

A note on the visual novel format:

Clearly, translating a visual novel is very different from translating a plain old novel. There's a lot more things to consider: scene transitions and sound effects and how characters look in any given scene, to name a few. The sequential nature of it actually seems really close to comic books to me. Suffice it to say, there was a lot more than the written word to consider when translating, and every aspect of the presentation mattered.

Which is why you'll see a lot of border lines in the text below. Each border line represents the end of one "page" and the beginning of a new one. If you're playing the game, the symbol of a book with flipping pages will also signal this. In my translation, there will be a border line with every appearance of this symbol, nowhere else.

Believe you me, I'd rather have the text right in the game as well, but since no one has, to my knowledge, cracked this game, we'll have to work with what we have. Hopefully, this particular conundrum will have been solved by April, but until then, this'll have to do. Anyone is, of course, free to plug this text on any patch they may have been able to construct and make the game work with. All I ask is proper credit.

Now on with the show!

It was said,

There was a mansion that rested on top of a hill, and within it there lived two witches.

1-5

Witch on the Holy Night

Trial

Outdoors, everything was toned with the lazy grays of afternoon. Inside the mansion, there was little difference. The lack of electric lighting in the entrance hall might have been some personal touch of the architect's. Yet the ceiling, which reached high up to the second floor, had a magnificent sunroof built into it, looking over the whole room. The only illumination you could find was sunlight at day, and moonlight by night.

In rainy days, the hall is often bathed in predawn gloom, and moonless nights mean a cold, black starred darkness where everything seems to have stopped.

Aoko was sorely tempted to just plop down and forget everything in the drawing room on the east wing, but she decided she needed to change her clothes and calm herself down a bit, so she made her way to the staircase. The staircase hugged the wall, ending at the second floor. The third floor was the attic, and to reach it you would have had to make your way to a separate room behind the entrance hall, where a different staircase awaited. Aoko, however, had not laid a foot in that attic for nigh on two years now.

The Kuonji estate is separated into an east and a west wing. The two rooms that have been parceled out for Aoko's use are in the east wing. The door to the room itself looks like the kind of thing you'd find interesting in old picture books. And once you open it, you find a sort of storage room, which it had been for five years; probably the reason why the attic sat unused for so long.

Aoko's room sat alongside the east wing's main upper corridor. When she first lodged here and had her pick of rooms, she ended up choosing a room that was no larger than average. She picked it not out of some sense of reservation, but simply due to the fact that a smaller room would be easier to clean. In the room was a largish bed, Aoko's beloved mahogany desk, a wardrobe for coats and clothing, and two, nine-row bookcases.

Those were what she brought with her from her parents' place, and if you had to abbreviate Aoko Aozaki's sixteen years of life, it's likely you would start with those things. This room, and the other room right next to this one, completed the picture.

"Oh, right! I have to check if Alice's watchtower isn't broken yet!"

And so she made her way to the other room, to make sure the work that she had stayed up all night for bore some fruit.

Though separated from her room by only one wall, the study was nevertheless a completely different affair. Here was her different life, one she had sustained for a little less than a year now. This room was not for the girl that she had been, but the one she was destined to become. It was her sanctum, a world all her own. But for now...

"Uh-oh. Forget about destroyed, it's just gone without a trace. Guess it really is too early for me to be going off with my own style. Laugh now, if you want to, sir robin." She addressed this to her small and quite unconcerned companion beside her, which promptly replies by taking flight around the room. Aoko didn't mind, though. She was something of a wild spirit. Though her talent was never so great, she poured every effort into anything she did, and she never looked on failure as something to be feared, but an opportunity to face her next attempt hoping for the best.

After changing out of her school uniform into something she felt more at home with, she returned to first floor.

After descending the stairs, she made her way to the east wing, opening the door that led to the main lower corridor. Before her stood a long hallway, dark as any underground chamber. Unlike the entrance hall, this place didn't have the benefit of natural lighting, so lights were placed and spaced throughout the length of the corridor. With the flick of a switch, the corridor was flooded with light. Satisfied, Aoko proceeded through the door nearest her.

"Man, I don't even wanna imagine a life without electricity." The drawing room was furnished like a room in some old chateau: The impressively yet subtly patterned wall, the grand leather couches, the high-class Persian carpets. And yet, as if totally oblivious to the atmosphere of the entire thing, enshrined as the center of attention was a 30-inch television. Slowly, Aoko's more modern ideas of home improvement were starting to take root.

The television sat like a naked king in all his glory, attended to dutifully by its servants, the two couches, at its flanks. When Aoko first moved in, she had insisted on the absolute necessity of the device. The mistress of the house, with whom Aoko had had more than a few initial arguments, had shown an obvious dislike of the television at first, but now they shared some mutual understanding.

"Well, it's not like my family was the pinnacle of modern thinking either," Aoko mutters to herself. Just being home has made Aoko's mood take a turn for the better, so she makes her way over to the kitchen to make herself some tea. Adjacent to the drawing room, the kitchen is kitted out with all the accessories. Aoko gets some water boiling and readies the teapot and cup, and before long has made a perfectly good brew of black tea.

"Ahhhh," Aoko exhaled, satisfied to sink into the couch.

She took the teacup to her lip, sipping once, then twice.

She listened closely to the rhythmic ticking of the clock, considering what she could do in the remaining hours of the afternoon. A third sip. The couch was so treacherously soft, enough to feel that you would want to drown your entirety in it.

Aoko's eyes flickered and blinked, but she quickly raised herself from the cushions.

Surely this was no dream. But without her noticing, a girl sat on the couch before her.

Unfazed, Aoko put a finger around her teacup handle. Strangely enough, the warmth of the tea she had just been sipping from was now nowhere to be found.

"I fell asleep, didn't I?" asked Aoko to the girl across the coffee table from her.

"I'm afraid so," replied the girl without looking at her, her voice seemingly unconcerned.

Had the girl not spoken, she could have been mistaken for a beautiful, well-crafted doll. She sits on the couch almost unmoving, reading an old book. The skin on the hands that hold the book seem to never have tasted the sun, pure and white as snow. Everything about her seems used to gloom, an almost inhuman aura that is barely perceptible.

Her hair is black, deeper than Aoko's, and her cold colored eyes, drifting gently from left to right, scan the pages of the book. Her dress, similar in appearance to a nun's black habit, is the uniform of the exclusive ladies' school she goes to. The color suits her well; too well to be any good for her, if you'd asked Aoko.

She exuded an illustrative grace, almost as if she'd been born with her sense of unreality. She kept her gaze downwards, and the pale exposed neck looked enchanting, even to a girl like Aoko. She is Alice Kuonji, a girl of an age with Aoko, and her fellow occupier of the house, of which they are the only two.

"How long was I out?" Aoko asked.

"An hour, more or less. I do hope you know that you'll catch a cold sleeping here."

Her voice made her sound disinterested, but this was old hat to Aoko, who paid it no mind. After giving the wall clock a glance, Aoko found the hour hand hovering just above 7pm, which meant that she had been asleep almost two hours. It didn't surprise her, though. Today had been one of those days. An all-nighter effort followed up by a difficult day is liable to make anyone tired enough to collapse on a couch.

"You know, you could have at least tried waking me up. I finally got a cup of tea and now it's gone cold on me."

