


# Tomorrow's Nadja

## A 16-Year-Old's Journey

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# Prologue

When Nadja was 13, she told her mother about Francis and Keith, and about her first ball when she danced together with Francis.

“Francis? Is that the person you like?” asked her mother.

“Um, actually, there’s another person. His name is Keith, and he risked his life to save me. I... just don’t know how to feel about all this anymore.”

Her mother took Nadja’s hand and gave her a tender smile. “There’s no rush,” she said, embracing her daughter.

“Ah—”

“Now isn’t the time for that. Whether Francis or Keith is your destined soulmate, or whether your soulmate could be someone else—when the time comes, your feelings will guide you.”

“When the time comes...”

Francis and Keith are twin brothers born into the Marquis Harcourt noble family of England. Though they both set out to shape society into a place free from inequality, they each walked different paths.

The younger brother Francis lived as a typical noble. On the contrary, the elder brother Keith carried a strong sense of *noblesse oblige*; it was his labour of love to play the role of a chivalrous thief who steals from the rich to provide for the poor.

The Black Rose and the White Rose.

The light and its shadow.

Nadja had a fateful encounter with the twin brothers. Pleasure, grief, excitement—they had a taste of it all. At times their chests fluttered, at others their hearts danced. They took each other’s hands, they danced together. In the end, they shared a kiss.

They were both important people to Nadja.

She liked them both, but 13-year-old Nadja couldn’t choose between them.

Almost three years have passed since then, and Nadja will soon be 16. She is not quite an adult, nor is she a mere child. A

ball to commemorate her birthday will be held at a grand banquet hosted by the Duke Preminger family in Vienna, and stowed away in her chest is a pensive secret she plans to unveil on that very day.

Nadja, who had opened the door of destiny to the vast world, is at destiny's door once more.

Once upon a time, about a hundred years ago...

A new tomorrow dawns for Nadja Applefield as she sets off on another journey!

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Life in Vienna

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Mom!”

With a large tray in hand, Nadja stepped into a sunroom. Her mother Colette was knitting laces, her eyes sparkling like a maiden’s as she stood up.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had your scones. They smell great.”

“The jam is marmalade and raspberry, and I garnished the scones with clotted cream. All served with Assam tea!”

“Thanks. Oh—it’s delicious!”

After a sip of milk tea Nadja poured for her and a mouthful of scone, Colette beamed. “Being able to enjoy such wonderful scones here in Vienna is a blessing.”

“The teachers at Applefield taught me the recipe. Aren’t they the greatest?”

“They are!”

“Fate kept pulling us apart. It was all so disheartening, but that fate led me to England where I grew up and learned how to bake these delicious scones. Which got me thinking—no matter how much the tide goes against us, there’s a good side to everything. That’s what I’ve learnt, and having you by my side might be proof of just that!”

“Oh my.”

“Even then, I feel lucky to belong to three unique families. There’s everyone at Applefield, the Dandelion Troupe, you and Albert...”

Colette eyed Nadja with a gentle smile.

“That’s just like you.”

“Hehe.”

Nadja let out a delighted giggle and touched the red, heart-shaped brooch on her chest. It’s a habit she’s kept since her childhood up to now, even as her sixteenth birthday looms.

When Nadja was a baby, she was brought into the care of Applefield Orphanage, a home for children with no family. The caretakers there believed her parents had died a long time ago.



The truth was far from it.

Her father died when Nadja was a baby—that much was true, but Colette, who was convinced that her daughter had passed away, continued living with good health in the Austrian city of Vienna.

All this had happened for a reason.

This story dates back to when Colette was still a youthful woman.

Colette was born into the Duke Preminger family, a well-established noble house in Austria. At a ball, she met a pianist by the name of Raymond and fell in love with him. But Raymond was not a noble—he was a mere commoner.

Duke Preminger, who is Colette's father, holds great responsibility in preserving the Preminger family tradition that spans hundreds of years. He shoulders an old-fashioned mentality, which would never permit a marriage between her daughter and a commoner like Raymond.

The couple eloped, yearning to spend their lives together at any cost. Colette and Raymond were by no means wealthy, but a joyous and peaceful life in Paris suited them just fine.

Thus, Nadja was born, and soon after, Raymond lost his life in an unfortunate accident.

Colette raised Nadja on her own through the heartache, overworking herself until she and her daughter fell ill. She collapsed with a high fever, and by the time she woke up, a Preminger steward and wet nurse stood before her. In the end, the family discovered Colette's whereabouts with the help of a family detective, but not without their persistence being tried.

“Your baby has died,” said the wet nurse.

Her daughter, who she valued more than her own life, has died. Colette sank into despair upon hearing this, and the Premingers brought her back to the Duke's mansion in Vienna.

Truth be told, Colette's daughter recovered from the fever. The very same wet nurse put the baby in the care of Applefield

Orphanage's matron, Miss Appleton, who at the time knew only one thing about the child: her name was Nadja.

Miss Appleton noticed the accessory fastened to her chest: a jewelled brooch, whose monetary value was barefaced given its jewel base and delicate craftsmanship.

*This girl they left with us must have some extraordinary circumstance,* thought Miss Appleton.

"A trunk addressed to me arrived just before my thirteenth birthday, and a letter inside hinted that my mother might still be alive! I was so shocked!"

Nadja has told this story several times since reuniting with her mother.

"My mother's diary, and a dress that she used to wear... That's what was inside. They're both precious, irreplaceable things to me. They made me wonder about the kind of person my mother was. I envisioned her, day-after-day."

Soon after the trunk arrived, two strange men began to pursue Nadja, and she had no other choice but to flee from Applefield. The Dandelion Troupe came to her rescue and took her in as their own, and since then, Nadja lived as part of their travelling circus.

The troupe travelled to England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Greece, Egypt, and returned once more to Italy. As she journeyed across the world, Nadja held one dear wish close to her heart.

"I want to meet my mother!"

Meanwhile, there was strife surrounding the Duke Preminger family's inheritance. The first in line to inherit the Preminger dukedom was Colette's younger brother Herman, who is regrettably an abhorrent man.

"I am the new Duke of the Preminger family! I can do as I damn well please! Anything in this world can be mine!"

Herman would boast in this fashion as he squandered in debauchery.

The Duke was not pleased. If Herman succeeded the family, the dukedom would be in ruin. This compelled the Duke to ferret out Colette's child—whatever the stakes. To him, nothing is more important than protecting the Preminger family bloodline. Should Colette's daughter be more suited than Herman to inherit the dukedom, she would be crowned heir. Her education could be easily arranged due to her age, and also, Nadja looked remarkably similar to Colette, who in her youthful days wore the same brooch that Nadja does now. All these features in tandem led her to be worthy of inheriting the dukedom.

Herman was aware of the Duke's intent and conceived an attempt to sabotage the inheritance. This family quarrel brought no shortage of pain and sorrow to Nadja, yet she did not falter. Nadja did not lose hope.

“Tomorrow—will surely be better than today.”

Her words proved her conviction, for in the end, Nadja fought her way into her mother's embrace.

Duke Preminger did not abate his conviction to make Nadja the heir. He is, after all, a man who settles for no less than his selfish desires.

During the opening of a grand ball at the Preminger mansion, the guests were acquainted with Nadja as the heir of the Preminger family. The Duke planned for her to be enrolled into a Swiss boarding school, but Nadja had no intention of entertaining his plans.

Nadja didn't attend the ball in a dress. Instead, she wore what resembled an apron: the Applefield uniform.

She held nothing back as she confronted her grandfather.

“I have no intention of inheriting the dukedom! I'm only here to meet my mother, and I won't be the Nadja you want me to be! The dukedom, the inheritance—I couldn't care less about any of it!”

Her outburst didn't stop.

“Grandfather, it’s because of the dukedom you treasure so much that Mom had to elope and run away from home. It’s because of the dukedom that I got separated from Mom when I was just a baby! Is the family name really worth more than our happiness? That’s just wrong!”

She continued. “I met wonderful people, travelling with the Dandelion Troupe. Everyone looked after each other. We all lived to our very best. Rather than become a noble, I want to see the whole world with my own eyes. Today, and the hardships that come tomorrow—I want to live through it all, because the day that comes tomorrow leads to the distant future.”

True to her words, Nadja readied herself to embark on another journey with the Dandelion Troupe in their automobile, which was already in the Duke’s garden ready to set off. But Nadja decided to put her journey on hold and remain by her mother’s side.

“You were taken from me when you were just a baby—all because I was too foolish to see past their lies. I believed them when they said you had died. The experiences we could have shared as you grew up—as mother and daughter—we have none of it to cherish, do we?”

“Mom...”

“Nadja, I want to reclaim what they stole from us. There’s no replacement for the time shared between a mother and daughter. I want to take it all back with you...!”

“Mom!”

Colette’s words resounded deep in Nadja’s chest.

Granny of the Dandelion Troupe also said this to Nadja. “Nadja, you’re 13 now. Your childhood is nearing its end. This is your last chance to relive it with your mother. You won’t get a second chance, no matter how much you regret it afterwards.”

Nodding and grunting along, the Chief who was laid on his side also spoke.

“I know how you feel. You want to travel and see the world with us. But listen—for the time being, spoil yourself and return

any favours to your mother. Do that while seeing what the world of nobles is all about. Doesn't sound so bad, does it? Hell, it's a world people seldom get to experience, you know! Take this chance before you grow older," he said, following up with a grin. "Of course, get in touch right away when you want to come back. We'll keep your seat warm for you."

"Granny... Chief..."

Nadja thought it over. And then she decided.

Nadja would remain in Vienna with Colette until the mother and daughter had memories to cherish.

Nadja spent her days with Colette in the mansion of Count Albert Waldmüller, Colette's childhood friend who she remarried to. Estranged from Paris for many years, Colette, whose days were clouded with endless tears, was cared for by the Count's tender kindness that healed her heart little by little.

Albert proposed to her. "I'll bear the burden of your past and everything that comes with it. I will cherish you," he said.

Albert welcomed Nadja with open arms, and the three of them lived happily together.

Colette, who flourished with a young lady's vivacity, showed tact. Albert, who commanded a calm disposition amid his wealth of knowledge, showed competence.

Colette, Albert, and Nadja discovered new things every day, their lives enriched with heartfelt joy. As time went on, even Duke Preminger, who never let up on his indifference towards Nadja, shifted his frigidness towards a strictness befitting a grandfather caring for his grandchild.

"Grandfather." Nadja called out to him, her lips unfastening into a fluctuant smile.

The Duke called in personal tutors for Nadja. Her studies ranged from history to geography, science, general etiquette, and foreign languages. She also learned ballet, ballroom dancing, piano, and vocal music.

“Don’t overdo it,” said the Duke.

The Duke granted Nadja an opportunity to share her feelings at a Preminger ball party, and that she did, almost brazenly so. Since then, she’s come to better understand the identity she embodies, much to her own surprise seeing the confident words she spoke that day in a new light.

“The choice is yours. Choose what you study, or whether you will study at all. But this is what I think—tangible things like money and jewellery are sought after and stolen by the less fortunate, but no one can steal the knowledge you gain of your own volition. Your greatest asset is yourself, no matter the path you walk in life.”

*Grandfather is right*, Nadja thought.

“Thank you.”

Nadja resolved to study everything she could. She visited Duke Preminger’s mansion on occasion, sharing with him her progress in playing the piano, performing ballet, and speaking foreign languages.

Albert bestowed upon Nadja the practical, problem-solving knowledge and skills he gained from travelling across the globe. His work dispatched him across Europe, the Americas, Asia, and even Africa. His recent studies in economics and philosophy have broadened his repertoire, and of the many books in his possession, Albert would at every available opportunity recommend a select few for Nadja to read.

Vienna embraced the dawn of the 20th century, leading itself into a period known for its extravagance—the Belle Époque. Arts, architecture, and music; they entwined together like petals amid the full bloom of a new, brilliant culture, and Nadja, in the company of Colette and the Count, went out into that blossoming city what seemed like every day.

The Count is a gregarious man, his network of acquaintances far-reaching. One day, he brought Nadja to an atelier; it boasted a large canvas, and crowded around its artist were countless beautiful women that made Nadja feel somewhat embarrassed.

On the walls hung paintings of gorgeous women. Their red and gold colours emanated a glamorous aura that lured Nadja into a daze. She absorbed herself in the paintings, when the artist of the atelier spoke.

“Hello, Albert. I wasn’t expecting such a charming young lady to accompany you,” he said, smiling faintly.

He looked headfirst in Nadja’s direction when she turned to face him.

“Miss, I am in an endless search for a *femme fatale*.”

“Femme fatale?”

“That’s right. A *femme fatale* is what you call a ‘woman of destiny’ in French.”

“A woman of destiny...”

“Yes—a woman capable of infatuating men with their charms and transforming their destinies. You too, miss, could embody a *femme fatale*.”

Nadja gulped at his eyes that looked to have marked their prey.

Albert cleared his throat for a timely interjection.

“Nadja is a *femme fatale*. She’s the girl of destiny who shined a new light onto my and Colette’s lives.”

“Albert...” Nadja was delighted.

“I see.” The painter showed an amused smile, the surrounding girls also cheerfully giggling.

“Perhaps once a few years have passed, I would like to draw a portrait of you too, Miss.”

The name of the painter who spoke these words was Gustav Klimt.

Colette brought Nadja to a café where they enjoyed Sachertorte, a cake made with rich chocolate, and apfelstrudel, a pastry that resembles British-baked apple pies. At the café, there were people reading the paper and others playing billiards and darts, while waiters donning white aprons paced back-and-forth between the motley crew of customers. The café had an adult-like atmosphere and Nadja loved it.

One day, Colette chose a café popular among upper-class women as a social get-together spot. They crowded around tables and chatted away, laughing boisterously like schoolgirls.

“There’s a dessert I want you to try.”

Colette ordered a chocolate cake that on top of it lay a sugar-coated violet.

“Wow! The flower’s so alluring! Ahh, it gives off a violet aroma too!”

Nadja seemed delighted by the dessert.

Colette asked, “Did you know the sugar-coated violet was a favourite of the late Queen Elizabeth?”

“She’s the wife of Emperor Franz Joseph, right?”

“Right! I even met her once when I was younger.” Colette took a sip of coffee before continuing. “She was born into a Bavarian royal family, and her nickname was Sisi. They said she lived her life as a young lady on a flat plains island surrounded by nature. Then, when she met Emperor Franz Joseph, it was love at first sight. She moved into his palace to live with him as the empress.”

“Sounds like a drastic change of scenery.”

Nadja recalled the time when she had returned to Duke Preminger’s mansion after her travels with the Dandelion Troupe.

“I heard that the emperor’s mother, Sophie von Bayern, was relentless. She piled up a lot of stress on Sisi—she wasn’t used to the customs of living in a palace, and preparations for the family’s inheritance put even more pressure on her. Before then, she was living a carefree life immersed in nature. In the palace,



her days became lonelier, with no shortage of stress. There's no doubt about that."

