through her body, as if he'd hit her in the head.

"Ah...that... That's..." Nichika broke into a run, shouting back, "nothing to hesitate over!"

She smacked the pocket containing the fiery magic orb once and skid to a halt near the edge of the cliff. Then, drawing back her pinched fingers, she materialized a brightly shining crimson arrow.

"Fiercely burning mana, lend me your power! FIRE ARROW!"

"What?!" the puppet master exclaimed.

Nichika shot the arrow, which flew straight and true at Lambert—Violette's chest—and pierced right through the core of the crystal glowing light-purple. The body jerked to a stop like a broken marionette...but then its lips curved into a malicious smirk.

"Hmm... To think you'd be the one."

Nichika's eyes bore into him, burning with the seven colors of the rainbow. Sparkling crimson butterflies were flitting around her.

"I let down my guard. I see, I see! So you're the rumored Spirit Priestess, eh?"

"How—"

Nichika wanted to ask how he knew that, but Lambert grinned and cut her off, "Well, I'll just write this off as my loss and wash my hands of this one." He limply waved the hand he was rapidly losing control over. "Nichika, was it? See...you...*later...*"

Static noise cut through his voice as it faded away with the final words, "*If we...meet...with my real body...next time...for sure I'll...*"

Threads cut, Violette's body staggered backward and slowly began to tip.

"Sumire!" Makina just barely caught her in his arms. He buried his face in her shoulder and trembled. "Welcome back... You were always with me, weren't you?"

LOLO Village's flower festival that year was extraspectacular, brimming with exhilarating energy and electrifying excitement. Sumire, who they had long thought was deceased, had finally returned to them and was at long last wedded to their landowner, Makina.

The pre-festival banquet continued all through the night. Enveloped by the sweet aroma of a fully blossomed sea of flowers, the music, singing, and dancing resounded nonstop throughout the village. Everyone was laughing and smiling. It was a truly beautiful and joyous occasion.

"Makina!" Nichika called.

Celebratory flowers were piled up on Makina's head as he turned toward her sanguine voice. Sumire was sitting beside him, with just as many flowers woven through her hair.

"Ahaha! You two look like flower spirits!"

"Nichika...um..."

Nichika tightly grabbed hold of Makina's hand as he searched for what to say and brought Sumire's hand to it, folding his over hers. Then she took a step back to give them space. "It's fine. We're all good. Don't mind me!" Nichika assured him, "I'm so glad you two were able to return to your original relationship."

"Nichika," Sumire said, tears shimmering in her violet eyes like morning dew on lilacs. She smiled with blissful gratitude. "Thank you so very much. Words aren't enough to thank you. How can I ever repay you?"

"Don't be silly. You don't have to thank me or give me anything. I mean, if you're really not going to let me go without something, the greatest way you can repay me is by becoming the happiest couple in the world. So there!" Nichika teasingly stuck her tongue out at them and laughed.

"Thank you," Makina said sincerely, devotion shining in his voice. "Not only did you save Sumire, but you rescued my heart."

"Shucks, that's too much praise for me. Okay, I'd better get a move on. We're

leaving soon.” Nichika waved goodbye and turned to leave, startling Makina and Sumire.

“Are you leaving already?” Makina asked. “You should at least wait to leave until after you see the main festivities tomorrow.”

“I agree completely. I still haven’t done anything to repay you,” Sumire chimed in.

“Yeah, sorry about that. You know that creepy Lambert guy from before? Master said we’d better leave this village right away because he knows where we are now.” Nichika waved again before dashing off. “Goodbye! May you both be forever happy together!”

Her final smile twinkled brightly, leaving a lasting impression on them.

“Ah...” They watched her go, the feeling of her comforting presence receding fast, just like the wind’s breath. The hubbub from the village’s festivities receded.

“She was a curious girl,” Sumire remarked.

“Yeah. Just like Goddess Yuna, she had the talent of charming everyone who met her.” Sadness tinged his face, turning his lips down.

Sumire sidled up to Makina and tenderly entangled her hand with his. “Don’t worry. I’m sure we will meet her again someday. I just know it.”