"It was already cold when I came in here."

"Well, I knew that. I just thought you could've said something while I was asleep."

With nothing to be done about it, Aoko downs the cold tea in a single swig. With the limited heating of the Kuonji estate, even the rather plain temperature of the tea was enough to wake Aoko to her senses.

"Not worthy of all the Fortnum & Mason stuff in here, but oh well."

"It's a bit late, but welcome back, Alice. Seems without you around, I can't even get a few hours of peace and quiet. Someone up there really has it in for me. Might not be *too* early to think about praying to a shrine, now that I think about it." Aoko sighed, already feeling that while she was in for a penny of defeat, she might as well go for a pound.

"Alright, what went wrong this time?" inquired Alice, without lifting her glance.

Spending two years together under the same roof has a tendency to make you attenuated to the other person's ticks. This was no different. Aoko has her own hidden implications, while Alice picks up on them in her own way, and then something resembling a cross-examination starts. As if on cue, Aoko began her reply.

“Wait, wait, wait. First, I’ve got to apologize. Remember what I was working on all night last night? Well, it’s a complete bust now. At first, I noticed that it was seriously heating up and kept getting busted, so I loosened it up some two or three wires.” Aoko recounted the story with an air of humor almost like it was someone else’s accident.

“And?”

“Right, so then this morning the school called up and said I needed to be there on the double. Then when I got there, I found out that the job of showing around the new transfer student suddenly became my business. Faster than I could have complained, I’d already lost my entire day. And whaddya know, when I came back, the entire thing had just up and disappeared on me...you’re not mad at me, are you, Alice?”

“Not really, no. If I became angry every single time you caused damage to my property, it’d be a lifetime of arguments, wouldn’t it? There will always be replacements, so all you need do is start over. As a matter of fact, I’m rather expecting *you* to be angry, after your day.”

Aoko made an annoyed sound. Alice was unusually keen today. She knew that it was these times when Aoko made a show of composure while hiding resentment inside her. She tried her best to pay the riposte no mind.

“Well, I suppose. This new transfer student is the strangest guy. Apparently, he’d lived way up in the boonies, and it’s already obvious from the way he talks that he’s not gonna fit in easily. I mean, really. They say the mountains are an entirely other world, but this guy is living, breathing proof, Alice.”

Alice looks up at the sound of her name. But Aoko, not truly expecting any show of sympathetic response from Alice, continues to elaborate.

“I knew he’d be trouble the moment I laid my eyes on him, but it was when I took him to a classroom that I got the real kicker. I mean, he *actually* thought that every classroom was supposed to be used for a one-on-one between teacher and student. I guess that could happen, but it’s not like it’s a regular thing. But we aren’t done!

“So then I explained to him, in as much patience and brevity as I could pull, what classrooms actually are. Imagine what he said after that. ‘So Aozaki, what’re the other classrooms for?’ That’s what he said! I mean, what other kinds of classrooms are there?!”

“So here we have this guy who probably couldn’t figure out which end to use a knife with if you didn’t tell him. I don’t know if he’s just not used to asking questions or he has some deficiency in his imagination. Well, I guess he did get what I was trying to explain the first time around, so he’s can’t be *that* dumb.”

“While this is amusing, it *is* fairly rare that you’d be so enraptured in criticizing someone. It’s no wonder you pay him a great amount of attention, if he’s as hopeless as you say he is.”

“Oh, there’s not a fiber in my body that cares about him, don’t get me wrong. I’m just worried that he might get into some serious misunderstandings tomorrow.”

She let it be left unsaid that her worry mostly stemmed from the very real chance that whatever mess the guy stirred up, she would be the likely candidate to clean it up.

At least, that’s what she thought. Otherwise, apart from his ruining of Aoko’s day, there would be nothing truly about him to worry for.

“Anyway, his weirdness is none of my business,” Aoko states with finality. “Actually, he might be more suited to you Alice.”

“Mmm, the mountains *are* a rather scenic otherworld, aren’t they?” She shared a short yet meaningful glance with Aoko.

Though no words passed between them, it was clear what both of them were saying. *But he would have to get a look at me before we could ever think of talking*, said Alice’s eyes. *There’s the rub, isn’t it?* Aoko’s glance responded in kind.

“So, Alice, mind telling me what it is you’ve been reading for a while now?”

“A book on the evolution of spirits. However, this one is a very clear fakery of the Spiritual Diary.”

“What, Swedenborg now? Why do you even need to read that then?”

“The original is an exercise in tedium. But reading it this way almost highlights the flaws and merits of the man in ways the original could never have done. It’s almost like a well-written adventure novel. However, the handwriting seems to be your grandfather’s.”

“This one’s his too, huh? Always seemed to have a hand in every sort of book. I’ll miss him.” Aoko’s voice became just that little bit smaller at the mention of her grandfather.

“I could have sworn he sent you correspondence this summer—”

“Can it. He’s dead, alright?”

At that, both grew silent. Aoko leaned her back into the couch without another thought, sighing as she did so. The soft cushion molded itself to her back, and soon enough she was completely lying down on the thing.

“I’d wanted to talk to you about...” Alice trailed off, though her eyes remained on Aoko, sprawled sideways all over the black couch, still as a dead body.

As for Aoko, talking and thinking were about the last things she wanted to do. But she could practically feel Alice’s eyes judging her. And the more she thinks about it, the more she tries to will the events of the day to just go away and lose themselves in her mind.

Aoko knew that if she just ignored Alice’s silent stare, their conversation could have ended here. They would have stood up, tried their best to ignore what happened today, and just wait for tomorrow. But Aoko Aozaki was never one to ignore the problem.

“Alright, what’s wrong?” Aoko asked, not bothering to get up.

“It must sting a little that you failed today.”

“Which is why I’ll just go back to square one. I told you I’m going to study harder when I get older, okay?”

“Alright. Let’s leave it at that.” Alice’s cold voiced reply tempts Aoko to grind her teeth.

Aoko knew what she wanted to say. They’d been over this a dozen times before. It was about the double life they led. They were simple high school students in the public eye, but here, in this house, they were different. Aoko said that the modern world made plenty of good ways for them to hide in plain sight, but Alice had told her more than once that this was a half-hearted way of going about it. Her silence said it all.

“You want me to decide once and for all, and soon, don’t you?” Aoko ventured her guess. Alice had often asked Aoko to weigh her life here and her life as a student, and judge what mattered more to her. Aoko often found the scales tipped to the latter. But Aoko knew that today’s failure in her task, a small misstep in the scheme of things, nevertheless served as a symbol to Alice of her friend’s lack of conviction.

“I don’t think I have to remind you that it’s my decision to make. Mine. You don’t have any say in it.”

When she had reached a certain age, it was revealed to Aoko that there would be a time when she would have to make a decision. That was more than a year and a half ago. And since then, her morals and her conscience have been continuously challenged, and her patience had just about run its course.

Aoko stood up suddenly and vigorously, and in front of her was Alice, wordlessly observing her, though her face told her all she needed to know.

“Fine, Alice. Sometime next week, I’ll have my decision. Is that fine with you?”

“As long as it’s fine with you.”

Aoko shook her head, feeling like she’d heard some variation on the very same circular logic just a few hours ago. How could that startlingly silly man still haunt Aoko even at home?