"....."

"Know that Sisi's efforts to fulfil her duty as empress were earnest, and know that she was able to live a life of utmost luxury by the same token. In the end, what followed, was her death by the hands of an assassin."

"Then, the sugar-coated violet is..." Nadja perused the charming, purple violet atop the chocolate dessert.

"Sisi loved nature. That may be why she was fond of violets."

"....."

"We live and have lived in different eras." Colette broke the silence. "The way women ought to be is changing. I can do what the women of Sisi's era couldn't, and that goes for us too—*you* can do what *I* couldn't. The words you spoke at that ball have set a precedent for the next hundred years to come."

"I agree!" Nadja bent forward. "If we continue opening the doors that lead to tomorrow, a better day will come! Because a brighter future awaits beyond! Perhaps in a hundred years, an era will come when people have the freedom to study, work, and live as they choose!"

Colette gazed into Nadja's glittering eyes.

"Nothing is impossible, even should a hundred years pass. So long as people continue opening new doors, that era will come!"

"You're right, Nadja." Colette nodded. "So long as we walk through those doors, we inch towards the light from a brighter future."

"Mom... I'm glad you feel the same."

For the rest of their time at the café, Colette and Nadja enjoyed their chocolate cake and its sugar-preserved violet flower. They savoured its flavour at a restful pace.

To recoup their time together as mother and daughter, Colette and Nadja enjoyed a medley of activities together. They took a stroll along the bank of the Danube River, they hopped aboard

Vienna's giant Ferris wheel, and they even baked sweets together.

Colette often hugged Nadja close. She brushed out the tangles in her hair, and at night she sang lullabies that Nadja sang along with too.

Nadja was happy. She couldn't be happier.

Happy as she was, uncertainty emerged from the depths of her heart.

*I can't live like this forever. Why am I the only one blessed with good fortune?*

For a while now, Nadja has been worrying over her Applefield siblings.

The Applefield Orphanage was set on fire when a pair of mysterious men who shot up out of nowhere began to pursue Nadja. It was arson—a third of the building had been destroyed by the time the fire died out, and it was a miracle that no one lost their lives or got injured.

The fire drove Nadja to leave Applefield.

“Hand over the brooch!” the strangers said as they approached her.

In short, Nadja was their target.

“I'll be a nuisance if I stay...” She muttered before deciding to travel with the Dandelion Troupe, who gave her shelter and recruited her as a dancer.

Exchanges of letters followed thereafter. Efforts to reconstruct parts of the orphanage that outlasted the fire were ongoing, which put Nadja at great ease. After all, the children at Applefield are like family to her.

*How's everyone doing, I wonder...?*

The youngsters should still be living with Miss Appleton and Mr Evans, according to Applefield's customs that behove only the children above thirteen to leave for work. In all likelihood, the orphans around the same age as Nadja are scattered about

working their own jobs, while the youngest among them have perhaps been adopted by distant families.

*I have nothing to worry about, so long as everyone makes each other happy. If someone's in trouble or if they're anxious about something, I want us all to work through it together.*

Nadja's conviction never faded. As the days go by, they only grow stronger.

Among her siblings, there was a boy named Oliver, the same age as Nadja. The two reunited in Paris during the Dandelion Troupe's travels there, and she was relieved to hear that he had been employed as a disciple of a master leatherworker. Later on, Oliver even tagged along with the Dandelion Troupe to Vienna aboard their mechanical automobile. The two still exchange letters, and it gives Nadja peace of mind that Oliver is doing just fine.

Nadja encountered another sibling on her journeys. Blonde hair and blue eyes, her name is Rosemary, also the same age as Nadja. Rosemary, who acted as an accomplice to Colette's younger brother Herman, wore the guise of Nadja in their plan to deceive both Duke Preminger and Colette.

*How is she after we separated in Vienna?*

Nadja's relationship with her is complicated—she couldn't fathom Rosemary's reaction if they were to meet again. In fact, the two do meet, and yet again does she do a terrible thing to Nadja. But the details are best left for later.

Besides Oliver and Rosemary, the faces of Nadja's other siblings surfaced.

Alex is the same age as Oliver and Nadja. Oftentimes, he looked up and watched the other two as they climbed trees. And being the exemplary, bespectacled honour student, he always had a calm aura about him. His current whereabouts are unknown.

*I remember, on the day before Oliver got sent out for work—the three of us climbed that peculiar tree and watched the faraway landscape together.*

Nicole is one of the younger siblings who, by now, should be working. She wears glasses like Alex and has long, black hair she braids with great force. Nicole, a girl unsparingly strict towards troublemakers and those too lazy to study, caused frequent cases of the blues among the boys.

*But Nicole has the guts to say ‘no means no’, and I like that about her!*

There was also Phoebe; a girl who developed a habit of clinging to the teachers and following them from behind, and Timothy; a boy who enjoyed sitting on the roof and staring vacantly at clouds all day long. A letter penned by Miss Appleton read that both Phoebe and Timothy have since been adopted by separate families.

*Finding everyone who’s gone their separate ways may have been impossible for 12-year-old me. But I’m 15 now, and almost 16! Maybe—just maybe, I can do it...*

Colette finished up her scones and tea.

“Oh, it was delicious,” she said.

Nadja smiled back at her.

“You’re welcome.”

She straightened her back and looked at Colette.

“Grandfather’s hosting a ball to celebrate my 16th birthday. When it’s over and done with, I think I’d like to leave home and travel with the Dandelion Troupe.”

Rejoining the Dandelion Troupe on their journey didn’t paint the full picture; Nadja explained that she wanted to find her Applefield siblings and meet with them.

“...When the time comes, that is.”

Colette responded, calm and composed. “I want to spend all the time in the world with you, but I think we’ve regained plenty of it already. Nadja, you’re almost 16—you’re standing before the gates of adulthood, ready to step through them with your own two feet.”

“Mhm...”

“Listen—if you ever find yourself in a tough spot, know that you can come back anytime. This is your home. We are your family.”

“Got it!”

“How will you meet with the Dandelion Troupe?”

“I mentioned before that I’m always exchanging letters with them, right? I know the stops they make no matter how far out they travel. Heh-heh, I bet they’ll be so surprised when I turn up out of nowhere.”

“Sounds about right.” Colette giggled. “But finding your friends will be wearisome if you don’t know their whereabouts. Still, it’s you, Nadja, so I’m sure you’ll manage it somehow. After all, you did find me!”

“Mom!”

“Hey, Nadja. I want to give you a present to celebrate your journey. Is there anything you fancy?”

Nadja nodded to Colette’s question. “There is!”

“What is it?”

“I want clothes like the Applefield uniform.”

“Oh?”

“You couldn’t mistake someone from Applefield if you passed them by, even in the city! I’ve outgrown my old one, though...”

“...!” Colette smiled tenderly. “Got it. I’ll put my heart into it.”

“Mom! Thank you!”

Nadja shared with her stepfather Albert her determination to embark on her journey.

“I thought it was about time.” Albert firmly nodded. “Follow your heart.”

“Thanks for everything, Albert.”

Her words put a resolute smile on Albert.

“I want to show my gratitude as well. Thank you, Nadja. The days we spent together were refreshing. I had fun. You proved yourself an excellent student and a wonderful daughter.”

“Economics, philosophy, and those other subjects... I learned a lot from you, even about the cultures and lifestyles of distant, faraway countries. It was difficult, and I still don’t quite understand most of it, but it was fascinating!”

The countless memories Nadja shared with Albert surfaced from her heart.

“I had a lot of fun meeting those artists and scholars, too. They were earnest people. Sure, they were strange at times—maybe even intimidating to the point of being scary—but their passions drove them, and I think that’s wonderful.”

“Glad to hear it. All that you’ve seen, heard, and experienced in Vienna will hold their purpose as you go through life. I promise you.”

“Got it. If you say so, Albert, then it must be true.” Nadja grinned as she adjusted her posture. “I leave Mom in your care. Please take care of her.”

“You’ve no need to worry. She’s my wife, who’s more precious to me than anything in this world. And you, Nadja—you are my daughter who I cherish more than any treasure in this world.”

“Albert...!”

They were words for Nadja to cherish indeed.

“Embark on your journey, but don’t bear any burden too heavy on your shoulders. Return to Vienna should you have the opportunity. Never forget that there’s always a place for you here.”

“Got it!” She answered, her warm chest thumping as her breath grew forceful and her eyes welling with tears.

The following day, Nadja visited the Preminger family’s mansion.

Darkness curtained the Duke’s study. Its coolness and its quiet that proved as solemn as the ocean’s depths remained unchanged.

Nadja announced her decision to her grandfather.

“I see. Very well,” said the Duke.

He gave a dignified nod from the opposite end of his spacious desk where he performs his official duties.

“Always conduct yourself so to not bring shame to the Preminger name, no matter when or where. Choose between right and wrong with the utmost conviction, and carry your words with confidence. Affirm your strength and stand tall against those who oppose you. Do not falter, and do not hesitate to lend a helping hand to the weak and incapable.”

The calm weight of her grandfather’s words soaked into Nadja’s breast.

“I understand, Grandfather.”

Her firm response prompted the Duke to relax his expression.

“Your tutors will surely be disappointed. They unanimously confessed that you were a very competent student.”

“I loved the teachers that you chose for me, Grandfather.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said the Duke, his expression turned obsidian. “To tell the truth, I haven’t fully resigned my intention to make you the heir.”

“What...?” Nadja recoiled.

“Relax. I won’t pressure you into it any longer.”

“.....!”

“The 20th century has dawned, and society is shifting on a grand scale. The government and the world’s economy will cause a rift between reality and the age-old social system. This friction will continue, and as the rift grows bigger, a great war may break out.”

“War...”

Nadja knew no such story or history from the book she’s read. It was truly a word that incited fear.

“There will be major changes in society as the world transforms, and the world of nobles may submit to that same fate.” The Duke continued. “Regardless, I hold the responsibility

in that shifting society to carry forward the history and traditions that connect us to our Preminger ancestors.”

“.....”

Of course, Nadja at present bore no intention of inheriting the dukedom, though she has grown to better understand her grandfather’s opposition.

“If you will not become heir, I must find a distant relative who will and crown them as such.”

“I understand...”

“That said, I’m confident in my ability to carry out my duty as the head of the family.” The Duke stared off into the distance. “Nadja... If—and only if you decide to inherit the dukedom—you will shape a new world of aristocracy with your values. You will grant new meaning to the concept of nobility, and I don’t see this as a bad thing.”

“Grandfather...”

The Duke sprung from his seat and approached her.

“Nadja, nearly three years have passed, and in that time I’ve come to understand one thing—you are without a doubt my granddaughter.”

“I... I feel the same!” Nadja, rendered motionless, gazed into her grandfather’s eyes. “You are without a doubt my grandfather. You are my beloved grandfather...!”

The Duke craned his eyebrows.

“Thank you, Nadja,” he said in a gentle voice, holding Nadja in a frugal but firm hug.

Since that meeting, Nadja questioned her belief for the first time.

“Grandfather...”

Nadja, enveloped in her Grandfather’s warmth, reflected upon the meaning of happiness.



第 2 章



Francis's Fragrance  
of the White Rose

The day of the ball approaches.

Every day, the merry servants of House Preminger engrossed themselves in the preparations for the party.

“We want to make this an unforgettable birthday for Miss Nadja,” they said in high spirits. Though Nadja’s plan to leave the next day was yet to be known.

In Count Waldmüller’s mansion, Colette helped Nadja pack her luggage in her room.

“Let’s keep your things tidy for when you leave,” said Colette, laying out several dresses for Nadja. “And this too.”

She held out the dress she knitted—the dress that resembles the Applefield uniform. Nadja hastily put it on and found it a perfect fit.

*What a relief..*

Nadja felt at ease, but underneath the respite lay an inevitable loneliness that awaits her when she parts from her mother’s coddling warmth.

“Let me know when you grow taller. I’ll knit another dress and send it to you.”

“I will! Thank you, Mom!”

Nadja was surrounded by her belongings. Among them were the diary she always keeps with her and the many books Albert recommends she reads on her journey. Everything couldn’t fit inside her mother’s beloved trunk, so she made use of a spare suitcase.

“I think I’ll leave this with you.” Nadja held out her mother’s diary.

“Oh, how nostalgic!”

Colette’s days of youth and the name of her ballroom dance partner were chronicled on its pages. It was no ordinary diary; not with it arriving alongside her mother’s dress in a trunk sent to Applefield Orphanage. A sender wasn’t named, but truth be told, it was Edna—Colette’s wet nurse—who dispatched it.

Edna explained to Colette that her baby had died, divulging a lie that left Nadja with no mother to speak of. In the end, Edna sent off the trunk, her guilt prevailing over her sin.

“As I travelled with the Dandelion Troupe, I sought to meet the people mentioned in your diary. I asked every person I met about you, Mom.”

“My...”

“I couldn’t read it at the time because it was in German, but Abel could. Just looking at it gave me a feeling that you were close by, even though I couldn’t make sense of your words.”

“In that case, take it with you.”

“No—it’s fine, Mom. This diary belongs to you. It’s my turn to record my encounters in my own diary.”

“Right. You *are* setting foot into a new world on your own!” said Colette as she fondly flicked through her diary. “While we’re at it, there’s another story I’ve yet to tell you.”

“Hm?”

“It’s about your father, Raymond, and how I met him.”

“Oh! I want to hear it! I want to hear how you and Dad got together!”

Nadja had already heard about Colette’s life with Raymond in their Paris apartment. But it only told the story of their life *after* Nadja had been born. Everything until then remained a mystery.

“How did you know he was your soulmate? How did you come to marry?”

“Slow down, I’ll tell it from the beginning.” Colette showed a soft smile. “I met Raymond at my first ball.”

“So it was your first ball...”

“I was 16. Back then, it was a whole other world of gleams and sparkles. I had so many firsts that my nerves were uncontrollable. My heart beat faster for every person I danced with. It was suffocating—I stepped out onto the balcony because I needed a breather, and that was when I heard a piano.”

“Was it Dad? Was it him playing it!?”

“Yes, it was! I had never heard such a lovely song. The nostalgic melody beckoned me to the steps of the balcony, down into an unlit room overlooking the garden. It wasn’t lit, but I could see him there, his back facing me as he played the piano. Oh, how beautiful the moon was that night. He felt my presence then—because he turned to face me, and said...” Colette’s cheeks flushed red as she seemed hesitant to continue. “‘You are like a fairy’, he said.”

“...!”

“The moment our gazes met, I knew—I knew that he was my soulmate.”

“That’s wonderful...”

“His friend invited him to the mansion, but he preferred to play music in solitude than blend in with the ambience of the ball. Then, a waltz took off in the banquet hall, and it was *that* song! The same one they played when you and Francis danced for the first time!”

Colette hummed a melancholic melody.