“I hope so.”

They stayed in the same position until they could no longer see any trace of Nichika. A gentle breeze blew past them as if to chase after her.

“**HAA...HAAA...**” Nichika ran from the center of the village all the way to the gates, then rested her hands on the fence for support as she caught her breath. Outside the reach of the festival lights, the road ahead was dark and stretched into the distance, perhaps continuing on endlessly.

“Did you finish your goodbyes?” A man emerged from the darkness as if he had slid out from the shadows.

Nichika grinned at him. “Yup! Said a perfect goodbye! Ready to go now? Where’s Wolfie?”

“I had him go on ahead.”

Nichika accepted her bags from Oswald and set off, her footsteps light. He followed right behind her. She started to babble in an elated tone, “Sumire was so pretty! They had her wear an outfit fit for a bride. Everyone was congratulating her left and right.”

“I see.”

“Makina seemed truly happy too. One look at him and I could tell that he’ll forget all about confessing his feelings to me in no time. Yup, I just know he will.”

“I see.”

“It’s true. I’m positive...it was just his mind playing tricks on him...a momentary fancy...” She desperately fought to restrain the trembling in her voice, her feet slowing to a stop several steps ahead of him. A gentle gust blew through the space between them.

“Did you love him? Did you love that man?”

Her head jerked up with a start, a single trickle of light shimmering down it. “I-I don’t know.”

“.....”

“Maybe I was starting to fall for him? Ahaha... It’s strange, isn’t it? It’s probably because it was my first time having someone confess their feelings to me that I got all stupidly excited about it.”

Nichika looked back at Oswald, still smiling. She was smiling even as she wept. It was painful for him to watch.

“O-Oh? Wh-What’s this? Weird. Why am I crying? Everything ended happily. Wh-Why am I acting funny? Maybe my fatigue is finally catching up to me. Ahaha.”

Watching her messily rub at her tears with that smile plastered on her face, Oswald walked forward. As he passed by her, he placed his hand on top of her

head.

“You’re so stupid.” He was mocking her, but there was something comforting in the tone of his voice. “Idiot. You’re a big idiot. What’s wrong with crying when you want to cry? There’s nobody here you have to fake your feelings for.”

“...!” Nichika gasped.

“Don’t pretend to be tough or happy. I can see right through your fake smile,” he said with his back to her.

Nichika clung onto him from behind and wept. “Ah...uwaaAAAAAAHHH!” She cried as loud as her voice allowed. “I...I...I’m never anyone’s number one!”



“.....”

“I’m so happy for them and yet disappointed... Nobody needs me. I’m worried no one will care if I’m gone...”

“.....”

“I can’t stop...thinking that way.”

Listening to her bawl in silence, Oswald didn’t move. He uttered no words of reassurance or solace—he merely stayed there with her arms wrapped around him and let her cry her heart out.

When her sobs died down to sniffles at last, she quietly muttered, “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?”

“...There might just be one.”

Those words were more than enough for her. The sky was clear and the stars brightly glittered overhead.

And only those stars knew how long the two shadows remained that way under their light. The distant celebration of the flower festival the only noise to be heard in the background.

Closing Act: Flying Broom

Chapter 24: Girl, Fights

HOT winds dashed through the prairie as mana spun around Nichika, drawing a circle of fire as it followed her outstretched hand. Snapping her eyes open, she swung her hand straight down from over her head.

“Swirl into the skies, O tempest! FIRE STORM!” she shouted, unleashing the gates to hellfire. Panic-stricken monsters stampeded away from the blast as fast as they could. Once the flames had abated, Wolfie jumped out of hiding.

“That was so awesome, Nichika! I didn’t know you could use magic attacks like that.”

Yet, despite the awesomeness of the attack she’d let loose, Nichika sunk to her knees in the coarse grass. “I can’t take it anymore! Why do I have to be the one fighting these battles now?!” she whined.

Oswald came out of hiding next, taking down notes. “Don’t be absurd. It’d be a complete waste not to use your magic when you have full control over fire.”

“But I’m terrified! I’m on pins and needles thinking I might get bit by something!”