“Then you get everything ready, since I’m still hopeless at this.”

“We’re doing in this in the park, as always?”

“The ley lines there are perfect. Oh, but wait, what about the forest? Doesn’t that need to be taken care of?”

“There will be time for that soon enough. I’ll inform you immediately if there’s any change in the situation in the forest.”

Sensing an end to the discussion, Alice returned her attention to the book resting on her lap. Their important matters having been concluded, they return now to being two individuals who seem, for all purposes, to get on with each other. Business as usual.

Aoko reached for the remote control of the television and turned it on. Alice continued to read, but found her eyes wandering toward the dull variety show on the television.

“Oh—” came the sound from Alice’s mouth, suddenly cut off. She had a hand on her chin, adopting the classic expression of someone who had something to say, but had almost immediately realized how stupid it would be to say it, and thus elected instead to keep their mouth shut.

Aoko knew that there were these rare times when she did this, when Alice’s own restraint was just a hair too late to prevent anyone from noticing that she was about to think something out loud. As a matter of fact, she knew Alice used to say “Er—” before. It seemed “Oh—” was her new noise. Aoko looked over at her poor friend.

“Um, what’s up?” Aoko asked as she lowered the volume of the television. Her vibrant, cat-like eyes scanned Alice, and it almost made her look like she was about to pull a prank.

“It’s of no importance, really...but...”

“But?” Aoko was starting to get nervous.

Alice saw it fit to hide her embarrassment by suddenly taking an intense interest in the floor, but it was clear well before that point that she was at a loss on what to say. These moments of irritation that

sometimes plague Alice were the only times that she showed any warmth or consideration. If her father had been able to see her this way, he would have probably nodded in approval, thinking that the name she gave her daughter had come to fit her well.

“I came home today and saw something strange. I had hoped to talk to someone about it but...”

Aoko nodded, pressing for her to continue.

“It is quite a trifle, almost meaningless, really. Yet the more I think about it, the less motive I can think for someone to perform such a thing. Aoko, would you know a reason for a cat the size of a man to go about delivering meals?”

Within an instant upon hearing her question, Aoko thought that this was another one of Alice’s poor attempts at humor. Aoko had always been very weak at recognizing when Alice was trying to tell a joke or being dead serious. This seemed to be the latter. Could she possibly be creatively exaggerating? No. It seemed she was really talking about something she actually saw.

“Wait a second. There’s about two completely undigestable lines in that last sentence of yours. Let’s try to tackle this one systematically, okay?”

“That would be best. I had thought at first that it must be some sort of queer device. But I could not think of a reason for why it looked the way it did. My next thought was that it was a finely crafted costume of a cat, out here to advertise the latest take-out menus, or something similar. But could it really be that simple?”

“I’d think really hard if there’s any sane person who’d actually do that before I start to think about the simplicity of the entire thing. But that’s just me.” In response to this, Alice nods slightly.

“Still, if the world has room for things as strange as us two, or even recently surrendering war veterans who live in the mountains, then I’m sure it has room for weirdos of every stripe. If it was me that saw the thing though, I’d probably try to ask it what it was doing.” At this, Alice averted her eyes a bit.

“Hmm, take-out cats wandering in the darkening streets of the Misaki Hill’s residential quarters? Get a background of a sunset in there and it starts to sound like urban fantasy, doesn’t it? Anyway, how’re we handling dinner? Since we’ve already on the subject, why don’t we go for take-out?”

Aoko has made no secret of her love of take-out, and her delight of it pours out of every expectant word of that last sentence. In this mansion, there are no arranged turns to cook dinner, no weekly duties. It depends solely on either occupant’s inclination to cook, at which point the individual so inclined will, with a certainty, cook enough for two. They have been doing this for so long that it has become a system. An unreliable system that has led, on one occasion, to the lack of dinner for a straight week, but a system that both have nevertheless found to be the most convenient.

Whether it stems from the time it takes to cook, or a true liking of take-out food, neither can truly say. A situation like tonight’s where ordering out becomes the only solution isn’t rare at all for them. And because of this, the restaurants and food joints of downtown Misaki have this estate’s address on a special service list. Often the pair decide to order in late hours, likely past eight in the evening, where the delivery then has to journey all the way to the top of the hill. Obviously, this causes the restaurants no short amount of misery.

“A hair before 8:00, so I think we can still make it. You think Kongetsu is fine? I haven’t revisited their udon with eggs for a while now, after all,” said Aoko as she pulled out all manner of fast food pamphlets, laying them down on the coffee table like she was playing poker with them. Her eyes darted over pictures of food and their prices, scanning them as studiously as she would read documents in her position as student council president, except that she looked immensely more pleased with herself.

Alice couldn’t bear to look at Aoko’s smile growing larger every other second, yet with little disinclination, she said something without eyeing her friend straight.

“I’m so sorry, Aoko, but I’ve already eaten dinner.”

At those words, Aoko froze. There was at least a two-meal minimum for delivery in any given restaurant, which meant that if Alice wasn’t going to get any food, then she wasn’t getting any either. Aoko wanted to call anyway, to try her luck, but knew that it wasn’t going to work. And for those brief seconds of realization, she couldn’t think of more chilling a thought.

(As an aside, the food joints have recently begun to implement a simple countermeasure against their notorious pair of customers on the hill. That is, to make the minimum order on delivery amount to three meals. The tactic is being adopted in many stores now, though Aoko and Alice are as yet ignorant of this evil conspiratorial plot.)

“You...you traitor! So that’s why you were so late coming home! You don’t have any afterschool clubs, and even if I factor in the walk and the bus you take from school, it only takes you twenty minutes to go from there to here. Augh, why didn’t I notice it before?” In despair, Aoko has likely forgotten that she had even failed to notice that she had fallen asleep earlier, which puts her in a very bad position to even begin to think about her friend’s pre-emptive dinner plans.

“I won’t forget this Alice. We had an agreement that if one of us ate out alone, we’d bring home a share for the other. You *knew* that. I mean, come on, the last time I ate out I brought you home some, didn’t I?”

It’s difficult to tell how much truth there is in Aoko’s outrage, but she does have every reason to be so indignant. Having been woken up this morning by a phone call from school calling her to service, she somehow hadn’t found the time to eat or drink the entire day, save for that cup of tea. It’s positively a miracle that her stomach hasn’t complained yet, though it really was entirely her fault for failing to eat anything. Still, that was all out of her head. The only thing she was thinking was Alice’s dinner countermeasure and how best she could chew her out for it. But...

“By ‘last time’ I am assuming that you refer to the time when you came from downtown, ate sushi, and yet cheated and only brought me home some pedestrian convenience store food, correct?”

Uh oh.

“Th—that’s true, but it’s better than bringing home nothing, right?!”

“I’m sorry. I suppose the truth must, at times, remain unsaid.”

The weight of Alice's eyes sent a chill down Aoko's spine.

Though Aoko hadn't intentionally sideswiped Alice with a lesser convenience store meal, it *is* true that Aoko, who historically found it hard to resist anything new, especially a new conveyor belt sushi store which had only opened quite recently. In the elaborate investigation of such a rare event, Aoko fell to temptation. The truth can be the roots of such great sin.

"Alright, fine. We got each other. If settling the score was what you wanted, then you got it."