“Raymond knelt before me and held out his hand. He said, ‘Will you dance with me?’ I took his hand as my answer.”

“How romantic! Was that when you started seeing each other?”

“Nope. Afterwards, I scoured the ballroom all over to find him, but he was nowhere to be seen.”

“.....!”

“I wanted to see him again... It was a morose feeling I couldn’t shake off. Every day I would relive that moment—the piano, the sound of his voice, the waltz we danced, the hand he offered me... If he was my soulmate, I believed, surely then, that we would meet again.”

“And then? What happened next?” Nadja leaned her figure forward.

Colette smiled back and continued.

“Two years after the ball, we invited a new piano teacher to my home, and it was him! It was Raymond! I felt my heart skip a beat! We didn’t exchange words. There was no need, because

his feelings were clear. Raymond felt the same—he was thinking about me all that time!”

“...!”

“We reunited after so long, as if the benevolent Goddess of Destiny was gently pushing us together. Father was in an outrage, of course. He wanted to draw us apart at all costs, because Raymond didn’t bear any mark of nobility. I eloped from my home in Vienna when Raymond and I decided we would walk a new path in life together.”

“So that’s what happened...”

Nadja listened carefully to Colette’s story of her past. If she had heard it after their reunion when she was 13, there were likely sentiments she couldn’t relate to.

*Destiny laid out this path for Mom. She loved Dad with all her heart, yet he passed away so suddenly... Mom must have been desperate to raise me. Yet she heard that I, her daughter, had died. I couldn’t imagine how tough it must have been.*

“Listen, Nadja...” She turned to face her daughter, smiling dolefully. “I want to hear your story too.”

“My story?”

“I heard some of it already when you came to Vienna. About Francis and Keith.”

“Oh...”

Colette peered at Nadja’s expression that turned a delicate red. “Nadja—you told me that Francis might be your soulmate, but you weren’t so sure about your feelings for him after meeting Keith.”

“Mhm. ‘When the time comes, your feelings will guide you,’ were your words.”

Colette did give that advice. Whether it is choosing between Francis or Keith, or that perhaps her soulmate might be someone else—Nadja will arrive at the answer, when the time comes.

Rumours spread that the Marquis Harcourt family crept at the brink of financial ruin before Francis stepped in for its

miraculous recovery. Naturally, he accomplished this while carrying out his deeds of noblesse oblige.

Fortune and status; noblesse oblige proclaims that those blessed with such things must provide for those who don't. This is Francis's credo—his drive to help the poor. In Vienna, Francis often visited Nadja whenever the opportunity arose. He was always kind, and beneath his kindness shined an inner strength. The mere show of his face or the sound of his voice sent Nadja's heart fluttering.

*Is this my destiny? Is Francis my one and only soulmate?*

As if reading Nadja's thoughts, Colette spoke.

"Is he your destined soulmate? This is what you're now unsure of."

"Right. I feel like what you said to me before will make sense when I become an adult."

"So, the Goddess of Destiny's clock has stopped for you."

"What do you mean? Her clock stopped?"

"Right—it's stopped because you haven't met Keith in a long time."

"...!"

"Which is why you're unsure and can't decide. That's fine, because it was the same for me—the clock stopped for me too until I met Raymond again.

"...!"

"Eventually, it'll resume ticking. Be ready for when it does by being the wonderful Nadja that you are. All right?"

"All right!"

They returned to packing Nadja's belongings after exchanging smiles, cherishing what little time remained for them to spend as mother and daughter.

Nadja's 16<sup>th</sup> birthday ceremony received a grand opening at Duke Preminger mansion's banquet hall. The chandeliers' dazzling light and the chamber orchestra's stellar performance delighted the guests. Dressed for the occasion, they took off to a

flight of dance, their hearts enveloped by an aroma infused with ballroom's perfumes and fragrances.

The party attendees weren't limited to those in Austria; distinguished noble families and other personages from Europe gathered there. Nadja, having her wish granted, even invited ordinary townsfolk who she befriended at cafés and parks in Vienna, her personal tutors also attending by invitation.

Nadja adorned herself in a soft pink dress chosen by Colette, who did up Nadja's golden hair with a pink ribbon and rose flower. It gave her daughter a modest and mature look.

"Nadja, you are like a flower that has bloomed," said Colette, smiling.

Guest after guest approached Nadja to give her their earnest birthday wishes.

*I'm so thankful...*

This feeling enveloped Nadja.

*Everyone is here to celebrate my birthday... I have the support of so many people,* she thought.

*It's not only those at this party—I have the support of everyone I've met on my journey so far. There was a time when I felt I could do anything on my own, but reality was far from it. It's thanks to them that I'm able to stand here right now.*

Francis Harcourt gave Nadja his blessing once more.

"Congratulations on your 16th birthday, Nadja."

"Thanks, Francis. I'm so happy you came all the way from England to see me!"

"If it's celebrating you, Nadja, I'd go anywhere."

"Francis..."

At that moment, the ensemble launched into song—Johann Strauss II's "The Blue Danube", an orchestra befitting an Austrian waltz.

"Shall we dance?" Francis unfolded his arm in a witty manner.

"Sure."

The two joined hands and took off to dance. Francis, with his arm around Nadja's body, veiled her in his warmth as they

danced the waltz. He wore a rose on his person—a white rose, that for each step he took diffused a fresh aroma as though it had bloomed during morning twilight.

Nadja helplessly gazed at Francis, whose expression bore an amiable smile with his lips parted. The ball brimmed with many other guests also dancing, but Nadja was immersed in a world of her own.

The curtains closed on the waltz.

“I want to talk.” Nadja announced to Francis.

“As a matter of fact, I do too.”

“Oh...?”

The pair withdrew from the banquet to the outdoor balcony, where the ribbon in Nadja’s hair swayed in the gentle breeze of the night. In the backdrop, another waltz started. Muffled voices of men and women wove into the orchestral melody, creating ripples of sound that Francis and Nadja could hear from beyond the glass doors before them.

“Francis, I—”

Nadja shared her determination to reunite with the Dandelion Troupe on their journey.

“That’s very much like you. That’s what Nadja would do. You want to see for your own what the vast world has to offer while lending a helping hand to your Applefield siblings. Your motivation touches me, and I want to support you sincerely.”

“I’ll be in touch when I go to London! I learnt ballet thanks to Grandfather. Let me show you how much I’ve improved!”

“Sure.”

“And I’ll try to send out a letter or postcard, wherever I might be.”

“Thank you, Nadja.”

“What about you, Francis?”

“Hm?”

“What did you want to talk about?”

“Ah, about that... I’ve decided. If I want to continue aiding the poor, I need to progress in a different direction.”



“Hm? What do you mean?”

“As you know, until now I’ve been donating money to hospitals, churches, and foster homes that shelter orphans. I even play with the kids there.”

“Yeah.”

In a memory not so long ago, Nadja bumped into Francis as he visited the children at a foster home to offer his donation.

“I don’t think I’m mistaken in my prior actions. I have acquaintances—noble ones—who share the same notion, and they’re wonderful people. But I’m considering that perhaps there’s a more fundamental way I can help children who live in poverty.”

*A fundamental way...?*

Francis then uttered the answer to the question ruminating in Nadja’s mind.

“I want to offer education.”

“Education?”

“Children born into families that live in poverty work from an early age out of necessity. They must eat, after all. They’re driven to survive destitution and can’t read, write, or even do basic math. It’s the same with their parents, whose children who don’t know any better will follow suit. They struggle desperately in poverty with no hope of breaking out of this cycle.”

“...”

“Those on the breadline—they can’t read or count and thus are deceived by malicious crooks. Hard labour is the only choice for them. Any plans they harbor for the future will never bear fruit, nor do they have the choice of reading books to pursue a goal that can make a difference. If they could learn to do those two basic things, then little-by-little, their lives can change. Because the knowledge you gain of your own volition...”

“...cannot be stolen by anyone.” Nadja claimed Francis’s words as her own.

“Nadja, how did you...”

“Grandfather said so. He encouraged me to study and pursue knowledge. The more I engrossed myself in learning, the more exposure I gained to new things.”

“Ah, the Duke said that...” Francis showed an uplifted expression. “I’d also like schools to provide milk and bread for lunch. This offering will draw in the impoverished, that much I expect. Those toiling to survive won’t feel compelled to attend otherwise. So be it if the children only turn up for an hour. So long as they keep attending, then it’s as you say, Nadja, that the exposure will help them learn new things.”

“You’re right! Oh, Francis, it’s a wonderful idea!”

“Thank you. I want schools to be a place where even adults willing to learn can attend.”

“Perhaps, even parents and their children can go together!”

“Oh, splendid idea.” Francis nodded with a smile. “I’d also like to personally teach any children struggling to learn.”

“I said I’d show you my ballet should our journey take us to London, but... Francis, if I visit London, I’ll drop by your school. I can teach a special class for the kids who love to sing and dance!”

“Nadja... That would be a blessing.” Francis paused for a moment before he continued.

“There’s something I need to ask of you, Nadja.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll be travelling to various countries with the Dandelion Troupe, right? If by any chance you bump into Keith, reach out to me.”

“...!”

“Keith’s been living in Switzerland to shake off his trail from the Black Rose ruckus. I visited him there on occasion—we talked at length about how we can eliminate discrimination from this society. One day, though, he disappeared.”

“Hm...” Nadja had already heard this from Francis.

Where could Keith be? What is he doing right now? These questions entangled her mind.

“You know, Keith is the only brother I have. I trust that he’s doing well, but I just can’t shake off my worries.”

“...I got it. If I catch wind of anything to do with Keith, I’ll be in touch.”

“I appreciate it. Actually... Keith was the one who struck up the idea of building schools while we were chatting in Switzerland.”

“You’ll meet him again, I’m sure of it.”

“Yeah.”

Wind blew over their conversation. Between the clouds that floated by, the bright, parading surface of the moon shimmered into view.

“You and Keith are moving forward with your lives. I’m sure you’ll both be busy,” said Nadja.

Francis nodded back. “But if you’re giving it your all, Nadja, you reassure me to do my best too.”

“Me too, Francis!” she said, looking up at Francis whose visage reflected a sudden sorrow.

“Francis...?”

In but a moment, Francis seized Nadja in a forceful embrace, cloaking her in his warmth and the fragrance of his white rose.

“...!”

“Nadja...” He addressed her, his voice hoarse. “I don’t want to let you go, even for a moment. I want to feel you this close to me—always.”

Intense emotion imbued his words. They plunged into Nadja’s eardrums, the intensity rushing through her body so forcefully that it made her heart ache.

*Francis... What is this suddenly?*

He continued. “Nadja, you are a small bird destined to roam free through the skies. There’s no happiness for you in the confines of a birdcage, no matter how beautiful or comfortable it may be. I myself know this to be true. That’s why I won’t stop you—I want you to be happy, now and forever.”

“...”

*I need to say something. Anything...*

His confession rendered Nadja speechless. Lost in her feelings, she couldn't find the right words to say, yet she resolved to break her silence.

“Francis, I—”

“Don't.”

Francis rested a finger at Nadja's lips and shook his head.

“...!”

She could feel warmth in Francis's touch.

“If you're not sure, say nothing. I don't want a response. I want to tell you how I feel—that's all.”

“Francis...”

He loosened the arm cushioning Nadja and put both hands on her shoulders.

“No matter how far apart we are or how much time passes, my feelings won't change. I love you, Nadja. You are my destined soulmate.”

“...! Your... soulmate...”

Francis bowed his head and smiled, when the next waltz started.

“This song...!”

“Ah, it's that song...”

On the night of the ball hosted at the Harcourt mansion, Nadja met Francis for the first time. They danced together in the moonlight to that song, as did Colette and Raymond under the gleam of a moon long past.

Nadja and Francis's hands found their way to each other. They danced while gazing at the moon in the night sky.

At long last, the day that Nadja embarks on her journey has come.

The Dandelion Troupe plan to perform for several days in the Austrian city of Salzburg, which Nadja plans to reach by hopping aboard a connecting stagecoach.

As the mother and daughter finished up their breakfast that morning, Colette called the eager Nadja into her room.

“I want you to take this,” she said, holding out a small, red velvet bag.

“What could this be?”

Nadja gasped at its contents: sixteen diamonds, each emitting their own magnificent glitter.

“As your mother, I felt obliged to get your birthday presents even after the terrible news that you had died. I bought one every year for your birthday. ‘May both you and Raymond live happily in heaven,’ I prayed.”

“Mom...”

“I bought another one, even now that you’re back. You’ll be free from here on—free on a journey across the vast world. That’s why I’d like you to take them with you. Should you find yourself in any trouble, they might come in handy!”

Nadja eyed the diamonds resting in her palm. Their worth couldn’t be mistaken; she couldn’t imagine how valuable they must be. But she placed no importance on their value. She was assured—and heartened—by the love that drove her mother to collect these diamonds that twinkle like stars in the night sky.

*They twinkle... as if Mom is whispering to me.*

“Thank you, Mom.”

“I thank you too, Nadja,” she replied. “Also... Albert has a gift for you.”

“But Albert’s given me plenty of books ahead—“

Colette, who slipped a mischievous look on her face, broke Nadja off.

“Shh...” Colette pointed to her ear.

“...?”

*Toot!*

A loud steam whistle blared.

“Huh!?”

It was a nostalgic whistle—a whistle Nadja counted the days to hear.

“It can’t be!?”

She peeped through a window into the garden where the Trick Circus Car stood. Albert, who was waving his hand by the carriage entrance, couldn’t help but grin at the sight of Nadja galloping towards him.

“I’m being overprotective, but thinking about what would happen on the off-chance that you couldn’t meet with the Dandelion Troupe made me anxious. So, I got a hold of them and they agreed to meet with us!”

“Thank you, Albert!” Nadja leapt into his chest and then into Colette’s as she stepped out from the mansion entrance.

The Trick Circus Car towered before Nadja; its sizable frame, persistent quivers, and high-pressure noises were as familiar as ever.

The door opened.

“Hey!” said the Chief, sticking his head out.

The rest of the troupe followed suit as they waved and called out to Nadja with smiles on their faces.

“Nadja!!”

“Everyone!!”

Nadja’s journey with the Dandelion Troupe begins once more.

第 3 章



Farewell,  
Trick Circus Car

George Haskill, the Chief, is the same musclemán of a giant he was before. He welcomed Nadja aboard with a kind and firm handshake.

Anna Petrova, the old but loving Granny, seems to have aged only slightly since parting with Nadja, though at a glance her build seems to have shrunk.

Abel Geiger, the clown, greeted Nadja with a jestful bow, his eyes showing their usual warmth.

Thomas O'Brien, the violinist whose demeanour hasn't changed one bit, played a short melody for Nadja as he wore a bashful smile.

Kennosuke Tsurugi, the samurai warrior, stood tall with his newfound height that now surpasses Nadja's. Despite the difference in stature, his greeting remained affable.