Unfortunately for Nichika, her display of shooting off a fire arrow at Lolo Village made Oswald consider her as a splendid addition to his fighting forces. Battles from then on unfolded with Nichika fighting on the frontlines as Oswald issued directions from the safety of cover—the complete opposite of the usual male-female combat roles.

“Monsters left us completely alone until now. Why are they coming after us all of a sudden?!” Nichika fumed.

Their group had departed from Lolo Village and traveled from the north to the east. Compared to before, their current journey on the road had taken a rather violent turn. Black beasts akin to huge dogs attacked them in succession.

Several more beasts appeared while they were bickering and ran with their

tails between their legs from her tiny fireballs. The monsters were being recklessly aggressive.

“Before now, I was just keeping the monsters and enemies away with my Witch’s Items.”

“Then let’s use those! I can’t keep this up mentally! Eeek!”

Wolfie body slammed one of the black beasts that had snuck right behind Nichika, knocking it away. He skillfully landed on the ground, worriedly glancing back at her.

“You okay, Nichika?”

“I’ll die. I’m gonna dieeeeeeeee!” She wanted to bury her face in her hands and cry, but she didn’t even have the time for that. Jumping backward to evade an attack aimed at her jugular, she clumsily fell.

All the while, unhelpful commands to action were coming from behind in shouts of, “Fight! Take ‘em down! We’ll be in a real pinch when that dire moment comes, and we need your abilities if you can’t get used to the battlefield!”

“I’d like to hear YOU say that from the frontlines, you JEEEEERK!”

AT last, the wave of monsters left the area, and tranquility returned to the prairie. Emotionally exhausted, Nichika fell back on the grass and kicked her legs in the air.

“I’m so doneeeeeeee!”

“Good job! Good job! You were so cool! I was spellbound watching you!” Wolfie openly praised her without even an ounce of fatigue weighing on his lithe frame.

Envyng his stamina, Nichika pulled out her water bottle. “I don’t think I killed them, but I wonder if I overdid my attacks...”

The prairie’s coarse grass had been cut short as if she had run it over with a lawnmower. Her attacks made it look like a clearing had been specially made just around her.

“I see. So this is what we get when balancing the output. Okay, time to go,” Oswald said heartlessly, closing the booklet he was recording her attack patterns in.

Nichika rolled her eyes and groaned, “Already?! Let’s rest a little longer!”

“Don’t get exhausted over such light work.”

She jumped to her feet at his hypocrisy, objecting, “I don’t want to hear that from the guy who was watching from the safety of a tree behind me the entire time!”

Wolfie plopped his butt down beside her and started fishing through the rucksack on his back with his teeth. “I agree with Nichika! It’s time for lunch, Master!”

“What am I gonna do with you two?” Oswald sighed, giving in to sit down with them. Their lunch for the day consisted of food from the flower festival’s feast the people of Lolo Village had shared with them.

“Anyway...mmph...where are we headed?” Nichika asked through a mouth full of cheese and ham sandwiched between rye bread.

Oswald made an unusual frown as he chewed on an identical sandwich. “I’m thinking of going to Elminage.”

“Elmi—what?”

“I know! I know! Isn’t that the academy you attended, Master?”

Surprised, Nichika put down her sandwich. “Academy? Like a witch academy?”

“It’s not just for witches. They also train wizards. I want to investigate something there.”

“B-But...”

Wasn’t the Witch’s Council after him? Memories of being hunted by the flock of witches when they had visited the first town were still fresh in her mind. Oswald must’ve glimpsed the worry in her expression, because the muscles in his face tightened as he reassured her, “Don’t worry about it. Nobody will know if I disguise myself.”

“Can the problem really be solved that easily...?”

They finished their lunch and resumed walking, doubts about his plan still lingering in Nichika’s mind.

AFTER two hours straight of brisk walking, Nichika started to lag behind. Birds were flying over her head with ease; meanwhile, she was dragging her heavy feet.

“Ugh, if only I could fly too.”

Her master caught wind of the words she had thoughtlessly muttered— and that’s when the tragedy began.