Alice replied only with a sly twitch of the eye, betraying no denial of Aoko's statement. That it betrayed no agreement as well only makes her all the more frightening.

"I *knew* this wasn't my day. Oh well, guess I'll just have to go to the kitchen and brush up my cooking," said Aoko to no one in particular. "Oh, forgot to ask you, Alice. Where did you grab dinner anyway?"

Alice's hand, which had been in the process of flipping a page in her book, stops abruptly.

Up to this point, Alice had been talking to Aoko while trying to read her book. But, as if sensing that enough had been read, she set her book shut and held it in her hand as she wordlessly stood up and made her way across the drawing room to the door. She looked back over her shoulder just as she reached the door to open it.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Well, I do now, now that you've built it up."

Somehow, the brevity of Alice's question left Aoko feeling bad.

Then Alice, as if it were the most trivial thing in the world, said, "A walking cat gave it to me." And with that vague answer, she made good her exit from the room.

7-ex

Witch on the Holy Night

Trial

The night can lead to strange things in this house.

Everything looked as if it were veiled by a thin fog, and everywhere Sōjūrō went, the doors looked the same, only shifting in number; here only a sparing few, there a fair number.

For one moment, it almost seemed to him that the shadow of small pigs played across the floors, tending to the carpets. Then the sound of what he was sure was the fluttering of birds wings came to him from the sunroom, and just as quickly disappeared. His head turned towards the source of the distant noise.

“What on earth...?” Sōjūrō usually only let noises slip past him unnoticed, but even that faint flutter couldn’t be ignored.

At least to Sōjūrō’s estimation, the sound seemed to indicate far more than just one or two birds. It sounded like there was an entire flight of them, hammering on the sunroom windows until they were through. Could it be real? With no time to think, he grabbed the dustpan and the broom and made a beeline straight for the sunroom. Whether it was an inborn willpower, or the instinct of self-defense, he didn’t know. The entire thing suddenly made him remember today’s class.

“You boys and girls should put an effort into tidying up your rooms. It seems some studies have been published that say that people’s tendency for disorder is affected by their environment. It’s how towns can have otherwise very little crime early on, but disorder grows once they allow even one ruin of a house to remain for a length of time. The truth is we’ve deceived ourselves that when we don’t care about how our environment looks, it does nothing. But that’s nothing but an artifice of the economic boom. So don’t start stealing bicycles and breaking windows in the neighborhood. It’ll just add hours to my job.”

Already, school violence had become some kind of a rite of passage for certain kids these days.

“Broken windows, broken spirits,” Sōjūrō muttered, ruminating on the thought of the broken windows theory. It can’t be allowed to be true in this house too.

Yet, at least to his perspective, his fellow inhabitants of the mansion were already plenty fearsome themselves. That being said, he couldn’t allow it to get any worse, for their sake as much for his. Some nasty rumors might make their way to school again, and it would sully their great student council president’s so far sterling reputation. Of course, protecting his own hide was also as good a reason as any.

He’d made his way to the sunroom, ostensibly to continue his task to tidy up the place, but...

“Huh?”

Clearly, no bird, nor even the shadow of one, or their cry, could be seen or heard.

“Oh.”

“_____”

There, sitting at the table that looked out over the inner garden and enjoying their tea for the night, were Aoko Aozaki and Alice Kuonji. What Sōjūrō’s head sonar had translated as an entire flight of eighteen or so birds was nowhere to be found.

“Um, did any birds or something come in here, by any chance?”

“Hmm, Alice, did you see any?”

“If there were I failed to notice them.”

“There you have it. Guess your birds are gone.”

Even Sōjūrō could tell they weren't telling him something.

“That's impossible.”

Sōjūrō was confident he didn't just imagine those noises. It just doesn't work that way. He crossed the room toward the window with just a shade more annoyance in his step than was suitable. He scrunched his eyes, peering through the glass to the garden outside. No bird, and not even the shadow of a feather either.

“So, chicken hot pot for dinner?”

Sōjūrō, still intent on finding his missing fowl, was only vaguely thinking about what Aoko suggested.

“Sorry, no. My part-time today was with a fish merchant. I could bring home some sardines if you like.”

“Ugh, sardines. I *hate* sardines. I guess you're going to make something homely out of it, like a pie or something. I already hate it by association.”

Aoko's uncanny ability to work herself up over little things still amused Sōjūrō. He left the window side, and made to go out of the sunroom, but as ever, even though he never saw it, he felt Alice's indefinable glare creeping up along his back. Sōjūrō sighed.

“What is it, Ali—” Sōjūrō started to ask...

“Ow!” ...until what looked like a blue-trailed shooting star gave him a sudden concussion in the head.

What that shooting star truly was became immediately obvious. It was the intermittent visitor of the house, that enigmatic robin.

The robin chirped, high and loud. Hard to believe, but this bird that had so brazenly assaulted Sōjūrō was one of this house’s greatest riddles.

Sōjūrō had to pass by the main roads on the way to his part-time job. This meant that the spectacle of so many people traversing one place all at the same time, which he still hadn’t gotten used to, was always available to him. The scene at the train station’s street, and the sheer tide of people that populated it, was one of the high points of his day.

Not a single one of them wore the same clothes, or bore the exact same gait in their pace, not a one alike. He’d seen no place like it, so the diversity of them still impressed him as a child would.

Nah, thought Sōjūrō, sighing as he did so. If I’m still thinking that, then I’m still acting like some guy from the sticks.

“Um, hello? You’re holding everyone up on the green light here. Unless you really want to die here, it’d be best for you to move,” said a stingingly familiar voice from directly behind him.

“On the way to Mad Bear, aren’t we? I’m heading for the convenience store. My part-time starts in 5pm. What about you, Shizuki?”

“5pm, same as you. Did you drop by somewhere first?”

“Dropped by the bookstore, and left right away. Someone bought the book I wanted to buy. And now I’m here—”

“—wasting time, like me, right?”

The girl was Kojika Kumari, Sōjūrō's friend from a previous part-time job, and a classmate from school. He'd never imagined he'd meet her here, but here they were.

Sōjūrō looked upon her only with respect ever since the first job they had briefly shared together. He had been hopeless at the cash register, always too slow, always making mistakes. It was obvious the convenience store job wasn't working out for him, and the management's lack of patience for him became more evident every day, until finally he quit. Kumari approached him at that point, and referred him to a Chinese restaurant she knew, called Mad Bear and as easy as that, he had gotten the job.

"I see something must be very wrong if your usually collected face is bothered. You're practically sweating frustration. Is it some really annoying guy at work? You know I'll get it out of you eventually anyway, so just spit it out and get it over with."

Kumari's eyes always seemed to be narrowed judgementally, never tiring of severity. It had become quite clear to Sōjūrō Shizuki since they first met how the city-raised Kumari found everything about him perplexingly annoying. Yet despite that, she had treated Sōjūrō always as someone equal, a rarity in itself. Giving him an endorsement at work had seemed, in her own way, to be an honest sign of friendship.

"No, not something wrong, really. I guess it's more like I saw something weird, or I guess unique, or..."

Uh oh. Now he *had* to tell it. He had no excuse. He couldn't think of a fast, work-related excuse to cover up what he just said. Nothing was really wrong at Mad Bear, and if he made something up, she'd just find out about it. With no recourse, he had to tell Kumari about the blue bird that had attacked him, and so he did.