"How ya doin'?" Welcome back!" he said, his eyes dazzling as he gave Nadja a firm slap on the back.

Rita Rossi, the lion tamer who bore qualities typical of an adolescent girl, is now a young lady. Her eyes emanating a brilliant sparkle, she hugged Nadja close.

Speaking of those who have grown, Crème and Chocolat, the lions who were often mistaken for enormous cats, have towered ahead of the pack. Sweet and playful young lions they were, but no longer—they have grown into mature lions with a majestic aura. They leapt at Nadja, evidently remembering her fondly, and Nadja didn't show an ounce of fear despite getting tackled to the ground.

The troupe reunited, but Nadja's jubilation didn't last long—the absence of an important troupe mate brought her eyebrows together.

"Huh? Where's Sylvie?"

Sylvie Arte, the songstress, was like an older sister to Nadja. They often danced and sang together.

"Sylvie's quit," said the Boss.

"Wait—she quit?"



“Remember Raphael? The troubadour? Sylvie hasn’t given up on him.”

“She’s still chasing Raphael...?”

Raphael, the troubadour, is a delicate man on a lonely journey.

“I shall love no one for the rest of my life”, he said.

Such is the obstacle Sylvie faces.

“Rest easy, Nadja. My crystal ball tells me that happiness is on Sylvie’s side.” Granny gently clasped Nadja’s hands and shared her divination.

“Mm... If you say so, Granny, I won’t fuss over it.”

The troupe smiled at Nadja’s optimism.

*I’ve come back, she thought once more, to the Dandelion Troupe!*

As a group of travelling performers, the Dandelion Troupe possess two distinctive qualities.

The first quality—each member hails from a different country. George and Abel are German. The aged but skilful Granny is Russian, and Thomas the violinist is Irish. The lion tamer Rita is Italian, whereas the sword-drawing expert Kennosuke is Japanese. Nadja, though she is a bona fide Austrian, was raised in England. The lions, Crème and Chocolat, were born in Africa. Incidentally, the former member and songstress Sylvie is of French origin.

The second quality—the troupe possesses an extraordinary motor vehicle: the Trick Circus Car. Built by the Chief a long time ago, it is an automobile bigger than anyone has ever seen. Not only does it serve as a home and method of transportation for the troupe, but it also unfolds into a stage where the Chief and his crew performs. Cogwheels of all shapes and sizes comprise the automobile’s tricky gadgetry, and with its frame supported by three layers of wood, the Trick Circus Car can expand outward to reveal its stage. This in itself is a sight to

behold; it charms the audiences' hearts and is as much of a spectacle as the troupe's performance.

Their journey went as planned.

First in the troupe's order of business is a show at a city middle-west of Austria: the historic Salzburg, a city immersed in music and yearly festivals that hold in its root Mozart's legacy.

With the Trick Circus Car's bustling music, the costumed troupe signalled their presence across public parks and prominent parts of Salzburg, sticking up posters along the way.

Their preparations are now in order. They readied themselves to perform. Spectators crowded the city plaza with commotions of applause and cheer as the Trick Circus Car jutted out its stage.

The Chief leapt into view.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! We come bringing love, hopes, and dreams! The Dandelion Troupe has arrived!"

A thundering round of applause ensued.

"Introducing our stars!" The Chief announced his members one by one.

"Thomas, the melancholic violinist! Abel, the department of laughs! Kennosuke, who hails from Japan, the nation of gold! Rita, the smallest lion tamer in the world! Crème and Chocolat, the lion twins! Granny, the senior mentor shrouded in riddles and mystery! And, myself—the compassionate giant with superhuman strength—George, the Chief! Last but not least...!"

A suspenseful pause accompanied his final exclamation.

"She's been away for some time, but after three years, she's back! A miracle of dance sweeping down from the heavens... Our star, Nadja!!"

The audience's roars and cheers welcomed Nadja, who entered the stage with a flight of dance.

Success blessed the Dandelion Troupe's three-day excursion. Nadja's singing and dancing have improved dramatically; it left her troupe mates gaping and the audience brimming with joy.

Passing the beautiful mountains of the Tyrol Alps, the troupe continued in the Trick Circus Car to their next port of call.

Dusk came.

Nothing could be seen or heard beyond the veil of darkness under Nadja's nose, yet her excitement was indomitable.

*I want to reach our next stop. I want to dance...*

Her thoughts were restless.

The rest of the troupe had retired to their own spaces that night, but Nadja couldn't catch a wink of sleep. She returned to the dining area and tended to her pointe shoes. There were two others awake; Thomas was maintaining his violin, and the Chief was commanding the wheel.

"We'll keep going a bit further for tonight," he said.

The Trick Circus Car reverberated a warm, assuring cacophony. Nadja submitted to its vibrations, savouring the car's comfortable mood.

"The sounds and vibrations—they're nice," Thomas said abruptly, startling Nadja.

"Oh, could you tell what was on my mind?"

"Yeah—I thought the same thing. I'm sure everyone feels the same."

"I think so too." Nadja nodded and opened up to a story. "You know, when I lived at Applefield, Mr Evans would always bring out anthologies of poems to read to us."

"...?"

"One of them was about sailors who have gone ashore. They longed to return to the seas—ship sails swaying in the wind, seagulls crying beneath the drifting clouds, and sailors aboard cracking into laughter. They lived in this wanderlust and wished for nothing more. That's what the poem was about."

"John Masefield's 'Sea-Fever', right?"

"Oh! You know it too?"

“That I do. It’s a wonderful poem.”

“Looking back... I had a lot of fun with Mom and everyone else in Vienna. But now and then, that poem came to mind, and I felt I shared the same wanderlust as those sailors longing to return to the sea.”

Thomas gently smiled. “Yeah...”

“I’m back, aren’t I?”

“You sure are. You’re back with us now.”

“I hope we can keep living like this for the days to come...!”

“Yeah, we sure will.”

Nadja couldn’t contain her excitement.

She will travel aboard the Trick Circus Car with her companions, now and forever.

Where will we go next?

What people will we meet?

These thoughts filled Nadja with emotion. Her heart pounded with excitement.

At the time, she couldn’t even dream of it; it was a catastrophe that befell the life she longed for. It was unthinkable that it would crumble to nothing—and all too soon.

The following day, rain poured.

A storm engulfed the city of Innsbruck, the troupe’s current venue. The fierce rain washed away their shadow no matter where they drove. For a moment, the storm abated into a drizzle, giving the troupe a glimmer of hope that they could continue. It was but an illusion masking their optimism, for the clouds soon resumed their downpour. The show could not go on. Nor is there any hope of them receiving an audience.

“The rain seems heaviest in this area.”

Abel and Kennosuke who went food shopping carried on this conversation.

With his arms folded, the Chief glared up at the thick of grey where rainfall surged through. Eventually, he spoke.

“That’s it—everyone, change of plans!” he said. “Let’s wrap up and move to our next stop!”

Their next venue lies beyond the national border of Germany—the city of Munich.

After heading west from Innsbruck and joining onto a highway that leads north and north-east, the Trick Circus Car was journeying on the right course.

“Sigh... This rain sure is gloomy. I want it to fizzle out already.”

“Let’s pick up the pace, Chief.”

Kennosuke and Rita felt on edge. The Chief, however, knew better.

“No, no—this rain won’t let up any time soon. We’re done for if we skid through the mud.”

They continued on and on, yet downpour enfolded the horizon.

“The entire world isn’t plundered in rain, is it?” Thomas cracked a joke that sent everyone into laughter.

When dusk settled, the sky shrouded in darkness turned an even darker black, as if night had come early. In the depths of the mountains, the Trick Circus Car drove on a narrow road where a river flowed alongside it, a precipice lying just beyond.

Suddenly...

*Bang!* A powerful crash halted the car.

“What happened?”

Everyone rose up, the Chief and Kennosuke leaping off the vehicle. When Nadja descended from the car, she noticed the Chief peering into its underside with a lamp in hand.

He raised his dispirited head. “We’ve run aground over a boulder. The axle’s knocked out of gear.”

The endless rain crashed into the soil surrounding the boulder, washing away and revealing the surface underneath.

“Oh no... What do we do?” Rita said worriedly. Kennosuke showed her a forward jab to calm her down.

“Relax! Give me and the Chief an hour and we can get this fixed in no time.”

“Working in this rain will be anything but easy.”

“Thomas has a point. Maybe we should wait until the rain dies down a bit?”

They couldn’t disagree with Abel and Thomas.

“We’ve no choice but to wait. Let’s prepare dinner!” Nadja encouraged. It was her attempt to dispel the anxiety seated in their hearts.

The Trick Circus Car lingered in silence. Without the humming of its engine, the rain seemed even more vicious; it crashed against the road, barraging the soil with a thundering rhythm that added to the torrential violence. The growls of distant thunder further amplified the troupe’s collective anxiety.

The Granny spurred as she stood up. “You’re right—we’ve got plenty of ingredients. Let’s cook up a feast!”

However, this notion proved fleeting. The Chief, observing the sky with a sullen face and his arms folded, denied any hopes of dinner.

“Wait!” he said, “Everyone, go get your belongings.”

“Huh!? What do you mean?” Nadja retorted.

The Chief faced her with a smile to appease her barefaced worry.

“Look—there’s nothing to worry about. The Trick Circus Car will stand headstrong against this petty rain. But, just in case—just in case the worst-case scenario plays out—let’s bring our luggage up the cliff.”

“Just in case? Do you promise?” Rita anxiously probed. Crème and Chocolat also whimpered uncomfortably.

“I promise. It’s just for the worst-case scenario. I’m very careful at times like this, you know.” The Chief jested. “You can mock me later if my cautiousness was for nothing.”

The troupe voiced no further objections.

*I'm sure it'll be fine. We're doing this just in case.*

Nadja affirmed this while packing into her trunk most of her belongings she brought from Vienna. For Rita and Granny's things, the Chief gave them a helping hand.

"Good! Everyone, stay put. I need to head back once more to grab something."

"Be careful, Chief!"

The troupe watched over him as his figure dissolved into the darkness. In its depths, they could hear the waves of the flowing river growing fiercer. Bolts of lightning dashed through the sky, vibrations of ominous thunder following its trail.

"Everyone'll catch a cold at this rate," said Kennosuke, to which Abel responded with a clap at his chest.

"Don't worry—my medicine is incredibly effective."

"No way! I don't want your bitter medicine!" Rita pulled a wry face at him.

The troupe joked against the unease, but before long, a bellow of thunder echoed with a flash of lightning. In that moment of diurnal clarity, Nadja noticed something: the river had well-nigh flooded over and submerged the entire highway.

"...!"

It looked nothing like it did at dusk; the river is now a whirlpool of violent, muddy streams of water. Lightning struck once more after the darkness returned. This time, the flash of light illuminated the Trick Circus Car, and descending from it, the Chief, who hoisted a large, jet-black silhouette on his shoulder.

*What is that...?*

Again and again, roaring echoes of thunder split the troupe's ears. The Chief's features gradually came into view amid the darkness, and that was when the scent of machine oil trickled Nadja's nose.

*This smell...*

Kennosuke revealed its true nature.

"Chief, that's—that's the Trick Circus Car's engine!"

“Wait! Why would you—”

Another round of lightning thwarted Nadja’s attempt to speak.

“Aaah!!” Everyone thrust their voices into a shriek.

In one gulp, the river water surged forward and swamped the highway, and with its arm-like waves, it made little work of swallowing up the Trick Circus Car.

“Noooooooo!!”

Nadja clamoured.

Flashes of lightning and roars of thunder overlapped one after the other as the Dandelion Troupe witnessed the tragedy.

Their home, their legs, their stage, and their precious companion... The Trick Circus Car was being washed away before their very eyes!

“No! Stop! Stop!!” Rita lost her wits and dashed forward, Thomas having to restrain her.

Nadja heard the Chief murmur only one word.

“Farewell...”

Further lightning crackled in the sky, and in that short glimmer, the Trick Circus Car could no longer be seen.

No one moved.

No one uttered a word.

No one could do a thing.

The troupe absentmindedly treaded by foot through the mountain path under the Chief’s guidance.

At last, a tiny village came into view.

A modest church stood at its centre. The troupe huddled inside along with other anxious bands of men and women taking refuge from the destruction that swept everything away, even homes built by the riverside.

The villagers offered dry towels, blankets, and even bread and warm soup to the refugees. Nadja and her companions, still operating at half capacity, patted their dripping-wet bodies dry



and covered themselves in blankets. The warm bread and soup restored some of their spirit, although their show of good health could merely be a facade to reciprocate the villagers' kindness. As a group of complete strangers, the troupe still felt grateful for the hospitality they received.

For a while, they said nothing to each other.

Images of the Trick Circus Car getting swept away have seared into Nadja's mind. She cried as her loneliness and sorrow further fanned the flame of regret. The troupe shared her distress.

The Chief spoke.

"This right here—is his soul," he said as he lovingly stroked the engine by his side. "Yep. His body got swept away, but his soul is still here with us."

The Chief turned to the engine and continued.

"Hey, partner. I promise I'll build a new body for you someday. Mark my words."

Strength, affection, and sadness filled his words.

"Chief..." Nadja wiped her tears away. "You're right. Let's perform with the Trick Circus Car again one day."

Everyone nodded at Nadja, tears still in their eyes.

The rain ceased the following morning.

The sun's incessant rays beamed into the clear azure skies as if yesterday's severe weather was but a nightmare they had woken from.

Losing the Trick Circus Car bore a hole through the troupe's hearts, but they needed a plan to press forward.

"Luckily, we still have our instruments."

"Ah, then we can still do simple acts here and there. Let's keep at it in this area for now."

Granny and Abel shared this exchange. Nadja agreed with them, but the Chief didn't.

“No, we won’t stay here. We’ll aim for Paris.”

“Paris?” Nadja pressed.

“I have friends in Paris from long ago. And besides that, it’s also a major city and the capital of arts and crafts. We’ll have more luck performing there.”

With Munich as a starting point, they plan on passing through the cities of Augsburg and Stuttgart to enter French territory and reach Paris.

“We don’t have the Trick Circus Car anymore! How will we get there!?” Rita was about to cry once again.

The Chief gave her drumming pats on the head. “Once the highway’s restored, we’ll catch a stagecoach. We can make ends meet by performing at each city stop until we reach Paris. We can make it!”

And with that, the troupe set their sights on Paris.

第 4 章



Reunions in Paris

The Paris city folk welcomed the Dandelion Troupe.

The Chief boasted his impressive strength. Abel enacted nimble ball balancing acts alongside his usual magic tricks. Kennosuke showcased his sword drawing skills. Thomas played the violin. Rita instructed Crème and Chocolat who showed a clear understanding of her words. Nadja sang and danced, and Granny imparted to the audience divinations from her crystal ball.

Each performance charmed adults and children alike. This novelty, however, didn't last long.