“That’s a good idea.”

“...Pardon?” She looked up from her feet to see what he meant. Oswald pulled a gold card out of thin air and flipped its gaudy surface over to its white back, where he started scribbling something with a pen.

“This should do it.” He pulled the pen away from the card, and it burst into light and disappeared with a light pop. Then Oswald sat down on a nearby rock and waited.

“What did you just do?”

“It’ll be here soon.”

“What will be?” Nichika prodded, when a shrill sound of something slicing through the wind rose from the distance. “Eh?”

The instant she looked up at the sky, something really had arrived right away.

ZOOOM! SKIIIDDDDDDDDDDD!

“Sorry for the wait! Super Express Delivery at your service! Thank you for hiring Witch Express! With a single summon, I will fly to the end of the world delivering whatever your heart desires!” exclaimed a bubbly voice, as a broom scraped across the ground.

Nichika’s eyes widened at the familiar face of the person who hopped off the broom. “Miss Charlotte!”

“Oh? Nichika?”

“Miss Charlotte!” Wolfie ran up to her. “Hi! Hi!”

“Wolfie’s here too...which means...” The witch spun around, sending her golden locks whipping. When she spotted the man in all-black, her face lit up like the flame of a candle. “I knew it! Osy! Oh my gosh! How have you been?”

Ecstatic to see him, she hopped up and down and rattled on at remarkable speed, “I was worried to death! Hasn’t it been quite a while since you set off? Yet, I haven’t heard any rumors about you. So I thought you might’ve gotten caught, or were dying on the roadside somewhere, or tossed into a pigpen for fraud, or forced into a marriage with a hunchback, or a buncha other wild situations I started imagining. But anyway, what a relief it is to see your sadistic mug! I see you found somewhere peaceful to settle down faster than I thought you—”

Charlotte swept her eyes across the endless prairie and cocked her head. “Is this where you’re settling?”

“...And I see you haven’t broken the habit of failing to listen to others first,” Oswald remarked, incredulously folding his arms across his chest.

Ignoring him, Charlotte threw her arms around Nichika and rubbed her cheek against hers. “Well, that stuff doesn’t matter! How have you been, cutie? Are you feeling okay? Not hurt? If you’re ever in need, just let this big sister of yours know!”

“Th-Thanks...it hurts...”

Oswald cut to the chase as Nichika was being crushed to death between Charlotte’s voluptuous boobs. “Deliverywoman, aren’t you going to do your job?”

“What’s your problem? I’m just celebrating our reunion!” Charlotte sulked.

Oswald filled her in about everything that had occurred since they’d last met.

“Heh. So that’s what happened. Nichika is the Spirit Priestess, huh?” She studied Nichika carefully, much to Nichika’s discomfort, but then broke out into a grin. “That sounds neat. You’ve got a mission now, right? I suspected you

were no ordinary girl.”

“So says the woman who tried to turn her into her own apprentice,” Oswald said wryly.

“Falling into another world and becoming a priestess sounds like something right out of a book,” Charlotte mused, dismissing him.

“Ahaha...” Nichika smiled dryly, slightly bothered by their conversation.

“Well anyway,” Oswald concluded, “I plan to have her gather the Great Spirits while I journey.”

“Oh, I see. Knowing you, Osy, you’re planning on abusing that power for your own good.”

“I’ll leave that up to your imagination.”

Though Oswald always made it a point not to trust people, he appeared fairly open and honest with Charlotte. If it wasn’t just Nichika’s imagination, his expression was softer than usual too.

Maybe he trusts her a lot? Sensing something strange about their relationship, she attentively observed their interaction. They weren’t acting like they were just a deliverywoman and her customer.

“...!” With a start, Nichika realized she was overly invested in figuring their relationship out.

Don’t be stupid! I don’t care either way! I’m just worried I’m in the way if they are actually a couple!

“What’s wrong?” Wolfie curiously peered up at the girl vehemently shaking her head.

Oblivious to his apprentice’s internal conflict, Oswald placed an order with Charlotte. “I can’t keep slowing my pace to match this slowpoke. Sell me a single flying broom.”