"What? A *bird*? *That's* what you're worried about? Alright, sure, I guess it's not every day that you get pecked by a rare blue bird, but—"

“No, no, you’re getting the wrong idea. It isn’t the way he looks that’s unusual, it’s his...his...”
Once again, Sōjūrō struggled for the words. Certainly, the corpulent bird and his incessant chirping were strange enough, but how could he truly explain its true outlandishness?

“Well, if it’s really some blue bird, then it’s probably a mountain bluebird, but there’re none of those here in Japan. A blue swallow maybe?”

“No, I don’t think so. It was pretty round. I tried looking at some picture books, and I’m pretty sure it’s a Japanese Robin...or at least, it could be if only—”

“—there *were* any blue Japanese Robin’s, gotcha. Maybe you just saw one of those blue chicks that you see in fest...oh, what am I saying, you probably don’t even know the first thing about festivals here. Never mind, it’s boring stuff. So I gather this was just the one bird, right?”

“Yep, just the one. At least as far as I could tell.”

“I see. Maybe it’s some kind of mutation, which would be pretty grim, all things told. To be the last of your kind the moment you were born has to be some sort of cosmic irony, don’t you think? Now, I don’t know what sort of bird this really is, but the next time you see it, try treating it with a little more care. You might even get lucky enough to pick up some spare change in a vending machine or something.”

Kumari meant well with her humor, Sōjūrō knew, but it was hard for him to agree. For one thing, that bird was the farthest thing from the sort of lonely animal that Kumari imagined it to be.

“Anyway, it’s just one bird, don’t sweat it. I know it’s not often that you get pecked by a bird in the city, but think of it as a...learning experience. Count yourself lucky it wasn’t some stray murder of crows looking to pick through some trash. Those mean trouble.”

“Hey, which reminds me, there’s something I else I wanted to hear your opinion on.”

It was the flock of birds that disappeared from the Kuonji estate that he remembered. Those birds really were getting to him.

“I’m actually living on a house on that hill, and there’s some starling birds there that drop by all the time. But here downtown, I don’t see a single one of them.”

“Oh, come on, it’s obvious isn’t it? The hill has a forest around it, so obviously there’d be a lot of animals. You can’t expect to find the same in the town.

“So, the mansion on the hill’s your new home, huh? I’d heard you moved out of your apartment but...you know that if this reaches school, there’ll be trouble, right? I won’t bother to ask why you’d settle for such a remote place.”

“It just...well, one little thing happened after another and I ended up there. I’m not worried if the school hears about it. I’ve got my mind more full up on what actually happens inside that house.”

“Huh?”

From that hill, it took Sōjūrō thirty minutes to get to the edge of town, and forty minutes to the nearest convenience store. But it wasn’t even the inconvenience of access that really troubled Sōjūrō. No, the real trouble lay in the inhabitants of that peculiar, almost inhumanly haunted place.

“Never mind. I probably shouldn’t be talking to you about them behind their back anyway. Anyway, back to what you said. You said that there weren’t a lot of birds downtown. Why is that?”

“The environment just doesn’t suit them, I suppose. You’re spending a lot of air asking about birds, you know. You’re a closet animal-lover, Shizuki?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Is that so? Well, as for me, I hate them. And now that we’ve made that clear, do you *really* still want to talk about birds with me?”

Something was odd about what Kumari just said. If she really hated them, why would she suggest to Sōjūrō to treat the blue robin with “a little more care”?

“If you don’t mind, yeah, I would. It wouldn’t hurt you just to tell me what you know.”

“Twist the knife more, why don’t you?” She sighed. “Fine. At least I get to waste some time before work. Let’s continue what I was saying about how they deal with their environment.”

Witch on the Holy Night

Trial

The stars had aligned to give him this day to dedicate to work. And that work would, in all likelihood, be the job of cleaning the garden. Sōjūrō couldn't put up with it any more. He felt that the longer he left it in its sorry state, the more his sanity would suffer. Thankfully, this was his day off from work. He might never again get so golden an opportunity.

The garden was unbelievably large though. They had been slack in the maintenance of not just the courtyard, but the front entrance and the foliage that had already made ample progress in creeping up to the walls of the house. Vast as it was, it would probably take him a week of preparation and subsequent cleaning to really get it back up to snuff.

"Alright. Let's start with leveling the soil a bit."

He knew that he wouldn't accomplish everything he wanted in a day, so he decided to spend the entire day pulling out and getting rid of the weed infestation. With fresh conviction, he stepped out into the wild wastes of the garden.

And so, from the early hours of the morning, Sōjūrō slowly made his circuit around the mansion proper. By his reckoning, he'd be able to give the area around the entryway, the courtyard, and the rear garden a once over before having to take a breather in the afternoon.

"What on earth has overtaken him?"

"Beats me. Maybe he has a thing for pulling out weeds."

They were in the sunroom, just before noon. Alice had come into the room with a book in one hand. Inside, she saw Aoko drinking her black tea with a practiced refinement as she read a women's fashion magazine. And there, on the other side of the window looking out over the courtyard was the singular crouched figure of a man, paying no heed to either of them yet slowly retreating as he did his work.

"He's been like that since I woke up. Pulled open the curtains, and there he was, moving here and there. I shouted at him that if he didn't mind then could he maybe take care of cleaning the garbage incinerator. That was alright, wasn't it?"

"I suppose, seeing as he has the initiative. He *is* putting his back into it, isn't he? Even though it's frightfully cold outside."

Alice sat herself down quietly, reaching for a nearby teacup on the table. She poured herself a cup from the teapot and opened the book she had brought.

"-----"

"-----"

The two passed the minutes in silence. Both had met in the room only coincidentally, whiling away the hours of the day. Not a word passed between either of them for quite a while, and neither troubled the other with the tasks and duties that they had assigned each other last night, for they were both quite finished with them.

Aoko read her fashion magazine only half-heartedly, spending more time looking at what went on outside the window. Alice was quite immersed in her book on rune magic, but she would sometimes suddenly look up from the edge of the book, as if remembering something important.

With a sip of tea, both girls, as if reaching some invisible agreement, directed their attention outside the window at the same time. With not even an ounce of urge to help him, the girls look on their makeshift gardener (a beginner and unlicensed as he was, both thought) with a curiosity that one would reserve for roadside accidents. Sōjūrō's activity seemed deceptively sluggish, yet somehow he still went about his work quite rapidly.

Slowly, Aoko's and Alice's eyes met, and when this alerted both of them to what the other was doing, they awkwardly started looking at some other direction, as if that was the most interesting thing they'd ever seen. Alice, for her part, retreated back to her book, trying to pretend that she'd been reading the thing all along. But it was only a few moments later that she was tempted to look up over her book again, and when she did...

"He just keeps piling them up." Alice cleared her throat and made sure to cover her eyes with her book this time around.

She hoped that would serve to hide whatever shock her voice might have given away otherwise.

It barely took Sōjūrō half an hour to traverse the courtyard and whip the weeds up into proper shape. Their enigmatic gardener toiled on the plants tirelessly, even as white puffs of breath steamed from his nose and mouth, and then when his work had finally concluded, he exited the garden, going around the house and away from both the girls' view from the window. If anything is sure, he certainly didn't leave anything to spare in his job.