“Where'd the big automobile go?”

“It's called the Trick Circus Car, right? It was so cool!”

Without fail, the people who remember the troupe from their previous trip to Paris probed Nadja and them about their missing act. They could only brace their answer with a smile. In their hearts, they shed tears for every recollection of the Trick Circus Car getting swept away.

The Trick Circus Car toted itself as the Dandelion Troupe's most iconic feature. It transformed into a stage, sounding lively music that jingled along the cranking of its large cogwheels. This spectacle sparked a light in the audience's eyes, the suspense for the troupe's entrance leaving their hearts afloat.

It served as their home and method of transportation. Moreover, it belonged to the Dandelion Troupe as a fully fledged member and a star of its own right. Surely then, the performers who heralded a feat like the Trick Circus Car have other tricks up their sleeve.

“Pestering about the Trick Circus Car must be taking its toll on them.”

“Yeah. Must be rough.”

Dusk, a few days later.

On their way back to the inn, the Chief and Granny let out a wistful sigh.

“Well, now isn’t the time to be all half-hearted.”

“We can’t make a living like this.”

Further sighs ensued.

“Our audience numbers have dwindled today...” A dull expression clouded over Rita.

“Those leaflets we scattered were for nothing, huh?” Kennosuke curled his lips into a pout.

Abel cocked his head to one side.

“Replacing the Trick Circus Car will be nigh on impossible. Which makes me wonder... Is there something else we have to focus on as our centrepiece?”

No one had an answer.

“Let’s not give up! I’m sure we can think of something. Right?”

As Nadja encouraged her troupe mates, two familiar voices chimed in.

“Nadja!”

“Nadja Applefield!”

“W-What?” Nadja turned around. She stared in wonder at two unexpected figures galloping towards her.

Harvey Livingston and TJ Livingston; the two American brothers who Nadja and the troupe met on their previous journeys. Since becoming acquaintances, both sides have bumped into each other countless times.

Nadja bolted into a dash and joined the brothers in their race to the oldish bridge atop the River Seine. They greeted each other with a firm squeeze.

“Ahaha! I see you’re still full of energy, Nadja!”

“Nadja! I’ve wanted to meet you again for so long!”

Harvey, TJ, and Nadja were elated all the same, and their voices showed it.

“You two look well! But hey—what brings you to Paris?”

“Oh, well, we have newspaper work to do. Montmartre Journal has a head office planted here.” Harvey smiled wryly.

Harvey is a competent newspaper reporter. His younger brother TJ works as his assistant.

“Really—wow! I never thought I’d bump into you guys here of all places.”

“This isn’t a coincidence, y’know. We’ve been out looking for the Dandelion Troupe.” TJ broadly smiled.

“Oh?” Nadja tilted her head.

The Chief approached from behind, also marvelled.

“What d’ya mean you were looking for us?”

“We came back to Paris only yesterday after our week-long trip to Marseille. That’s when we heard an unusual troupe of performers had shown up!”

“Rumours said they had black and white lions—and that their star performer is a tyrolean and umbrella dancer with movements as light as a fairy’s!”

TJ’s cheeks flushed red as he mumbled.

Harvey continued. “Couldn’t have been anyone else but the Dandelion Troupe, eh? When I heard those rumours, we tried to find you guys in places you’d ought to be,” he said.

Soon after, his expression stiffened with concern.

“The Trick Circus Car? In shambles?”

For the evening, Nadja and company dined at a bistro and chatted with the Livingston brothers over dinner.

Kennosuke and TJ, who acknowledge each other as rivals, were next-door neighbours at the table. They stared daggers at each other as they crudely argued over their strife for Nadja, while Granny and Rita could only giggle at them. The adults drank wine, though their toasts still met with the children’s glasses of grape juice.

The troupe recollected their story for Harvey. They told it from the beginning when Nadja had reunited with the Dandelion Troupe up to the recent tragedy of losing the Trick Circus Car to the Tyrol Alps.

“I see... Well, this is no laughing matter.” Harvey brooded as if he had lived the experience for himself. “Say... Do you mind if we write a story about this?”

“Of course! I would have asked this much from you.”

The Chief answered in a flash. Any publicity, especially in the newspaper, will put the troupe under the spotlight. Harvey and the Chief chatted about it for some time, and then Nadja broke in with a question.

“Harvey, what sort of news have you been covering?”

“I’m glad you asked! We’ve been investigating a mysterious businessman.”

“Oh, really!”

Harvey nodded then deepened his tone. “His name is Harold Brighton. Aside from that he’s a young Englishman who operates in his Paris headquarters, there’s not much known about him.”

“He’s a businessman, you say. What does he deal in?” Thomas asked.

“He deals in the manufacture of iron and steel, manages several railroad and maritime companies, and he even runs department stores that have branches in London and Paris. His reach is impressive—he has his workings in these industries he invests in, yet he rarely shows himself in public. His personal history is a mystery, too, and no one knows what he looks like since he hates photos of himself being taken. Here—this is the first and only photo we have of his general appearance.”

Harvey held out a photo: many vessels lined up at the Port of Calais, where a slender man stood with his back facing the camera. Due to the backlighting, the shot captured only a perfect silhouette of the man.

“Clinching him for an exclusive interview is my current goal.”

“His lackeys will be on guard. I’m sure it won’t be easy.”

Kennosuke voiced his honest thoughts, to which TJ confidently responded to.

“Harvey can do it!” he said, showing love and respect for his brother.

“I wonder if this Brighton fellow would invest in the Dandelion Troupe?”

Abel cracked a typical clown joke that sent everyone into laughter.

Lively chatter fuelled their reunion until night time. As they left the bistro and set foot outside, Nadja quietly approached Harvey.

Since their reunion, a lone question has endured in Nadja’s mind. She *had* to ask him, but not while everyone was enjoying their meals.

“Hey, Harvey. About Keith—have you heard anything about him? Even Francis is really worried.”

Harvey renewed his expression after taking in her question. “I know nothing for certain. But—I’ve heard rumours,” he said.

When Nadja first met Harvey, he had set out to follow the trail of the Black Rose phantom thief who appeared across the whole of Europe. He would, in a gaudy fashion, steal precious gems and money from people who amass wealth and fortune. He was a chivalrous thief; the people touted him as both a criminal and a prominent figure of the community. To the masses, his face was a mystery hidden beneath the mask he dons, but to Harvey, Nadja, and the troupe, they know his true identity to be Keith Harcourt, the elder twin brother of Francis Harcourt.

The last time Nadja spoke to Keith was after she reunited with her mother in Vienna. Francis also accompanied him back then, but Keith’s current whereabouts are unknown.

*Harvey of all people might have a clue.*

Nadja acknowledged this. Harvey captured the Black Rose before, and his work as a newspaper reporter demands information to be his business.

“Rumours, you say? What sort of rumours?” Nadja bent forward with curiosity.



“There’ve been rumours that Keith Harcourt has left mainland Europe to join a British colony.”

“A colony...?”

At the dawn of the 20th century, Britain occupied vast stretches of territory in Canada, Austria, Germany, and even Asia and Africa.

“I’ve heard India and even the far-eastern Malaysia being mentioned. There are countless people at these colonies struggling in poverty, and it seems Keith intends to help them. Ah—I’ve also heard that he no longer commits theft.”

Harvey swiftly clarified that detail when he noticed Nadja’s worried expression.

“Wanting to help those in need is much like Keith. He sure is far away though, in India and Malaysia...”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“But we’ll meet again someday. I just have that hunch.”

Nadja had no basis for her earnest claim. Would Keith return to Europe, or will Nadja travel to Asia? The events to unfold remain shrouded in mystery.

Oliver Applefield marched in high spirits. His boss, a master leatherworker, had entrusted him with visiting the local saddler.

“Full of energy, as usual! You’re an inspiration.” The shopkeeper greeted him before giving her appraisal. “The maternity belt you made for us is really comfortable. It’s been an enormous help!”

Oliver wagged like a dog with two tails. He skipped with joy as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Through Miss Appleton’s recommendation, Oliver had been employed under a leatherworker at his workshop for three years. Oliver’s responsibilities have grown recently, what with his boss now relying on him more often.

*I need to hurry and grow up to be my own man. And then—and then...*

Oliver's cheeks flared up into a bright red.

*I'll go see N-N-N-Nadja. And t-t-this time, I'll say it straight to her face! I lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-love you!*

The red in his face burned even deeper. Ever since they lived under the same roof, Oliver has been in love with Nadja.

Nadja, who mindfully watches over the troublemaking kids.

Nadja, who is talented in singing and dancing.

Nadja, who can run a great distance.

Nadja, who is even amazing at climbing trees.

Nadja, who with her golden hair looks stunning under the clear blue sky.

Nadja, who is like an angel...!

Oliver persistently tried until now to confess his love, but each time, his confession unfolded like so.

"I lo-lo-lo-lo-love...!"

All his attempts backfired. He lamented this obstacle that he couldn't comprehend.

*But when I become a real adult, I'll be able to say it!*

Though they last met three years ago in Vienna, Oliver's feelings for Nadja haven't changed. Not one bit.

*Oh... I want to see you again, Nadja.*

Oliver sighed, his eyes wide open as he vacantly stared at Nadja who emerged from the bakery opposite the road.

*Nadja?!*

Oliver braced himself to rush over before restraining himself.

*Wait, wait, wait—Calm down, Oliver! This timing is far too convenient. Isn't something off?*

Is this a dream? A hallucination? A mirage? I need to make sure—but hold up. Just then, Nadja looked straight in my direction! Isn't that her, delightfully galloping over to me, shouting "Oliver!" with a wholesome smile on her face?

*Ahhh, it really is Nadja!!*

Oliver exploded with joy and called out her name as the two bolted towards each other.

*All right! I'll say it, even though we're not alone! I lo-lo-lo-love you!*

Clasp! Oliver felt his arms being restrained from both sides.

“Eh?”

Holding their grip on Oliver from both sides were none other than Kennosuke and TJ.

“Heya, Oliver!”

“Aren't you doing well!”

Smiling broadly with ridicule reflected in their eyes, they greeted Oliver with an air of intimidation.

*Oi! I won't forgive you two for getting a head start!! Y-You guys...!*

Nadja walked over to them.

“Long time no see, Oliver,” she said.

“N-N-Nadja! I never thought you'd be in P-Paris!”

“I left Vienna and went back to the Dandelion Troupe! We're performing in Paris.”

“What!? You're back with the troupe? How come?”

“Hehe. A lot's happened. I thought I'd visit the store where you work when we're not as busy, so I'm glad we bumped into each other like this.”

“Yeah! I'm so glad to see you!”

“Hey, do you want to come say hello to the troupe?”

“I, uh—I'm in the middle of work right now.”

“Oh, that's too bad.”

That's too bad.

Oliver ricocheted into senseless joy when he heard those words. Kennosuke and TJ meanwhile were evidently humoured by his reaction.

Nadja blissfully ignored their antics and gave Oliver the address of the inn the troupe are lodging at.

*Thank you, Nadja! I'll go watch your performance when I have a day off work!*

Oliver did say this out loud, but the voice in his heart sang a different tune.

*No—not just on my days off... Whenever I'm off work, I'll go see you as soon as I can...!*

He swore by this inner motivation and headed back.

With that, Oliver had been mixed into Kennosuke and TJ's rivalry now turned into a three-way conflict.

Two days after Nadja and Oliver met, the Montmartre Journal published under Harvey's signature a feature article introducing the Dandelion Troupe. It triggered a breakthrough in the troupe's audience numbers.

"This is all thanks to Harvey. Really."

The Chief and everyone else felt indebted to Harvey. But he had yet to go the extra mile.

A few days later, TJ and Harvey visited the troupe and surprised them with something totally unexpected.

"Say—do you guys want to perform in a theatre?"

"Wait—a theatre!?" Nadja retorted.

"A theatre? You mean a theatre with a stage that has guest seating and a roof...?" Kennosuke intently probed.

"Yep! Exactly." Harvey nodded. "It's a small theatre called *Le Signe*. A three-day time slot's opened up since a scheduled play got postponed. The manager thought it would be a waste to leave the stage empty, so he consulted us about anyone who might be interested in hiring that time slot! That's the situation, and that's why the hire amount is so cheap."

The Dandelion Troupe exchanged instinctive glances with each other. They would always perform on street corners no matter where they travelled, and Nadja herself never imagined performing on stage, never mind one with a roof. It was beyond her dreams.

"The location's good. The size of the stage is too. I think it's a great fit for the Dandelion Troupe." Harvey added.

TJ also chimed in. “I went to see it myself. It’s showing its age, sure, but it’s a great theatre!” he said.

“It might work out for us...” The Chief brooded over the offer for some time. “What distinguished the Dandelion Troupe from your average street performers was the Trick Circus Car. But on the streets, people obstruct the view. On stage, we can accommodate a much larger audience! I think a theatre performance, by and large, would really be no different!”

How obvious, thought Nadja and the rest of the troupe.

“You’re right! We’ve been stage performers from the very beginning!”

“Yeah, a theatre would be a piece of cake for us!”

Abel and Thomas sprung out.

“It all sounds like fun! Let’s do it!” said the smiling Rita.

As Granny peered into the crystal ball in her hands, she used her foresight to garnish the troupe’s motivation even further.

“My divination tells me... that performing under a roof will bring wonderful fortune!”

No one voiced any further objections. Even Crème and Chocolat rolled around and purred as if conveying their approval.

For the first time since their foundation, the Dandelion Troupe brought their show to a theatre stage.

The curtains closed on the Dandelion Troupe’s performance at Le Signe Theatre.

The show triumphed. An audience gathered for their theatre debut; people who had read Harvey’s article in the newspaper, people who had already seen the troupe perform on the streets, and even people who were just plain curious all crowded into the theatre.

The troupe shone on stage, just as the Chief had said. Nadja took off into her flamenco, umbrella, and tyrolean dances atop the timber stage, whose polished texture compliments her

dancing more so than the old bricks of the city plaza. The duet Nadja and Rita sang together, the melody of Thomas's violin, and the timely yells of Kennosuke's sword-drawing echoed with a new, profound clarity bolstered by the theatre hall's commodiousness.

The theatre manager is a besuited middle-aged man with black hair and a firm moustache. At first, he scrutinized the Dandelion Troupe as if grading them as part of an examination. The day after their initial show, he beamed an ear-to-ear smile and rushed over to the Chief to shake his hand. He had dropped all of his initial presentiments.

"Let's put aside that I've known Harvey for quite some time. I admit his recommendation of putting street performers on stage made me uneasy. It seems, of course, that my worries were for naught. Your show was magnificent!"

A considerable number of seats were occupied for their opening show, yet it didn't match the growth in numbers the next day. Not only were there newcomers seated, but those who had already seen the previous show returned, this time bringing along their friends and family.

Rain fell the following day.

Under normal circumstances, the troupe would have no business performing in the town square. Under the roof of the theatre, their show could go on worry-free for them and their audience.

