

Chapter 3

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Night's/That Night

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And here, is what happened last night.

'On nights when you can't see the moon, there's no turning back----'

It could have been advice for a noble action. It could have been a warning.
It was a really long time ago.....and I still have to wrap my mind around the things taking place in my life right now.
It began on a night like this. I went running to Grandfather. I felt like crying, and I was coming down with a bad case of the butterflies from what just happened. I had no idea...they didn't say anything to me at all.
Sitting there inside his workshop, Grandfather smiled at me nicely, and it was like the first time that he ever did. Then, quietly putting his hand on my head, he said,

'----Death wears red, and it's at your back watching you.'

How could those words make me feel better? Telling me I was doomed, I was sent back to our house.
On that night, I definitely noticed that an unseen shadow was behind me.
A somebody that's always watching from far away.

And with each passing year, the yardstick measuring the gap between myself and that thing keeps getting shorter and shorter and shorter----

It's a small dot on my radar, telling me that it's getting closer. I can almost sense its breathing as it slowly creeps up behind me.

It would be just a trick of the mind, though.
Nobody would be there if I turned around.

Still---- it had its chance that night.
Make no mistake. The butterflies I couldn't stop having then, were pointing to the dread I was supposed to feel.

*".....High diddle diddle, The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jump'd over the moon;
The little dog laugh'd....."*

.....That was how it usually went for me.
Tucked away in a corner of my memory, are those days when I was still a little girl.
In my mind, I have a picture diary filled with those vague moments.
.....On a dark night like this one, those words that my grandfather left me would still be ringing in my ears.

No matter how strong the wind is blowing, no matter how pleasant the sound of this girl's ringing bell is next to me, they can't drown out the sound of Grandfather's voice...and the words of foreboding that he left behind.

".....Here we are."

Alice

The girl says, standing right next to me.

Her voice is dry. She's making it clear that she'll be staying out of my way.

She and I are alone in the park tonight.

Today celebrates the day I was born as this 'me' standing here.

And we have to commemorate it with my first fight. I have to say, it's more or less a night that's crawling with evil for us to do this.

The thick clouds block out the stars like a looming black umbrella.

The strong wind carries the heavy clouds across the night sky.

In the middle of the park stands a clock, whose hands point straight up to the moon in the sky.

Except, the moon is nowhere in sight. That's just my luck, too.

The winter chill just gets worse when it's midnight.

I feel like I'm drawing the freezing cold into my body just from breathing in and out.

The cold wave soaks right through my bones, sending its icy stabs high up my spine and straight to my brain.

To keep a clear head in this cold air,

to keep my fingers from getting stiff in this chill,

I keep the fire of my emotions burning alongside my own rhythm.

"It has a solid presence.This is lucky for you.

The wisp will light up at the spot I inscribed it on."

I throw a nod to Alice in response.

In that split second, I catch a glimpse of the ground, and my feet.

.....They're shaking, but not too obviously.

'I'm just cold.' I can't convince myself with it, though.

I might also be numb from fear and not the freezing weather.I exhale a breath while feeling better. If I give in to my emotions, I'll be perfectly human.

Then, Alice passes her barrier over to me, and with that, I lose a chance to be caught up in sentimentality.

A see-through wall surrounds this whole area of the park.
A carpet is spread out, undetected, and rooted deep inside the earth.

Mother Goose

----Absorbing the night, is Alice Kuonji's Fairy Tale Lullaby.

My body fuses with those sensations.
Goosebumps prickle my right arm,
and someone else takes control of it.

The goosebumps crawl up my arm like marching ants.
Slowly but surely, they're heading for my heart.
Swallowing the urge to avoid what it'll cost me, I wait -- not for where they'll be, but when they'll get here.

There's no moon tonight.
The little street lamp can't shed light on the whole park trapped in darkness.

The ants have stopped. **core**
They're right next to my heart. They've split far off from my right arm.
Without really seeing it with my own eyes, I can see the attacker -- hiding themselves in the dark.
They're behind a clump of bushes.....thirty steps to the right and the rear, and crawling on all fours. One hand comes up, as if to get my attention----

"----Over there!"

Our enemy's movements and my sensing them are synchronized.

I twist my whole body around.
Their arm unfolds into a long, spearlike weapon.
It moves like a missile, lunging for the back of my head and sweeping up my hair.
With the barrier I got from Alice, being able to sense what's going on in this whole park makes it possible for me to make even the smallest dodge.

The savageness of the attack tosses my hair violently into the air.
There's a small, sharp sting as the arm glances off my cheek.

----I...experience a close brush with Death.

"Gh----!"

Circuit

Blood flow shifts to a new kind of circulation.

Racing at one meter per second, all the blood in my body is reduced to an imaginary element. By completing the transformation of my heart into a very different kind of **engine** creation machine, my whole body is now ready to be used as a single circuit.

It's an obscure physical exercise, which can't be measured in terms of heat quantity. To let myself be this 'me' right here, is a sacred mystery still beyond the reach of ordinary people. A fire stoked to life by the strength of every miracle, and fable, in existence.