"Maybe he's a professional and we don't even know," Aoko ventured. He had seen the entire event play out like an odd movie almost from beginning to end, and the act somehow left her feeling like the person left alone to stand outside in the rain. She tried to put Sōjūrō's performance out of her mind, even as it left her amazed. She saw Alice glance upward, checking the time on the clock.

"If you're going to clean the trash incinerator, you'd best do it now or you'll risk night catching up to you."

"Done and done, Alice. I saw Sōjūrō do it himself from my room upstairs. I watched him to make sure he didn't get anything wrong. Opened the window and started yelling directions at him, and by the end of it my room was as drafty as could be."

Alice ventured a guess that the only reason she went here to the sunroom was because her room had become so cold. Though Aoko complained about the temperature, Alice was willing to bet that cleaning outside was a far frostier experience than shouting instructions from your bedroom.

“He didn’t say anything as he was doing this?”

“He was saying something, yeah, but I couldn’t hear anything.”

Alice took this to mean that Sōjūrō’s complaints went unheard.

...But take care, milady,

For not all our stories are touched by the sun.

From here, we shall see a night close to the truth,

And we will talk of a witch’s life.

Witch on the Holy Night

Trial

1.5-3

++GOOD MORNING++

++TIME CONFIRMED: 0000 HOURS++

++24 HOURS SINCE LAST UPDATE++

++INITIATING BACKUP PROCEDURE++

++TRANSMITTING UNIT LOG++

++SCANNING NEARBY TERRAIN++

++ATMOSPHERE CONTENT SCAN++

+NITROGEN [N]: NORMAL+

+OXYGEN [O₂]: NORMAL+

+ARGON [Ar]: NORMAL+

+CARBON DIOXIDE [CO₂]: NORMAL+

+ FIFTH THEORETICAL ELEMENT: ABNORMAL/ABNORMAL/ABNORMAL+

++CONFIRMED TRACE OF SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM ANOMALY++

++CONCLUSION: HIGH LIKELIHOOD OF ENCOUNTER WITH
HIGHEST VALUE THREAT++

++SENSORY MODE: SUBJECTIVE _[switched to]_OBJECTIVE++

++AUTONOMY CIRCUIT_[rerouted to]_RESERVE BATTERY++

++INSTRUMENTATION CIRCUIT_[rerouted to]_MAIN POWER++

++CAMERA MODE: INFRA-RED_[switched to]_IMAGINARY NUMBER++

++CREATING NEW COMBAT LOG++

++FROM DESECRATION OF THE BODY, MY LORD DELIVER ME++

Forests still surrounded much of Misaki City. The urban sprawl continued apace with the economic boom, but the suburbs in the outskirts of town still stood shoulder to shoulder with tall sentinel trees.

All across the country, they felled the trees, with their decades of wisdom that flowed in root and trunk. They swept away the leaf mold, warm to the touch. The birds, worried and confused, continued to leave. Yet the true power of the green endured. And until civilization has learned to violate the very years that have given nature its inexorable power, it would remain the domain of mystery.

That applied as much to this forest as it does in all of them. This was the place that marked the borderline between Misaki City and Misaki Hill, left mostly unexploited in the outskirts of town. The fauna that still lived here eke out a meager existence. Rural areas are still filled with similar forests, those that in simpler times people might have dubbed forbidden, unless one no longer needs to find his way home.

Hey diddle diddle,

The cat and the fiddle,

For the forest, winter had already come, chill and sharp as a razor. Should a person chance to walk here now, he would feel the cold creep up from foot to leg. He would find his cheeks stiffening, and his breath steaming in white puffs, only to disappear into the black evening air. Not surprising, given the temperature was just about a degree above zero. The cold wave had the forest, the earth, the trees, and any living being present here in its grip.

The cow jump'd over the moon,

The little dog laugh'd,

Even in day, barely anyone saw fit to trespass here. And now, in winter, when all beasts slept, there is nary a trace of life. The still night air that caressed the sturdy wooden trunks was the portentous breath of ghosts. The trees drank up the moonlight, veiling any dangers that might lie ahead, and bringing ruin to the pitiable sacrifices that saw themselves lost here tonight.

All that could be heard was the wind whispering secrets through the leaves, and the gentle murmur of a nearby stream. The darkness between the clearings held no trace of life, neither man nor animal.

And yet, someone was here. A figure dressed in black, who clearly didn't belong here; a lithely framed silhouette of a body, wandering in the sea of mist like a boat lost at sea. The faint sound of the person's footsteps bounced across each surface the sound could reach. What revealed itself from the veil of trees left no doubt as to its nature: a young girl in black.

To see such craft,

And the dish ran away with the spoon.

"They've come, they've come!"

"They're here, they're here!"

"Who? Who?"

"With whom and whom?"

"Is your stomach aching?"

"Is your stomach growling?"

"What do we eat?"

"What don't we eat?"

"You take the left hand..."

"And you take the right hand!"

"Let's give them a welcome!"

"Let's give them our regards!"

"These should be fun ones, I'm sure!"

"And remember, it's been a while since we had actual stomach and backbone..."

"...so make sure to chew thoroughly!"

"-----"

The shadows of the trees swayed and stirred, as if laughing. Was it just imagination that played tricks on the senses, or perhaps a real response? Here, even as the girl walked, the gathered shadows looked to dance around her with each advancing step.

"Now go thither, go thither!"

"Deeper and farther, deeper and farther!"

"Have the dice been taken care of?"

"Loaded to the core."

"And finely honed edgework!"

"Now all that's left is to pray we don't land the all-important six!"

"-----"

The girl's brow furrowed almost imperceptibly. Was it out of fear of the voices the pair of voices that should not have been heard that now echoed against the trees, and the trace of some beast that should not be felt just out of the edge of the senses? Yet how could it be, when her lips so stern and unyielding, told not even a trace of fear?

She strode with purpose, not in panic. She was deep in the forest now, letting the cool night air wash over her. It was then that she sensed the presence of two shadowed figures, observing her from poor concealment.

"I've spotted them! I've spotted them!"

"Here they come! Here they come!"

"All hope is lost!"

"All escape is lost!"

"You only have yourself to blame..."

"...when you didn't run away earlier!"

The girl stopped, and with her, the incessant voices stopped with her. She heard the rustle of the stream, clicking and popping like an eager flame. Then beyond the ankle-deep stream, something that was neither of this forest or of the city revealed itself to her.

“Good evening. I would have words with your master.” the girl said, with nary a note of worry in her voice. The two men, their smiles like gaps torn in their faces, ignore the girl, advancing at a plodding pace toward her position.

“Nothing but crypt guardians, built only to observe. A small mistake. I could have let Aoko take this and she would have done fine. Ah, but no.”

One of the smiling men saw fit to remain where he was, while the other, perhaps unable to hold in what passes for fury for his kind, leaned forward with his body.

“Aoko carries far too much weight on her shoulders now to take on the likes of you. Your appearances belie your competency: almost that of a neophyte mage’s own.”

The man in black started to move. In her right hand, the girl reveals a small glass cat, black as night.

At this, the two smiling men acquired just a bit of caution in their stance, and maybe even a misunderstood fear; the first thing that looked like some close approximation of genuine emotion from them.