With that, the Dandelion Troupe's stage premiere concluded without incident.

"It was perfect all round!"

"Yeah! If only we could keep performing in theatres!"

Everyone shared Thomas and Kennosuke's enthusiasm, feeling immensely grateful to Harvey for the opportunity. By the same token, disappointment crept in with the realization that they must resume performing on the streets without the Trick Circus Car.

"Hey, Chief... Let's hire another theatre."

Rita asked an innocent question. Things weren't as simple as that—it's because the Le Sign Theatre's loan fee was priced generously that the troupe could hire it. Its stage was a perfect fit for the troupe, but to stumble upon another theatre with these same conditions? Some would call this happenstance.

One morning, a half-moon hung in the sky.

The Livingston brothers paid the troupe a visit at the inn. Harvey, who already caught on to the troupe's eagerness to perform at another theatre, said, "Leave it to me. If our performing arts journalists come across anything that meets your needs, they'll be in touch. The truth is, I won't be able to do it myself since I'm leaving Paris."

"Oh, where are you going?" Nadja cocked her head to one side.

TJ responded. "Harvey's off to America for a job. I'm tagging along too!"

"Wow, America! I'd like to visit one day," said Nadja, her eyes gleaming.

To Harvey and TJ, America is their home—the place where they were born and raised. To Nadja, it is a world of unknowns that lay across the vast Atlantic Ocean.

"America, eh? Sounds like quite the trip." Abel cut in, Harvey nodding back.

"Yep. I expect we'll be there for about a month, gathering information in New York."

In pursuit of Harold Brighton, Harvey will voyage to New York to seize information on the mysterious businessman's upcoming contracts. The Montmartre Journal's editor-in-chief, however, wouldn't permit Harvey's overseas pursuit—not without him being tasked with a mountain heap of other matters to report on.

"Massachusetts is our hometown! We're making a stop there to stretch our legs a bit since we're crossing over the Atlantic. I thought we'd visit our parents' graves too. It has been a while."

When TJ was still a child, their parents had passed away, leaving Harvey—who was young and green all the same—to act as his brother’s foster parent.

Harvey brought up TJ in their small New York apartment in the suburbs. Back then, time and money were scarce; the brothers could barely afford to return to their hometown to visit their mother and father’s graves, but fortune has at last granted them the opportunity.

During this time period, passenger boats voyaged across the Atlantic Ocean to travel between Europe and the Americas. It was only recently that a one-way trip to America could take only a week, yet current advancements endowed an arrival time of just five days. For as long as maritime companies keep competing against each other, ships and vessels will grow bigger, longer, and more extravagant. Nevertheless, a round-trip spanning ten days will strap Harvey and TJ in for the long haul.

“Harvey, TJ! Please take care!”

“Nadja... I can’t believe I won’t see you for another month!” TJ cried as he gestured to grab Nadja’s hand.

“Knock it off!” Kennosuke forced his way through. “Don’t get in our way!”

“Hey—shut yer trap!” another voice burst out. By some miraculous timing, Oliver, who had just finished his shift, turned up to set the stage for another fruitless struggle.

Harvey and TJ departed on their trip the following day.

Meanwhile, the Dandelion Troupe went back to the streets to perform.



第 5 章



The Goddess of  
Destiny Beckons

Several days later, in the city square.

Granny spun the record on her gramophone to sound a melody for Nadja to dance along to. Amid the crowd watching, Nadja noticed a man gazing intensely at her. He wore a dark olive suit, a similarly coloured hat, and spectacles with green frames to match. His hair was red, as was the moustache on his upper lip. He gave the impression of a candid and dignified man who looked only a few years older than Harvey. The man stood motionless, observing Nadja's movements with a fortuitous gaze telling the story of a man who had reunited with a long-lost friend.

*Hm? What is it? Who could it be...?*

Her attempted recollections of the man faded away in Nadja's mind.

During a break before the Dandelion Troupe's encore, Nadja took shelter in the tree shade, where she felt someone's presence creeping up on her. She flipped around, and there stood the man from earlier.

"Apologies for my being abrupt, but... Are you by any chance the grandchild of Duke Preminger?"

"Huh?" The sudden question astounded her. "Ah, yes. That's me, Nadja. My name is Nadja Applefield."

She gave a vigilant answer while subduing her confusion.

The man responded exultantly.

"Ah!" He took a deep breath before he spoke. "I see... Just as I thought! You are Colette's daughter, correct?"

"What!?! You know my mother?"

"That I do! I met her in Vienna over 10 years ago. Though it was only once, my memory of her is unforgettable. She gave off an aura of utter beauty and nobility, much like you. You are very much like your mother."

"...! Um..."

Realising that his words were perpetuating discomfort, the man flashed a bashful expression.

“Oh, my apologies. Please pardon my rudeness. My name is Pierre du Pont.”

He courteously introduced himself. Nadja could sense gentleness from his demeanour and manner of speaking.

“Before I started doing legal affairs work in Paris, I was an actor for a theatre company, which was around the time when I met your mother.”

“An actor... you say?”

“Yes. I took up law in university to become a lawyer in my family’s best interests, but I never gave up on pursuing theatre. My conviction led me to join a famous theatre company in Paris. As it turned out, the bud died before it bloomed. I returned to pursuing law when my acting career was run aground.”

He continued after a brief, youthful smile.

“I went along with my group to a show in Vienna where the Waldmüller couple often came to watch us. And one day, they invited the lot of us to their mansion. The producers, stage directors, and actors all gathered there, including Colette.”

“Oh, I see! So you stumbled into me by chance today?”

“Actually, not quite.” Du Pont empathetically refuted. “I watched the performance at Le Signe Theatre a few days ago, and there I saw a young lady who I felt shared many similarities to Colette. When she sang that song, I was astonished.”

“Which song?”

“The lullaby!”

“Oh...!” Nadja let out a quiet gasp.

It was *that* lullaby; it was the lullaby she’s cherished for all this time, the lullaby that her mother sang to her as a baby, and the lullaby that ties her to her mother. That day, on the stage of Le Signe Theatre, Nadja sang that lullaby.

“Colette sang and played that song on the piano for us when we arrived at the mansion.”

Du Pont hummed a short melody. Its soft, familiar notes drifted into the air. Nadja eyed the gentleman with a renewed interest as deep emotion took her over.

*Ah, so he's met Mom too.*

"I read in the Paris newspaper three years ago that Duke Preminger's daughter had reunited with Colette, despite claims that the baby had died. What a relief, I thought. I was truly grateful for that news."

"To think someone who had met Mom would come to watch my theatre performance... It's a mysterious twist of fate," said Nadja.

Du Pont sternly nodded.

"Truly. I feel like destiny has granted us this meeting today."

"You came especially to see me, and for that I'm grateful. Thank you very much."

"Meeting you wasn't the only reason."

"Oh?"

"There's another matter at hand. I feel it's almost predestined."

"Predestined?"

"Miss Nadja, that theatre is being put up for sale."

"What? It's being sold off?"

"Indeed. This may be abrupt, but..." Du Pont prefaced before uttering something astonishing. "Would the Dandelion Troupe like to buy it?"

"Wha...?"

His offer flabbergasted Nadja, her head vacating for a moment.

"Whaaat!?" She cried in an uproar. "You want us to buy the theatre...? What's that supposed to mean? You're not mocking me, are you? Is this some sort of joke?"

The gentleman smiled to give her peace of mind.

"No, absolutely not. I'm quite serious." He claimed. "The theatre owner passed away last week, and the bereaved are looking to relinquish it."

"He passed away...?"

One unexpected thing lined up after the other.

"Yes. He lived in a sanatorium in Switzerland due to old age."

"...!"

“I served as his legal advisor for a while, you see... The bereaved consulted me about potential buyers, and the first thought that came to mind was the Dandelion Troupe.”

“Why us?”

“Two reasons—the first being how you all brought that stage to life. Your performances suit a stage more than they do the city plaza. The performing arts column in the local paper wrote about it too.”

It was none other than Harvey’s associate who wrote the article. He was a journalist reputed for writing accurate reviews.

“The second reason—is that I personally want to support you, Miss Nadja.

“Why me?” Nadja questioned, still perplexed by this string of events.

“You are Colette’s daughter. Moreover, there’s no one else who can hold a candle to your brilliance up on stage. I don’t want to enjoy your singing and dancing for myself. I want to share it with the world..!”

“...!”

His gratitude bolstered his kind words.

“Thank you very much,” said Nadja with heartfelt appreciation. “Please wait one moment!”

She ran over to the Chief and call him over.

The chat seemed likely to swerve into a negotiation, so Nadja and company returned with Du Pont to the inn where the two parties could mull over the finer details.

Everyone settled into the inn room. When Du Pont re-stated his offer, the Chief needed to catch his breath.

“What impeccable timing...!”

“It’s certainly an unexpected development.”

Abel and Thomas’s eyes rounded.

“Oho! That sounds awesome!”

“Do it, Chief! Do it!”

Kennosuke and Rita were hastily eager.

The Granny, with her crystal ball in hand and a middle-noddle of her head, looked as if she was in agreement while dozing off all the same.

“So, what do you want?”

The Chief questioned with doubt on his face, inviting Du Pont to summarise the same details he had shared with Nadja.

“Wait, hold up a moment.” The Chief cut off Du Pont mid-sentence. “You’re offering a theatre for us to do as we please? It’s nonsensical. Well beyond what we could even dream of. We could barely afford to rent the theatre so buying out the entire place is impossible no matter how you slice it.”

“But, Chief...” said Nadja.

George shook his head in regret.

Thomas and Abel cast their heads downwards. Kennosuke and Rita haven’t yet given up, nor has Nadja. Granny meanwhile still seemed to be nodding off.

A disappointed sigh escaped from Du Pont.

“There won’t be a second chance if you back out. The bereaved explicitly said that they will concede the theatre at a price much lower than its market value, should your party be affiliated with Duke Preminger.”

“What?”

*What does he mean by that?* Nadja wondered.

All other faces in the room focused on Du Pont.

“It seems the late theatre owner, in his younger days, was indebted to Duke Preminger. He always said he would return the favour, though such an opportunity never arose. The bereaved wish to at least be of help to his grandchild, that is, if they can verify that you are indeed Colette’s daughter.”

“I see..! So my grandfather had that sort of connection with the theatre owner long before I was even born. And you too, Mr Du Pont—even you had met Mom and the rest of the family.”

As Nadja murmured, familiar faces surfaced; the faces of her grandfather, Duke Preminger, and her mother, Colette.

“I too feel this is an extraordinary opportunity,” said Du Pont.

“Well then, how much for the theatre?” The Chief asked.

“By all rights, the original asking price of 100,000 francs is not worth bothering for you lot. But if the bereaved can ascertain that Duke Preminger’s grandchild *is* a member of the Dandelion Troupe, they’ll settle for 50,000 francs.”

“.....!”

Astonishment blanketed the troupe. Du Pont’s offer is remarkable, but whether the Dandelion Troupe can afford it is another matter.

The Chief spoke after a brief silence.

“No, well—how do I put this? We’re very grateful for this generous offer, and I understand your perspective. As embarrassing as it is to admit, that amount is still well beyond our depth.”

“Is that so...”

Self-reproach showed on Du Pont’s face. Then, he uttered an idea that struck his mind.

“I know! Miss Nadja, are you not able to ask your grandfather for help?”

“That’s...”

An unexpected proposition. Duke Preminger certainly can settle the lump sum, and it’s likely he would act in his own interest given the late theatre owner’s debt. Nadja, however, didn’t want to rely on that option—she proclaimed on the day she left Vienna that she would walk on her own two feet. Not only is it a selfish request to ask of her grandfather, but her troupe mates wouldn’t wish for it either.

“I decline. It’s not an offer we can entertain.”

Nadja didn’t respond; the Chief did, and everyone else agreed with him.

“I understand. Though, it is truly regrettable...” Du Pont drooped his shoulders, though his form suggested he has yet to

back down. “I would urge you folks to weigh this offer one last time. Discuss between yourselves before rushing to a conclusion. I’ll hear your answer in about, say, three days.”

He held out his business card, signalling his final proposal.  
“My office address is written on it.”

After Du Pont left, Granny woke up.

“Wheeeew! That was a good sleep!”

She let out a big, carefree yawn and saw the troupe pondering all together with gloomy clouds over their heads.

“Eh? What’s the matter, everyone? Eat something bad?”

“No, not quite...”

Thomas gave her a brief explanation.

“Oh my. And all this took place while I was—” Granny ground to a halt and caught everyone off guard with a screech. “Ohhh...!”

Her eyes flared up as she grazed the crystal ball she held.

“Nadja!”

“Yes? W-What is it?”

“Oh, Nadja! The Goddess of Destiny! She has come! She beckons you!”

“Huh? She has!?” Nadja blurted, Granny looking gently back at her.

“Ever since we met in that town in England, the Goddess of Destiny has looked favourably upon you!”

“Granny...” Nadja grasped the brooch on her chest in momentary silence.

After a deep puff of air, she spoke.

“Chief, everyone—listen, an idea struck me while I was listening to Mr Du Pont. I hesitated about the whole thing at first, but Granny’s given me the push I needed!”

“Eh? What kinda idea?”

“Hey, Nadja, what’s your idea?”



Kennosuke and Rita tilted their heads to one side. The adults pierced their gaze into Nadja, who with an undaunted expression made her proclamation.

“Everyone... I’m going to buy that theatre!”

“Whaaaat!?”

Everyone gaped in bewilderment.

“What on earth are you saying, Nadja?”

“Nadja—you know the theatre is really expensive, right?”

Only Kennosuke and Rita reacted. The adults, on the other hand, already caught onto her hidden agenda.

“Don’t even think about it.”

The Chief flat out dismissed her, as did the other adults.

“The present your mother gave you... those diamonds—you're thinking of selling them, aren't you?” Abel probed right on the mark.

Kennosuke and Rita were both astonished.

“You can’t, Nadja!”

“They’re precious gifts!

The adults aligned with the kids’ opposition.

The Dandelion Troupe. An exclusive theatre.

Everything would change for the better if they had such a thing. Without the Trick Circus Car, they can no longer skip from country to country like they used to. Their current fate is to settle and perform in Paris, which makes relying on Nadja for their financial bearings an absurd proposition. Not a single one of them wished for it.

The Chief repeated himself. “Nadja, it’s a definite *no*.”

“He’s right, you can’t put a price on those diamonds! They were a gift from your mom!”

Kennosuke couldn’t dissuade Nadja. She responded only by holding out the small and red velvet bag that rested on her chest. Gently loosening it, its contents came into view: sixteen diamonds glimmered a radiance that could only rival the constellation of a wintery night sky.

Nadja had died. Colette believed this for the longest time, but her everlasting motherly love eclipsed the false truth. She committed to buying diamonds every year for her daughter's birthday—her daughter, who she believed was up in heaven. Even after learning the truth and reuniting with Nadja, Colette kept buying those diamonds for her daughter on her birthday.