Nichika looked up with alarm. “A flying broom?! For me?!”

“Ahhh, so that’s what you want!” Indifferent to Nichika’s surprise, Charlotte flashed Oswald a knowing look and rummaged through the pile of bags tied to

her broom. “Okey dokey, wait just a moment. I’m pretty sure I had one stuffed around here somewhere... Huh? That’s a snake, not a broom. Where’d it go?”

Digging out all sorts of weird items from her bags, she tossed them over her shoulder after she confirmed that they weren’t what she was looking for. She was evidently pulling more items out of her bags than what would be possible given normal physics, but Nichika didn’t comment on it since she had grown more accustomed to this world. Humans are adaptive creatures.

Oswald stood outside of the flying merchandise’s trajectory. “At least organize your stuff,” he grumbled.

“Shut up. I usually prepare the goods *after* I receive an order. It’s all your fault for abruptly demanding I sell you something without ordering first! FOUND IT!”

Delighted, Charlotte pulled her head out of the bag along with a single box, which she brought over to Nichika. It was wooden and no bigger than a lunch box. Nichika accepted and gingerly opened it. What she found inside was unexpected.

“A mini broom?”

The miniature broom was crafted with exquisite detail and was about the size of her palm—it definitely wasn’t big enough for a person to ride. *Maybe a cat could ride it?* Nichika took another look and changed her mind. It was hamster size.

“Now, now. Don’t judge a book by its cover, girly. Grab the handle.”

“Okay, grabbed it.”

“Now, throw it!”

She did as told and tossed it in front of her. White smoke erupted from it, and a full-size broom appeared.

“Oooh!” Nichika uttered appreciatively. “Okay, how am I supposed to ride this thing?”

“How? You put it between your legs, silly,” Charlotte replied, with a wide grin.

Honestly, Nichika was embarrassed. Any elementary school kid who enjoyed fantasy novels would probably give it a try at least once while playing make-

believe. But Nichika was close to becoming an adult—she couldn't shake her internal resistance to looking stupid while testing out the broom.

"L-Like this?" She warily wrapped her hands around the shaft and straddled it. It floated into the air with her on it. "Whoa!"

Before she knew it, she was floating several centimeters off the ground. Panicking, she tried to get off by placing her feet on the ground, but that was a bad idea.

"!!!!"

BAM! She took off into the sky like she'd been shot from a cannon.

"OH MY GOSHHHHHH!"

Wind whooshed past her ears, the world spun around in circles, and she completely lost her sense of what was going on. The blue sky, brown ground, and green forest blurred together in a single strange color as she spun out of control. Somehow, Nichika managed to cling to the broom in her panic.

"Oh my, that's a terrifying reaction," Charlotte commented.

"MISS CHARLOTTEEEEE! STOP! STOP MEEEEEEEEEE!"

"You just need to give it the command," Charlotte told her mildly.

"Let me down this instant!" GAH! The broom instantly jerked down, falling headlong toward the ground at breakneck speed. "NOOOOO!"

The broom grazed the top of the ground, skidding on the emergency break. All the strength left Nichika, and she fell off the side of it.

"You suck." Oswald's merciless comment hit her where it hurt.

THIRTY minutes of broom flight practice went by, and Nichika was gradually starting to get the hang of it, but she instantly lost control anytime her mind wandered even a tad. Oswald sighed dramatically at her nth crash landing.

"You're still crashing?"

"This thing is super hard to control! If you want to complain, show me how to do it the right way first!" she shot back, retaliating against his complaints.

But for some reason, Oswald turned red. “Stupid! There’s no way I could do something so embarrassing!”

“Huh?”

What’s so embarrassing about it?

Charlotte grinned evilly behind the confused Nichika. “Osy is embarrassed to fly.”

“Char, don’t teach her bad things.”

“What do you mean? Oh, wait, are you talking about how you said only women can use brooms?”

Nichika thought back to the conversation they’d had when she first met Charlotte. *“It’s conventional wisdom that male witches can’t fly,”* is what Oswald had told her at the time, but could male witches maybe fly after all?