“Goodbye, good sirs. All will be done in a moment, so I might as well give you my farewell.”

Now the men froze, the change in their disposition clear to all.

The pair never had ears to hear, or mouths to speak, or a mind to think. Words carried no meaning to them. All that mattered was the here and now. Fear and hope meant little to things that bore no hearts, something to be filed away in some unattainable hope that could never even happen.

Yet she still sent a feeling of something closely approximating a chill up their spine, something that raised their hackles, and they could not understand this.

“Now, I believe we should be just about ready to play our game, foolish dolls.”

The mist almost seemed to exude a dim, white light as it caressed the trees. The wind blew in low hums now, like a bell tolling in the night. The girl’s voice echoed across the forest for but a moment, and was suddenly silenced, as if stifled by the very cold itself. And then...

“My, oh my, we have been delayed.”

“But just in time for Little Red Cap’s appearance!”

Thus, the curtain was raised on Diddle Diddle, the Nocturnal Feast.

One of the smiling men, in his confusion, beat his legs at a run toward the girl.

The other man, in fear or dread, fled back deeper into the forest.

The man sent up a spray of water as he stepped into the stream, then past it, each step almost a leap toward the girl. The girl saw him now: A smiling man, with sharp blades for arms, and the mind of a simple monster. He could rip a child in half given but a moment, and doubted he would regret doing so if given the chance.

“Tweedle.”

“Leave it to us!”

“It’s our turn after all. Now if you don’t mind...”

The pair looked no more imposing than pig stuffed toys about a meter in length. They swung between the trees, going to and fro like large balls bouncing comfortably around.

Even with such absurdity before him, the smiling man did not flinch. He raised his arms and made ready. What emerged from the sleeves of his coat were no human arms. In their place were cruel blades only a hair longer than a foot and a half. Just as the girl had known. From its worn appearance, it looked like it had seen much use, tearing apart the man's prey. Now he sought to add the little pigs that flew toward him to that gruesome score. With a single, sure cut, his blades tore one of them in half.

The smiling man froze. He had sliced one of the pigs in half. He did the same quite easily to the other pig with his second blade. But then there was a crash, a sharp keening sound. And then he saw the pig, cloven from head to tail, turn into what looked like a reptilian jagged-toothed mouth. In an instant it had clamped down on the smiling man's arm with overwhelming force.

The monstrous mouth closed up until his shoulder. And with this, the man lost whatever control he thought he had of his body.

"-----, -----!"

Now he felt fear. He had realized far too late that these pigs were no mage's familiars. These were clever traps by design, made to take a less intimidating form.

"Dum's got you now!"

"Dee's got you too!"

"Ah, but isn't it sad that our master is so quiet, and heartless, and uncaring?"

"Because in the end, anything we do is the same to her."

London Bridge is broken down,

Broken down, broken down,

“Urk—” was the only thing he managed to say.

Something inside him whispered to him that all of this was wrong. Impossible. What was this? What was this? *What was this?*

Talking pigs. His arm eaten to the shoulder. He felt a wave now, a surge of mana that washed over the forest in a single detestable, wondrous instant.

But in a way, all this held no surprise to the man. A mage with bizarre familiars, with even more bizarre ways of attack, and such potential in the magical Art that it was hard to be clear of anything else except the fire that burned in her soul. It was their master that this odd girl resembled more than anything.

“What now? What now? How long can you last?”

“May I say, you limbs are quite exquisite!”

“Payment might be difficult, but a pound will suffice!”

What *were* these things? They were no mere puppets, but neither were they living things, compelled to action through the Art. They only had purchase on both of his arms, but his whole body no longer responded to him. It was not borne of shock or a sudden weakness. But like a letter, written and permanent upon the page, he was pierced with a sensation that he could go nowhere else.

There was no doubt that the smiling man had already endured more than its fair share of the supernatural in this world. He had even encountered wielders of the rare arcane eyes; eyes of bewitching, of charm, and domination, eyes that froze, eyes of grave wax, and even the most powerful of that breed, the eyes of petrification. He had withstood punishments that would make most men curdle, from forced medicine to the torturous applications of the Art. Yet here, he screamed.

This was different.

This was wrong.

The ban that held him in place now was not of the same rules that governed the flesh and blood, or air and heat. It was an Art that was not known to him, and it disgusted him. It was a vulgar thing, completely at odds with everything in the world.

London Bridge is broken down,

Broken down, broken down,

London Bridge is broken down,

My fair lady.

“Urk—” the man grunted.

He looked at the vicious teeth that buried deep to the tips of his shoulders, and for the first time since he had taken this form, he tasted fear.

Everything must adhere to a rule, a standard, even mysteries and wonders. This girl and her familiars spit on every one, almost spiting the man’s dignity.

“By the third day you’ll be bone dry!”

“By the sixth day, you’ll drown in thirst!”

“In half a year, you’ll be naught but pitiable bones!”

“But you must excuse our rudeness. In the interest of time, we’ll have to kill you now!”

The man howled. Through his false mouth, a scream of rage echoed.

"Oh!"

"Oh, oh!"

"A device to take off his arms!"

"Look at him, the brave warrior!"

The talking pigs dropped inactive for a moment in the stream. That moment was all the man needed. He bellowed his rage as much as his pain, his shoulders being destroyed in a small decoupling explosion. Yet even with such an impediment, the smiling man ran toward the girl.

"A useless pair. A punishment is in order after this."

Though he now lacked the arms to cut her to ribbons, he still had one last weapon left to him:

His Arcane Eye that could force any heart to stop. A channel of his Art that constrained the cardiac muscle, forcing a heart attack. Simple, like a shotgun, yet covert as well. At this close a range, she'd never have enough time to avoid or dispel it.

"-----?"

Sadly, the man didn't account for something.

Build it up with wood and clay,

Wood and clay, wood and clay,

Build it up with wood and clay,

My fair lady.

Right unto the end, he never noticed that the girl had begun to sing a different rhyme.

To the man, he felt the earth tremble with the force of the attack, but to what attacked him, it was no more important a task as sweeping away a fly.

It had veins rich with the blood of the green. It's thirsty bark had seen untold years of age, and seemed to contain within it the strength to shrug off any common chainsaw. On his forehead, scribbled haphazardly in many colors was a word, "emeth." It was clumsily written, but it could be nothing else except that word of legend that bound him to service.

The Thames Troll. Falling Down. The Great Bridge. The many names it bore spoke to the depth of its reputation. It was the first of the four wonders.

"Thames, I'll leave the other one to you."

It heard the girl's words, and obeyed. His feet were roots, half buried in the earth, but it didn't even need to take a single step to obey her. It raised its left arm to the heavens.

"-----", "-----"

The other smiling man had ran as his companion fought, and now he kept pace, one step, and then the next, deeper into the dark forest. He had seen what they were up against, recorded and tagged it. That was the only order that he had been entrusted to fulfill.

Strange that he had stayed so long in this forest, only to run from it now. This was all part of the emergency plan, though. It had played out like they had anticipated. One of them would keep the enemy at bay, while the other would retreat to report back to their master. And now he was truly retreating.

The smiling man kept his mind only on running. One step, and then the next. Bound up by a distant fear, he was nevertheless confident that this could still be a victory, in the sense that he could send his report, and his duty would be fulfilled.