“We can buy the theatre by trading just a few of these off...!” said Nadja.

The Chief shook his head. “You can't. You shouldn't let go of them—not unless it's crucial.”

“I agree. That crucial moment is now.” Nadja beamed.

“Well, but...”

“The Dandelion Troupe is my family—you're *all* important to me. I'm seizing this opportunity for our future, and Mom would definitely side with me!”

“Wait. Please think this through, Nadja,” said Abel to Nadja, whose determination did not falter.

“Just so you know, I'm also doing this for my other family.”

“Your other family?” Rita asked.

“Yup. That's everyone I grew up with at Applefield. I said I'd look for them, didn't I? I want them to be happy too, but I've no clue where any of them are right now. The chances of bumping into them by sheer coincidence is low—that's why I think planting our roots in one location here in Paris is sure to help my chances.”

“Nadja...”

The Chief and his troupe stood motionless as they gave ear to Nadja.

“Harvey said so too. ‘Paris is the place where people and information gather. Rise in fame here and your Applefield siblings will catch wind of you’. We already have proof of this! Mr Du Pont noticed me precisely because I'm in Paris!”

Nadja glanced at each and every troupe member.

“I want everyone to realise this—that I'm not merely doing this for you all, but myself, too. I'm selling these diamonds for

*me*, and no one can convince me otherwise,” she said with a mischievous smile.

A brief silence settled. The troupe only had empty stares for each other. Eventually, the Chief gave Nadja a heartfelt hug.

“Nadja!!”

“C-Chief...?”

“Thank you, Nadja. From the bottom of my heart... Thank you!”

His voice quivered along with his eyes that looked ready to pour with tears.

“I’ll be honest...” he said after a brief interval, “Having our own theatre means we can bring our old friend—the Trick Circus Car—back to life.”

“What do you mean?”

“We can stage a show with his engine!”

His exclamation let on more than what the troupe bargained for.

Abel directed a question back at him. “A show? With the Trick Circus Car?”

“Exactly! His engine packs massive horsepower—he can spin and rotate the stage, maybe even raise it up and down! If we want, we can even shoot petals towards the audience to spread a flowery fragrance, or we can spout water like how the engine whistles out steam! I can see it already—if we incorporate him into our stage show, it’ll be a spectacle with a punch like no other!”

The Chief leapt forward and snapped his back and shoulders upright. Excitement came over the troupe, their eyes rounding as they exhaled all at once.

“Chief... That sounds great!”

“Whoa! The Trick Circus Car is awesome!”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho! Clever!”

Kennosuke, Rita and Granny jumped with glee.

“I want to see it too!” Nadja encouraged. “We can perform with the Trick Circus Car again...!”

“I never thought this day would come...” said Thomas and Abel calmly.

“It’ll put a smile on his face.” The Chief turned to face Nadja once more. “Nadja! We’ll do our best to put the theatre on the right track. There’s no time to wait—we’ll earn a steady income and quickly return your favour!”

“Okay! I’ll do everything I can too!”

The troupe hugged each other to unite their collective, overflowing joy.

Two questions still remain: Where can the troupe go to exchange Nadja’s diamonds? How much would they sell for? These are the hurdles they must overcome, and it was Granny who saw an answer to them both.

“Let’s head to *La Tour*. It’s a jewellery store by the opera house that Madame Moreau favoured. She was one of my patrons who I made hats for a long time ago, and it was that store she was fond of, I’m sure of it!”

“Madame Moreau...”

When Nadja heard the name, the hazy silhouette of a poised lady clumped together in her mind. She had met that lady before—when the troupe journeyed to Paris. It was in an elegant mansion furnished with quiet, sunlit salons made especially for young artists to foster their talent. Madame Moreau introduced Nadja to the aspiring artists there, but the Madame has since passed away from illness. Those salons are no more, and a forlorn sadness tinted Nadja’s return to Paris.

Thomas seemed discouraged. “A jewellery store of such high status will turn us away at the front door, no...?”

Granny grinned broadly at him.

“No need to worry—the Madame was an obliging lady! She would tell me about her acquaintances in Paris at every opportunity, and she even gave me a reference letter for them! ‘Take this with you if you come across any problems,’ she said!”

“A reference letter! You’ve kept hold of it all this time?” The Chief exclaimed.

Granny proudly clapped her chest at him.

“Of course! It’s tucked away safely here in my stomach band, though I never thought the day would come when I’d put it to use. In any case, having a reference letter from Madame Moreau will give us tremendous leverage.”

“Thanks, Granny!”

*We can exchange those diamonds at the store! Without a doubt! We can buy the theatre!*

Nadja’s heart danced with excitement, and the Chief straightened his body back to life.

“Let’s settle this and report back to Mr Du Pont!”

Calling on the address written on the business card, Nadja and the Chief brought their tidings to Pierre Du Pont, who had just returned to his office moments ago.

“Should things go well, we’ll secure the funds to purchase the theatre!”

The Chief’s enthusiasm echoed to Du Pont.

“Good heavens! That’s fantastic news!”

His office flaunted neither extravagance nor spaciousness; at the very least, its bare minimum furniture mirrored the modesty of its occupant.

“Pardon me... I began living independently not long ago.”

Du Pont seemed bashful. Nadja, meanwhile, saw the plainness of his workspace as an expression of his sincerity.

“I think preparing the funds will only take a few days. Would you be so kind as to wait until then, should there be other potential buyers?”

Du Pont smiled at the Chief, giving him peace of mind. “Why, of course. The bereaved and I wish to do what we can to pass it over to you. Your performances would bless both the late theatre owner and the theatre.”

“Thank you very much!” said Nadja and the Chief aloud, their rhythm in harmony.

“Please come back once you’ve obtained the funds. Waste no time—I will speak to the bereaved of what we discussed today so we can prepare a sales contract.”

Nadja and the Chief thanked Du Pont several times over before they returned to the inn, where the rest of the troupe cheered out loud at the news. Everyone trembled with excitement at the prospect of owning their own theatre.

“This here’s Madame Moreau’s reference letter!”

Granny held out a white envelope, the nostalgic fragrance of Madame Moreau suffusing into the air as she did.

“Great! Nadja and I will set off at dawn!”

Before the Chief could grab the letter, Granny buoyantly slid it back into the envelope.

“No, no! We need to get the letter to the jewellery store first. Thomas, could you hand it to them?”

“You bet!”

“Even if the employee is a beautiful, high-class lady?”

“Of course—leave it to me!” Thomas said as he prudently accepted the letter.

“Great! Get that letter to them safely. Tomorrow, Nadja and I will take care of the rest!” The Chief rolled up his sleeve, though Granny shook her head at him.

“In *that* getup, they’ll turn you away at the door no matter how many reference letters we show.”

“What do you suppose we do?” said Nadja.

Granny surveyed the crew with a sharp gaze. “Let’s see. Nadja can go to the store... with Abel. He *was* a doctor, so his words and demeanour have class.”

“I’ve no class whatsoever.” The Chief murmured peevishly. Rita and Kennosuke had to stifle their small puffs of laughter.

“Sure, Granny. I’ll go with Nadja, but... I should probably do something about this outfit, huh.”

“Nice one, Abel! You know best. There’s a clothing rental store in this area that I supplied bountiful hats to. Mention my name and they’ll knock the price down for something that’s a perfect fit. Nadja, I believe you have a dress of your own?”

“That I do, Granny! Mom gave it to me.”

“Excellent. Wear that and I’ll do up your hair. As for you, George...”

“Oho, kept me waiting!” The Chief’s eyes sparkled at the mention of his name.

“You’re borrowing garments to assume the role of our carriage driver. Since you won’t necessarily be entering La Tour, we must loan a first-class carriage that you’ll park at the entrance all grandiose-like.”

The Chief juttled out his bulky chest.

“Gotcha! Leave it to me. I’ll be the prideful, boisterous carriage driver! It’ll be a piece o’ cake. Not to mention, if any petty thieves try to pull a fast one on us on the way back, I’ll give them a wallop.”

“Then I’ll go too! Those petty thieves’ll be no match for my wooden sword!”

Kennosuke rolled up his sleeve, Rita pitching in too.

“Count me in!” she said, raising her hand. “Indeed... The Chief will have his assistants Crème and Chocolat by his side. Fufufu... Those thieves will witness a terrifying hell if they dare come after us. Fufufufufu...”

The daunting look on Rita’s face made Thomas’s blood run cold.

“H-Hell?”

“Exactly. Just imagine—Crème and Chocolat pouncing on the thief and pinning him down as they lick their faces all over with their coarse tongues. Tears and apologies will *not* be accepted.”

“O-Oh, I see. It’s that sort of hell. I think we should set that notion aside for now.”

Everyone agreed with Thomas. Everyone except for the disgruntled Rita.

Early in the morning, on the following day.

Abel and the Chief headed for the clothing rental store. Having borrowed appropriate outfits for themselves, they set for the cartwright and made their meticulous choice of a suitably gracious and spacious carriage. Meanwhile, Nadja singled out a calm blue dress among the ones Colette handed down to her.

“This dress isn’t simply cute—it has an intellectual quality to it, too!”

“Oho! Looking good. Perfect for today’s weather,” said Granny as she arranged Nadja’s hair with a ribbon that compliments her blonde hair. Her cheeks dusted with a thin layer of powder and her lips glossed a deep, crimson red, Nadja stood in front of the mirror wearing her dress and gazed at the reflection that beheld a Nadja more mature than her usual self.

Kennosuke, Rita, and Thomas were enchanted by Nadja’s blossoming beauty. Before long, Abel and the Chief returned, their breaths also stolen.

“That’s the radiance of a princess right there.”

“Yep. Nadja is a real princess, after all.”

The Dandelion Troupe boarded the carriage, except for Crème and Chocolat who were, of course, left back at the inn with treats.

“Alright, we’re off!”

The Chief looked quaintly fitting in a coachman’s attire. He drove the horse and took everyone down Paris’s main street where the city’s opera house towered.

The doorman at the La Tour jewellery store caught sight of a single carriage approaching. It was neither new nor gaudy; rather, its sturdy build emanated a dignity that accorded the coachman and his elegant horse steering.

*There’s no mistake. They must be clients here for that special appointment.*



The doorman's expectations were answered when the carriage halted on the stone paving opposite the entrance.

First, a lone, middle-aged man with an intellectual air descended from the carriage, and following suit, a youthful lady whose elegance contended with a flower in its immediate fullness of bloom.

She smiled at the doorman. "Good day to you."

"Welcome to our store. Please enter."

He respectfully bowed his head and opened the door.

When Nadja lived in Vienna, she had already visited several jewellery stores with Colette and Raymond, but La Tour—the store that Madame Moreau had especially written a reference letter for—went above and beyond Nadja's expectations.

Glass displays encased jewels of various colours and sizes that glimmered from the light of the store's dazzling crystal chandeliers. Peaceful chamber music flowed through the room as customers, ladies and gentlemen alike, spoke mannerly to the store clerks.

The manager gave Nadja and Abel his courtesy.

"Miss Nadja Applefield and Mr Abel Geiger, I presume?"

"Yes, that's us."

"The chairman is expecting you. Please come with me."

He guided them to an inner section of the store where they boarded an elevator that enclosed them with inlays of stained glass. When they stepped out, a silent hallway presented itself, its atmosphere distinct from the shop floor they first entered.

The manager opened a door, revealing a spacious and profound study room on the other side.

*This study—it reminds me of Grandfather's in Vienna.*

Nadja entertained this musing of hers as she entered the room with Abel.

The chairman who invited Nadja and the troupe to his jewellery store presented himself as a kind, elderly gentleman. Though his figure was tall, he was especially thin.

“This is certainly a letter by Madame Moreau.”

The chairman, after exchanging introductions and formalities, spoke calmly.

“It must be over three years by now... Miss Nadja, I had already heard about you many years ago.”

“About me? Really?”

“Yes. She told me there was a girl who showed up at her salon—a girl who was both a magnificent dancer and a member of a travelling circus, the Dandelion Troupe. Their future looks promising, she said to me.”

“I’m so glad to hear that!”

Nadja felt sincere joy.

*To think that Madame Moreau spoke about me to this gentleman in such a positive light...*

“Some time after that, news spread that Duke Preminger’s Daughter had been found alive in Vienna. Those reports caught even the ears of Paris’s highest echelons of society. ‘It must be Nadja!’ the Madame said so happily.”

The chairman looked over Nadja once more.

“That’s more or less how I came to know you. I sensed... a compelling fate when I heard of a reference letter from Madame Moreau. But let’s not delay any further. Please show them to me.”

“Yes.”

When Nadja revealed the diamonds in her pouch, the chairman let out a gasp.

Abel thought, *For someone who peruses many diamonds, these must be the genuine thing if they caught him off guard.*

The president slid into a white glove. In his hand, he held a loupe for appraising jewels. Bead by bead, he painstakingly examined each diamond.

“My... Only a Preminger could collect diamonds of this calibre. They’re splendid. I’ve seen nothing like them in my life.”

“My mother bought one of these every year for my birthday, even though she believed I had died.”

The president nodded amiably. “The size, transparency, and cutting of each diamond are superb. Your mother chose them with her love for you in mind. This, I can see clearly. Your mother’s love is in these diamonds.”

“Mom’s love...”

“Let’s discuss your asking price. How much are you looking for?”

“50,000 francs,” said Nadja.

For a while, he pondered with his eyes shut. Then, he opened them and stated his offer.

“We would like to purchase 12 of these diamonds.”

A satchel was all that held their absurd amount of currency together. No one in the Dandelion Troupe thought they would see such a thing in their lifetime; yet, they had to have fantasized about it at least once.

The troupe set off back to the inn. In the horse carriage, they were spellbound by their current reality—at the satchel of money pervading their entire field of awareness. Its presence washed all colour off their faces, and it precipitated a loud, collective heartbeat that filled the silence.

The troupe arrived at the inn without incident. There were no robberies. No surprise attacks.

“We received a message for Miss Nadja.”

Nadja accepted an envelope from the front desk.

“It’s Mr Du Pont!”

She rushed back to the inn room and opened the letter.

*I’ve prepared the sales contract. How are things proceeding on your end? If you please, come to my office tomorrow at 2PM,* penned Du Pont in scrupulous handwriting that befits him.

“Finally!” Nadja folded Du Pont’s message with both hands.

“Tomorrow is the day the Dandelion Troupe starts anew!” said the usually quiet Thomas, his proclamation uniting the troupe’s spirit.

That night, the troupe took turns slipping in and out of sleep. They had to ensure at least one pair of eyes was watching the money until the break of dawn.

The following day, sunlight rained cheerfully from the serene skies, marking a pleasant spring morning.

Nadja and the Chief set off to Du Pont's office. The rest of the Dandelion Troupe accompanied them with their watchful eyes glued to the satchel, though as per their previous visit, only Nadja and the Chief went inside.