And *we* make it so by using magical energy.

Set
"----Connect."

Whirling to face the enemy, I put out my hand.
My arm is the one in control now. **voice**
Because I'm still new at this, magecraft won't work for me unless I make use of words **action** and my limbs.

The ritual for magecraft was already in place before we started.
All I have to do is make fire come alive on it.
I have to work magical energy into it -- energy generated by my own body -- and while using a technique that's different for every person.

Not surprisingly, the magus herself is the means of transfer. She can choose to connect either wired or wirelessly. Whichever one she can live with, her objective is still to get magical energy sent into the inscribed ritual. 'Emerge', 'Discharge', 'Distribute' -- any of those will work here...but when it comes to me, it just flicks through my limbs---- like this.....!

"----Light it up!"

And it's over.
Our enemy goes up in a burst of flames, their long, long arm still dangling behind them. I thought it looked like a campfire set in the middle of the park at night, which wouldn't have been weird at all. Except...wriggling in the center of that fire like a shadow puppet...is a human being just like me.

The fire that I made on purpose, goes away just as I made it appear.
That burnt smell and those crackling sounds as they roasted there...weren't very much at all.

"----I'm passing the barrier to you again. I'll go make sure it's done."

I walk over to the body. They've stopped moving completely.
I killed them. I killed them. I killed them.
No matter who they were, I took someone's life here.
With a dry throat I swallow down this fact, and I'd be numb to it if I distance myself from the truth sitting in front of me. It's like swallowing a pill, bitter and tough enough to make me force it down all the way.

"----"

This...doesn't faze me at all. My heart's beating fast, and my breathing's been broken into uneven little breaths, but my mind's as clear as still water.
All I'm looking at now is a mound of ashes.
I thought it would attack me again...but the more I stand here, the more dead they stay.
.....That's good. We're fine, then. We cornered them in this park, and now they're lying in their own ashes.

".....?"

But something isn't right.
Maybe it's just me, but this corpse doesn't reek of anything remotely alive.
'Maybe...it can't be!' I peer at the face of our unidentified enemy...
and all I see is an eye-less, nose-less, pale mannequinlike face.

"*Argh!* For Pete's sake, not again!"

I kick the thing while screaming.
The ashes dance in the wind, and even the dead body disappears into dust. Screw it, it's not even a dead body, is it? This thing is just a *puppet!* Designed to trick us and lure us out, that's all there is to it.
.....So much for my 'first fight'. I'm right back at square one with myself.

"*sigh*.....I don't think I'll ever get past being an apprenti.....what?"

Something caught my eye then, something that looked familiar.
Over there where the slide is, the shadow of it just seemed off. Like, there's an extra lump there that doesn't match with the rest of the slide.

Maybe the fight just got to me and all the blood's rushed to my head.
I really thought for one second that it's the slide making that shadow.

"----Who's there!?"

It wasn't smart of me to go and do that.
I recognize the school uniform. They stumble back as soon as I call out to them.

Are they gonna make a run for it----?

----Yes! Yes they are!

"Get 'em! They saw everything!"

But she's just as oblivious as I was.

And besides, I can't move either. My legs still feel like stone after the fight just now.....!

"No! They're getting away!

We have to grab 'em and take 'em out.....!"

We've got no time to do this nicely.

Getting caught by some nobody while we're out here is a matter of life and death for me and Alice----!

"Wait, come back.....!"

Shaking off the numbness in my legs, I fly out of the park.

.....Their feet are so fast to get so far away already!

They speed off towards the residential area, disappearing under the cover of darkness.

Whoever that person is, they saw the whole thing tonight.

"Oh, forget it! I didn't know they were there using the barrier anyway.....!"

And they're not coming back no matter how much I yell at them to.

The trail's cold, as far as I know. I am so pathetic. I can't even look at myself.

Right now, the park is Alice's temporary 'forest'.

Here it blurs out specifics like the faces and voices of the people in said forest, so there's no telling who's who even from a meter away. As far as things go, it's all locked inside a fairy tale.

In the event that a witness sees things like the fight taking place here, they won't know me, her face, and who we are---- but we have to take care of the situation differently, if it's come to that.

"From behind, it was definitely a boy."

I go back to the park.

I know what I saw -- I would recognize that uniform anywhere. It's *my* school's uniform.

That's all the info that I need. Since it's one of ours, there's a sure-fire way to find out who.

".....Even so. Why do things just keep getting worse for me?"

I can complain all I want, but I know what really matters here, what needs fixing.
If I want to keep any rumors about tonight from going out tomorrow, I'll have to cut them off at the source itself before that happens.
And I can't afford to be lenient when I do it.

Looking up, Alice is still where I left her.
For her, being a magus and getting caught like one also puts her in a bad spot as me.
But,

".....This is, a terrible situation we're in."

like a statue, she just stood there and watched them go.

.....I am so fed up with this.
Her deadpanning me, on a moonless evening like tonight, is just perfect as it is a pain in my neck to hear.

--End of Chapter--