“You see, wind mana is infamous for having a thing for girls,” Wolfie explained innocently, further adding to the crease in Oswald’s brow. “So they say the more attractive and girly the person, the better they can fly.”

“Wait, so—”

Charlotte cracked up and pointed a quivering finger at Oswald, laughing between her words, “Male witches who can fly have to be feminine!”

Oswald was certainly beautiful. He’d probably be an unparalleled beauty if dressed as a woman. But it appeared that cross-dressing was considered an embarrassing thing in this world.

“Let me get this straight. If Oswald wants to fly, he has to wear a skirt...?”

“Stop it! You’re making me sick!” Scowling, he chased Nichika back into the sky. “Get back to your practice!”

ANOTHER thirty minutes of flying practice passed. Finally getting the knack of it, Nichika softly landed at Charlotte’s side.



“Riding sitting sideways is a lot more stable for me.”

“True. That method is probably best for you, Nichika.” Charlotte tugged her witch’s hat back in place and patted Nichika on the shoulder, flashing her a big smile. “I officially declare your training as over! You did such a good job.”

“Thank you so much for teaching me!”

“Sorry for making you boys wait. She’s all good to go,” Charlotte called.

Her voice brought Oswald and Wolfie back from dreamland. Rubbing at his sleepy eyes, Oswald taunted, “Did you improve that unsightly flying of yours so we don’t have to see your panties anymore?”

“Don’t look!”

“Don’t flaunt them.”

Watching the master and apprentice bicker reminded Charlotte of her other items. “Speaking of panties...that reminds me, here’s some fresh underwear for you, Nichika.”

“Yes! You’re a lifesaver! I’ve been hoping to get a few more pairs.”

Nichika’s voice trailed off, the underwear reminding her of something else personal. Red coloring her face, she tugged on Charlotte’s sleeve and led her away from the boys.

“Hm? What’s the matter, cutie? Want to talk about something the men shouldn’t be a part of?”

“There’s something I wanted to ask your advice on...um...” Nichika hesitated, then, with her expression grim, she confided, “My period hasn’t come.”

Charlotte stared blankly back at her. Then her expression rapidly shifted into an ever-widening grin. “Oh! Oh! Oh! I know what this means!”

“What? Wait!” Guessing what conclusion Charlotte had come to, Nichika rushed to correct her. “I-It’s not what you’re thinking! It’s not because of the normal reasons they stop! I have no idea why it’s not coming.”

“Aw, shucks. It’s not because of Osy? Too bad.”

Does that mean he hasn’t laid his hands on her yet? Charlotte blinked in

surprise. *Does he actually care for her a lot? That man, who cares about no one?*

“That’s surprising...” she muttered, more in response to her own thoughts than to Nichika.

“It’s really not that reason! It’s been late for about a week now. I’ve always been right on schedule with it, so it’s really got me worried.”

Charlotte hummed thoughtfully and smiled to comfort her. “I’m sure it’s just from the stress of coming to this world. It’ll come eventually, whether you want it to or not. Don’t let it bother you.”

“You think it will?”

“If it bothers you so much, you could have Osy whip you up something to stop ovulating—”

“Please drop that sort of talk!”

Charlotte cackled, but prepared the necessary supplies regardless. From the looks of the items Nichika received, women in this world attached a cloth sanitary pad to a garter belt that they would wear during their period.

“It’s going to take a while before I get used to this thing...” she murmured, holding it up with a look of disgust.

“What did you use in your world, Nichika?”

“Disposable pads made of plastic and cotton, with sticky tape on the backside. You remove a paper to reveal the sticky side and just stick it to your underwear like that. Then when you’re done, you peel it off and throw it away,” Nichika informed her. The pads she normally used on Earth were much more convenient.

Charlotte appeared extremely impressed. “Disposable! That’s a revolutionary design! I’m going to try my hand at making something like that next! You *must* try out prototypes when I finish them, ‘kay?!”

“Sure,” Nichika agreed.

The witches of this world went to work whenever it came to creating something that interested them. Greed and passion fueled their actions.