Nothing, not even a wolf at full pursuit, could possibly outrun him in this forest. His bird-like legs, changed in this manner by his master specifically for speed, pounded the ground hard and fast.

He was putting in around seventy kilometers an hour now. He'd gone well past the speed that any bipedal creature could achieve, and he still kept his pace. After he had judged himself a fair distance from the fight, he looked back over his shoulder to see if he was safe.

Nothing pursued him. And with that, his crescent shaped smile—no, his eye, rather—seemed to sigh in relief, and slacken.

"-----?"

But as soon as he had faced forward again, he saw his doom.

London Bridge is broken down,

Broken down, broken down—

From somewhere far away at the edge of hearing, he heard the Mère l'Oye, the Dark Tale. And before him there were roots and branches and vines, countless in number and stretching toward him. It looked like giant nerves, extending out into a network, but it was, in truth, the hand of a giant.

London Bridge is broken down,

My fair lady.

++FINAL REPORT++

++WITHDRAWAL OPERATION COMPROMISED++

++ANALYSIS OPERATION COMPROMISED++

++TRANSMISSION OPERATION COMPROMISED++

++REPORT COMPLETED++

++FROM DESECRATION OF THE BODY, MY LO

"We are done for tonight. Well executed, Thames. Return to me. I can only hope that I will summon you on more valuable ground next time."

She turned around, making to leave. The outsiders that had foolishly sought to build their sanctum in this forest have been eliminated, and she had no more business here. She cared little and less about their motivations, or how many people they had preyed upon. She left little room in her heart for the worrying of such matters in the city beyond this forest. That was the only way she knew, the way of the Meinster, of the pure witch bloodlines.

"Hey, what about us!"

"These arms aren't going to come off us by themselves!"

"We can't move while we've got these to chew on!"

"This is plain mean! There's no use for a pig that can't fly!"

"We know we've been a bundle of failures, but we'll do better next time, we swear!"

"Yeah, we'd like to be praised at least once before we break down!"

The girl sighed, and made her way to the nearby stream. She took off a black-gloved hand, and ventured a finger into the ice cold water.

"Both of you never want a natural six on your dice, yet you keep getting the roll, don't you?" Her voice was tinged with sadness, and it remained unanswered. The pigs had tested her patience again, but now they were formless and shapeless. Now they were but a pair of black six-sided dice on the palm of the girl's hand. She opened her mouth, as if making to comment on the ruin she had made of the clearing, but just as suddenly put a hand on her lips as if to think on other words.

"Our farewells are done here. We should not linger, or our resonance will be heard."

A finger as thin and white as an icfish slowly traces the outline of her own lips. With a third sigh, she walked out of the clearing and into the black forest, as calmly and indifferently as she had done when she walked in.

Now we dispense of the fragments of stories of lives lived.

We adjust the camera, and return to the original opening.

Silence, please everyone.

It's been a long time coming.

----- But now, Witch on the Holy Night begins.

I am a wolf, hubristic and greedy, with a talent only for destruction.

Without looking back or reflecting, I puff out my chest in pride, and if that means I'm alone, then alone I'll be.

And one day, I'm sure, I'll meet the Little Red Riding Hood that will destroy me.

1: An Unusual Person

The sun rose on a soundless morning.

She ignored the fact that the sky she saw out the window with half-awake eyes from her bed was smeared in a stormy gray. She ignored the fact that the thermometer read somewhere below six degrees, a particularly unforgiving temperature to be throwing out in the middle of November. She ignored the fact that the hour for breakfast had long since come and gone, and that she woke up primarily because she was hungry.

Even though she was caught between awakening and sleeping, and leaning toward the latter, this was still all set to be a good day.

Her clock told the time as a little past eight o' clock. Were this a normal weekday, that would be the hour of despair, as she'd be late for class no matter how fast she tried to get ready. But today was the school's foundation day, which meant that school was out for the day. So today she could finally do what she had not done for a long time now, and had been looking forward to: sleep the morning hours away.

Outside, the window opened to such gloomy steel blues and ash greys that it felt more like afternoon than morning. It'd just be poor humor to honor this weather with a "good morning." However, seeing as she had kept up her work all night until just three hours ago, when she finally had to consign herself to sleep, the morning could do whatever it pleased for all she cared.

Sleep was the only thing that mattered right now. As soon as she got back to dozing off it would be a very good morning indeed. Judging that, with the weather outside, the student council couldn't possibly be insane enough to drag her out of bed, she prepared once again to sleep.

She rose only to close the curtain.

When she returned to the bed, she closed her eyes, trying to return to sleep at best possible speed.

"Please let the next two hours have some unexciting dreams, at least," she said like a prayer. With that, she let her consciousness descend into blissful slumber once again.

Well, prayer mercilessly denied.

Far away and the edge of hearing, a ringing reached her ears. The phone. It was just like it to ring at this exact point. Against her will, she opened her just-closed eyes.

"Ugh, today of all days..." The problem was that the phone was in the first floor lobby. To get there she'd have a corridor to walk, and a stair to climb down. In the girl's sleepy state, even halfway that distance might as well have been covered with uncharted oceans and trackless deserts.

The ringing continued. This caller was being persistent. If she kept ignoring it, it would eventually go away, but that would have been too kind to the person.

“Isn’t Alice going to answer it?”

She’d hoped that her ever industrious housemate would answer, but she had just realized that was a fool’s hope. It was only her school that had a holiday today, so Alice obviously still had to go to her fancy girl’s academy. And that should have been hours ago.

The ringing continued, determined to have an answer. As if to underscore the urgency, she thought she even heard the volume go a tad higher.

“Augh, fine, take away my sleep time, why don’t you?!” Resigned, she got up from the bed, grabbed a random jacket and put it over her, and left her room.

“Whoa, it’s freezing.” She put her hands together as she walked, twining her fingers. The estate had little in the way of heating, which is why winter was a frighteningly formidable problem, especially in a cloudy, sunless day as this one. She didn’t need a thermometer to tell her that winter had definitely come. The mansion’s position at the top of a hill ringed by a fairly deep forest meant that winter came earlier here than in the city below.

The mechanical sound of ringing echoed around the long corridor. A carpet had been laid out here once, but maintaining it was too much trouble for its worth, so now the corridor lay bare. This mansion, coupled with the gloomy morning mood, made the entire place look like some haunted house.

“It *is* a haunted house, I’ll give it that. And far too large for just two of us,” she said to no one in particular.

The phone had ringed well past thirty rings now, she supposed. Whoever was on the other end of the line either had a lot of free time on his or her hands, or knew the house well enough to know exactly why the girl couldn’t answer it as soon as possible. She had a sinking feeling it was the latter.

The sunroof that hung above cast a melancholic air to the lobby. She quickened her steps, seeking to end the phone’s impolite ringing as soon as possible. She had a notion—nothing more—that to seize that phone now would mean that her happy day would burst like a bubble, quick as that.

At any rate, this is where the story finds its beginning.

Perhaps you are thinking it is too sentimental, but it is what it is.

Is it a matter of statistics or opinion, I wonder?

But things must begin from here, when stability and calmness reigns.

This was the time when life was quiet and peaceful for our character.

A story of a time when a certain mage was still untalented, and innocent of what was to come for her.