I envy them. I wish I could get that passionate about something.

“Oh yeah,” Nichika blurted, “How should I pay you for the broom and all the things you’ve—”

“Oh, right. I forgot about that. I don’t really mind because it was all stuff I had in stock anyway, but...”

They walked back over to Oswald and Wolfie to discuss the payment. Charlotte put her finger to her chin in thought, then lifted the lantern hanging from the tip of her broom.

“In that case, can you imbue this lantern with fire magic?”

“Is that all you want?”

“I’m terrible at fire magic, no matter what I try. The fire I imbue it with won’t even last through the night, and I get stuck recasting it midflight.”

“Well, if that’s good enough for you, I don’t mind doing it,” Nichika replied and concentrated on the lantern sitting on the ground as she closed her eyes. When her eyes snapped open, she shot the energy surging in her hands into its open lid. ***“O flames, light the night! FIRE!”***

Flames leaped from her hands, striking the lantern dead center. Charlotte kicked the lid shut and stared in awe of the bright light shining within.

“*Wowee!* This looks like it’ll last for ages! Maybe it’ll turn out to be semipermanent!”

“Ehehe. You think so?”

“Now *that’s* what I’d expect of the Spirit Priestess! For this, I’ll give you a bonus item!” Charlotte tugged a belt out of her bottomless bags. “If you hang your broom and magic orb from this, you’ll be able to pull them out right away without losing them.”

“Is it really okay for me to have this too?”

“Don’t mention it! This is nothing in comparison to receiving a lantern enchanted by the Spirit Priestess!”

Nichika had almost lost her magic orb more times than she’d like to count, so

she was deeply grateful to receive the magic belt. Gaining one more piece of handy equipment brought a smile to her face.

“Char,” Oswald started.

“Hi, Osy. What can I do for you?”

“Time for you to do business with me. Can you make fake acceptance letters to Elminage?”

What outrageous things is this guy asking for now with that straight face? Nichika slapped a hand to her forehead, shaking her head at her master.

“Now that’s nostalgic! We did it before too—you know, when we attended there.”

“You did?” Nichika doubted her ears, but Charlotte didn’t look the least bit guilty about it.

Seriously, what did these two do together in the past? Better not ask. Don’t ask. I see nothing! I hear nothing! I know nothing of their crimes! She desperately tried to convince herself, while the conversation quickly progressed without her.

“What do you want for the class? Wizardry? Witchery?”

“Combined course would be best. Getting too close to the Witchery Department will give us away.”

“Hmm. I hope I can prepare good papers for you, but it’ll probably take a while. You good with that?”

“As long as you have them ready by the time we arrive.”

“Easier said than done.” Charlotte chewed the tip of her nail as she stressed over whether she could pull it off in time, when suddenly the front of her dress flashed. “Oh, somebody’s summoned me for a delivery.” She procured a card just like the one Oswald had written on from between her breasts. “Let’s see, if I remember right, this handwriting belongs to…” Her face lit up as she read it. “*Oh, could it be?!?*”

“What is it?” Oswald asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Can you wait just a tad? I’ll be back in a flash! I might be able to bring you back some amazingly awesome news!” She nimbly straddled her broom and shot off into the distant skies as if catapulted from the ground.

“I wonder what came up,” Nichika marveled.

“Beats me.”

After they watched Charlotte fly off, Nichika faced Oswald and asked out of curiosity, “Why are you readmitting to that school if you’ve already graduated once?”

“Why’re you asking such a dumb question?”

“Well, *excuse me* for being dumb.”

Turning his icy blue eyes on her, he pulled a face as if what he was going to say was self-evident. “You’re going to attend, obviously.”

“*Whaaaaaat?!?*”

Yet again, things were proceeding without her consent.

Wolfie started wagging his tail at her feet. “Nichika’s gonna attend school? Lucky!”

“I’m not lucky at all!”

“Don’t be a spoilsport. You attending school is the most natural way for us to infiltrate the academy without getting detected.”

“Listen here, you!” Nichika was about to level him with her complaints, but Charlotte returned at that moment with the full force of a whirlwind.

“Big news!” she squealed, “We’ve got seriously perfect timing! I got my hands on the admittance papers!”

“That was fast!” Nichika blurted.

Before Nichika could complain that she hadn’t even decided whether she wanted to attend or not, Charlotte hopped right into reporting how she’d gotten the papers. “The job summons I just got was from a regular client who’s a rich young lady from an important family. She said she’d just narrowly escaped from being forced to attend Elminage. So she ordered a buncha

equipment for her journey. I wonder what use she has for that collar though...”

“And? Did you receive her admittance papers in return for that equipment?”

“Bingo! Ta-da!” Charlotte proudly held up a golden envelope sealed with red wax. “She said she had no use for it. Boy, oh boy! Aren’t we lucky!”

“Basically, you’re telling me to take that rich young lady’s place...?” Nichika asked hesitantly.

“Yay! You’ll be young mistress Nichika! Young Mistress Nichika!” Wolfie cheered childishly.

Nichika held her head in her hands. “There’s no way I can do that!”

“Pft,” Oswald snorted, “Remember to act like a lady. If you can even pull that off.”

Charlotte flashed a wicked grin at Oswald. In a teasing voice, she said, “You too, Osy.”

“Excuse me?”

“These are academy and dorm admittance papers, but they are registered for two people—the young mistress and her attending butler. So, you’ll become Nichika’s butler by default.”

Nichika and Oswald awkwardly jerked their necks and exchanged looks. There were no words capable of expressing how they felt.

Muscles tight in his face, Oswald exhaled once and tossed out his pride. “Please forgive my insolence in requesting that you allow me to serve you, but I do hope you will have me, my dear lady.” He elegantly bowed, magnificently donning a butler’s persona.

Behind that fake smile, he was one-hundred percent simmering with anger. Imagining the horrors of her upcoming school life, Nichika was rooted to the ground until Oswald dragged her away kicking and screaming.

VOLUME 1 END

Afterword

HELLO, everyone overseas! I'm the author who wrote this story, Roka Sayuki. I've been graciously granted space to speak with you, so I've penned this afterword as a final note to the readers.

First of all, thank you very much for purchasing this novel! I doubt there is anyone eccentric enough—pardon me, I mean with odd tastes who will start reading from the afterword, but from this point on there will be slight spoilers about the main story, so beware!

Almost every story I write is about a main character that gets pulled into another world, but to tell you truth, I've actually never even taken a flight overseas. I'm amazed that my work has flown overseas before I've even had the chance to leave the Island Nation of Japan! Words are so lucky because they don't need a passport to travel to distant lands.

Though, on that note, I've enjoyed teen fiction from other countries since I was a child, so as strange as it sounds, I feel very close to those foreign countries. *The Neverending Story*, *Harry Potter*, *Cirque Du Freak*, *The Chronicles Of Narnia*, and *The Tara Duncan Series* are just a few of my favorite works of literature from abroad.

Isn't it wonderful to be able to read a book? You can travel anywhere in this world or another without leaving your couch; you can become the hero or the villain and experience someone else's dreams.

I never thought my story would be the one to bring people into new worlds. Please allow me to take this space to thank everyone starting with the translator Charis Messier, all the staff at Cross Infinite World, the illustrator Itaru, and to my many fans in Japan who encouraged me to finish the *Eccentric Master Series*. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Last, but not least, Nichika's story still has a long ways to go! Here's a preview of what's to come!

Nichika disguises herself as a rich young lady and attends the Magic Academy

in order to infiltrate their ranks and investigate who attacked her in Cherry Blossom Kingdom. As for Oswald, he completely enters Butler Mode, treating her so kindly his actions up till this point seem like a lie! And their relationship suddenly gets super intimate?! (Mr. and Mrs. Editor, how far can we take this story without crossing the rating line?!)

To shake things up even more, a certain man joins their ranks, taking the story toward a potential love triangle! Then there's a fake Spirit Priestess who shows up and wreaks havoc. Nichika takes part in flying competitions, and many other exciting adventures await you in the next volume!

I hope we can meet again at the end of volume 2!



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