The contract agreement proceeded favourably. Du Point elaborated on the sections difficult to understand, and so the troupe met with no difficulties.

"Now, if you could sign your name here, the contract is complete," said Du Pont.

Nadja carefully avoided obscuring her signature with ink. At last, Du Pont slid the papers into an envelope, and the troupe exchanged it with the hefty satchel of money they toiled to bring. The agreement was sealed.

"Congratulations!" Du Pont blessed Nadja with a humble smile that considered all matters resolved.

He shook her hand. "Miss Nadja, you are hereby the new theatre owner. The handover is complete once the current show ends. As stated on the contract, this will be next Monday when you are made the theatre owner."

"I'm... the theatre owner..." Nadja felt unsteady as she drifted into a reverie.

"The Dandelion Troupe now own their exclusive theatre, but there's one last matter to settle before we tie the knot on this celebration," Du Pont said to her with an auspicious smile.

"What's that?"

"Why, if you continue performing there, Miss Colette can come to see you, no?"

Her eyes widened.

“Mom...!”

Du Pont’s words rang true. Why did she not realise this sooner?

*Mom, Albert... That’s right, maybe even Grandfather too! They can all come watch us on stage!*

She envisioned this in her mind, and then reality struck her: the Dandelion Troupe now possess their own exclusive theatre.

“Congratulations! You did it, Nadja! I must thank you too! Let’s do our best from here on!” said the Chief as he gestured for a handshake from Nadja’s side. He spoke rapidly, perhaps to obscure his ardence that put him at the brink of tears.

Before retiring to the inn, Nadja and the Dandelion Troupe returned the carriage and the clothing they loaned. Nadja, in her usual apron dress, headed for the Le Cygne theatre with everyone else in tow.

“This is awesome... This is *our* theatre now!”

Fervent as Keinosuke’s words were, Rita’s interjection cut him off cold.

“Actually, it’s Nadja’s theatre...”

Nadja smiled wryly. “It’s fine! This is our theatre now, and not to mention our home, too.”

“What d’ya mean our home?”

“I mean just that! Granny and the Chief talked it over and decided we can just live in the theatre. It’ll be more economical than renting an inn room, that’s for sure.”

Abel and Thomas grinned with approval.

“Oh, good thinking!”

“We’ll save time too, with there being no need to travel!”

The rest of the troupe, even Crème and Chocolat, made merry and frolicked like they were at a festival.

Some time has passed since they last visited Le Cygne. There, a billboard showcased the current ongoing performance: Before

a lake in the background, a burly male actor and a beautiful actress stood, flaunting that it was in all spades a romantic love story.

“Gooooood afternoon!”

As they entered the lobby, their strides and sunny disposition met with the receptionist.

“Welcome. Please present your tickets.”

“Ah—we haven’t come to watch the show.”

“The sales contract has been settled. We’re here to discuss the formalities.”

Nadja and the Chief announced their intention in proud spirit, contrary to the female receptionist whose face turned utterly blank.

“What? Um... What are you talking about?”

This bewildered Nadja and the troupe.

*Ah! The receptionist probably doesn’t know yet. That must be it!* Nadja thought over.

“Excuse me—is the manager available to speak to?”

“Your show was truly magnificent!” said the elderly manager a few days ago. He now stands before the troupe, his black hair, stiff moustache, and well-dressed figure seemingly untouched.

“My oh my. Aren’t you all in tune today!”

Upon hearing the theatre had been sold, the same confusion that struck the receptionist dissolved the manager’s cheer.

“That’s preposterous—the *Le Cygne* theatre has *not* been sold. Are your heads in the clouds?”

The manager dismissed Nadja’s story flat out.

“Um..... Oh! I assume you haven’t been informed yet?” Nadja continued with unease rattling deep in her heart. “The owner passed away in a sanatorium in Switzerland, and his bereaved have relinquished their ownership of the theatre.”

“No?” The manager rounded his eyes in awe. “Not quite—the owner is in good health. Yes, he’s not currently in Paris, but he is down south in Nice—in *Le Midi*—where he is on holiday.”

“What...?”

There they stood, the Dandelion Troupe, their faces drained of all colour as they beheld a foreign and perverse reality.

*Could it be that... No—but what if? There’s no way...*

Nadja tried resisting the chilling weight on her shoulder, but the truth proved too much to bear.

“Du Pont wouldn’t deceive us like that! He mentioned he met Mom back in Vienna! He supported our endeavours! From the bottom of his heart! He even watched us perform at this very theatre! Look—the sales contract is right here...”

Nadja felt her hands trembling as she yanked the sales contract out from her trunk.

“A contract...?”

The manager knitted his eyebrows. He prudently scanned each word as Nadja and the troupe watched him with intense concentration. The papers he held undoubtedly state the sale of the theatre, and the troupe prayed he would acknowledge this.

Their prayers, however, were not answered.

“Certainly, the name of the theatre that was sold is written on here. Look—it doesn’t read *Le Cygne*. It appears similar, but what’s actually written is *Le Cygnet*.”

“Huh??”

Nadja glanced over the passage the manager pointed to.

The puny handwriting spelt the name of the theatre. It spelt *Le Cygnet*, not *Le Cygne*.

She felt the tension in her body give rise to hot blood. There wasn’t the slightest movement between the troupe; they stared at the contract, unable to peel their eyes off it.

“No... It can’t be... There’s no way...” Nadja’s voice turned so hoarse that she could hardly believe it was her own. “But... But Du Pont seemed so kind... He’s acquainted with Mom, and he even knows our lullaby...”

He spoke so nostalgically about Mom on the piano... He even hummed our melody... There's just no way Mr Du Pont's words were lies! This must all be a mistake! Or a misunderstanding!

*But... But the name of a different theatre is on the contract...*

Chaos enveloped her mind, her thoughts swirling into an endless whirlpool of confusion.

"That's it!" Kennosuke raised his head, "Le Cygne might be a different theatre, but there's no doubt Nadja is the owner of Le Cygnet, right?"

"Kennosuke—you're right!" Rita showed a glimmer of hope on her face. "Le Cygnet could be a beautiful theatre at Mr Du Pont's recommendation!"

The Chief surveyed the group. "Alright! Everyone, let's head there for now!"

"Please wait! It's no use! That theatre is...!"

The manager tried frantically to stop them, but his words couldn't reach. In perfect unison, Nadja and the Dandelion Troupe had already galloped off into the distance.



第 6 章



# A Black Trap

“How horrible...”

Nadja came to a standstill, stupefied by what she stumbled upon at the address written on the contract.

It wasn't a theatre—it was anything but.

She gaped at what stood before her: a dilapidated building ridden with so much decay that a haunted house would better suit its description.

Its paint coating was all but peeling off, and its broken windows concealed by clouds of dust. A billboard laid bare, though half of it had been smashed off. The only semblance of life to be found was an overgrowth of weeds.

The Chief burst out in anger. “I don't believe it... What the hell is this!?”

A crude plank of wood barricaded the front door that no key could open. The Chief tore it off, and everyone stepped inside.

Compared to the exterior, the interior was far more wretched. It was a hive of spider webs filled to the brim with dust, and the pervading stench of mould accompanied the clammy darkness in the room.

No words escaped their mouths; only sighs.

*This is it? This is the theatre Nadja gave up her precious diamonds for? This is... horrible...*

Everyone shared the anguish.

“That settles it. We've been swindled.” Abel muttered these few words that Nadja still wasn't willing to accept.

“B-But...! This... This must be some sort of mistake! Mr Du Pont wouldn't do something like this!”

“You're right. Let's hear it from the man himself.”

Clinging onto the Chief's affirmation, they hurried off to meet Du Pont at his office.

The troupe arrived at Du Pont's office where he was nowhere to be seen. On the contrary, there was nothing left in it: They opened the unlocked front door and stepped into an office

wholly vacant. What little furniture and supplies in the office have vanished.

There was a prolonged silence. And then Thomas spoke.

“We’ve been swindled. For certain...”

At last, they surrendered all denial.

Stood in the lobby of his theatre, the manager of Le Cygne exhaled a sigh.

*This must be fraud. Le Cygnet is a worthless junkyard in that secluded spot.*

Who in the world would palm off such dross to Nadja and the troupe? Who would deceive, of all people, the forward-facing Nadja and the ever-spirited Dandelion Troupe?

*Harvey Livingston... He could have seen through this trickery.*

He couldn’t, of course, for he is in America.

*What will Nadja and them do now...?*

The manager’s face darkened. He vexed his bystander position where he was of any use.

Let’s rewind time for a moment.

Du Pont, having seen off Nadja and the troupe from his office, whiffed a breath of fresh air.

“With that, my role is fulfilled.”

After a remarkable stretch, Du Pont crammed into his own bag the satchel of money that Nadja and the troupe had brought him. He pokily exited through the backdoor into a narrow alleyway where a lone, small-sized stagecoach inconspicuously abided. He stepped up with brisk footing onto the vehicle and entered the carriage of his own accord.

The previous passenger sat inside. She was a youthful beauty with delicate, blond hair. Her pale skin, blue eyes and cherry-coloured lips resembled that of Nadja's.

“Ha-ha-ha! Just about all of it went as planned.”

Du Pont, contrary to when he dealt with Nadja, crowed with a vulgar tone, to which the blonde-haired girl gave her lips a slight curl.

“Everything went as you said, but not without its surprises, mind you. For one, I didn't expect such an enormous sum of money to land on my desk, especially not by the hands of that *little brat*.”

“Little brat, you say?”

The girl challenged Du Pont's callousness. He directed an insincere smile at her.

“Oh, pardon me! It was a slip of the tongue. She's the same age as you, indeed, but a shred of ill intent she had not. As you can see from the frightening amount of money in our possession, she was an easy swindle.”

“And why are you speaking ill of our deed?”

“Eh?”

“I certainly didn't deceive anyone. A theatre was sold, as is clearly written on the contract. You never once spoke the words *Le Cygnet* when discussing the sale, did you?”

“Why, yes—of course. You explicitly said I wasn't to refer to it by name. Only as ‘the theatre’.”

“It's fine, then! I have a more reasonable price in mind if they try to accuse us of cheating them. I dare say *Le Cygnet* wasn't cheap. Actually, it's worth many times that of its original asking price!”

She giggled like an angel.

“Ha-ha-ha. You're a frightening one! You bought such a shabby theatre for dirt cheap and sold it for a ridiculous profit. Did you plan on buying it from the beginning?”

“Of course not. I had no way of knowing the Dandelion Troupe would come to Paris. But you know, I saw it coming. My

intuition told me—it told me that theatre will be a useful commodity in the foreseeable future.”

“Yes, indeed.”

On the surface, Du Pont showed a look of admiration. Underneath the pretence, he basked a crude smile.

She can spout cheeky and conceited remarks all she likes, but she’s a *little brat*, just like that other girl. She can’t hope to cross swords with me, when I—an adult—gets serious about things.

“Well? Are you handing it over?”

“A-Ah.” Du Pont held the bag out to her—to the *little brat*—who nonchalantly brushed her fingers through the money to assure the deed was done.

“Good work. Here’s your share.”

She put forward a single roll of banknotes.

“Dear me. Only this much?” Du Pont gestured an awkward shrug of his shoulders. “You owe the success of this plan to *my* role and *my* talent as an actor! It won’t be a tragedy to add on a little extra, will it?”

His accomplice showed not an ounce of irritation.

“What nonsense you’re spouting. The plan went smoothly thanks to *my* flawless script.”

“Tch.” Du Pont didn’t click his tongue out loud—only in his mind. “Hoho... Fine then, play that way. Not much to worry about, am I? When push comes to shove, I’ll expose your ploy to the world, you brat.”

Du Pont took a stand of confidence with a threat enough to frighten any other brat. That’s what he thought, but his accomplice reflected anything but; she giggled and then burst out into laughter.

*W-What?*

“Hey, Mr Du Pont. Listen carefully. Greed is a bottomless pit. It’s not proper for a man to behave like this.”

“.....?”

“I’ve met one of you greedy types before—a man. He lacked perseverance and often acted without using his brain. It was

pitiful—he was a middle-aged man who revelled in greed, despite being the first in line to inherit a wealthy noble family. Where do you think he is now? Behind iron bars in a cold, dark cell, and he *won't* be leaving until he's a decrepit old man.”

The little brat said all that, with a bewitching and handsome smile on her face.

*Wha...!*

A chill ran down his spine. Like prey chased into a corner by a wild animal, he had nowhere to avert his eyes from the girl's predatory gaze.

“You know, when I witnessed that person's fate, I decided. I decided I would never work with such a greedy person again. He didn't even do a very good job with the task I entrusted to him. Now, let me ask you, Mr Du Pont. Are you a greedy person?”

“W-What kind of question is that? I'd never act out of greed! Of course not!” Du Pont answered desperately. “Please reach out to me if you have more work. Well then, until we meet again!”

He descended from the carriage and ran, in the most literal sense of the word.

Now alone, the *little brat* smiled and murmured to herself.

“No hard feelings, Princess Nadja.”

If Nadja were to turn up, no doubt, she would be wide-eyed with surprise and call out “Rosemary! What brings you here? What are you up to?”

However...

Nadja has yet to discover this reality—that she and Rosemary are looking up at the same Paris sky.

“Please let me off.”

Rosemary called out to the coachman and caressed the bag on her knee while indulging a gaudy smile of a lordly princess.

After fleeing the carriage, Du Pont couldn't burke his frustration for any longer.

*I've been threatened? By a little brat? Well, this may be a blessing in disguise. That girl is bad news—I shouldn't get too involved with her.*

He took off his glasses and stripped away his red hair and beard, uncovering a blonde, clean-shaven face. As he walked along the bridge atop the River Seine, he tossed his toupee and fake moustache into the water.

*The man known as Pierre Du Pont no longer exists. Not here, not anywhere.*

The nameless man walked off at a restful pace, a vulgar grin surfacing on his face.

The Dandelion Troupe was deceived by Du Pont. With no other choice but to accept this reality, they headed for the police station to file a criminal report.

Nadja and the troupe crowded into a room and sat around a table that faced the supervisor. He was a middle-aged man; stern expression and business-like in his conduct, he listened to the troupe's account of the whole story to write a preliminary record. He was obstinate about capturing Du Pont's facial features, which Kennosuke drew a lookalike portrait of.

Kennosuke is confident in his drawings. Evidenced by his detailed blueprints and sketches for his work, inventive ideas come naturally to him. The troupe eyed his sketch of Du Pont and agreed that it looked just like him.

"We'll definitely get him with this!" said Rita, the troupe nodding with her.

A portrait of a bespectacled man with red hair and a full-grown beard was sketched onto paper.

There was nothing else left to do.

"Now then, shall we head back?"

The Chief urged everyone to return to the inn before heading out again to sate their hunger at a nearby bistro. As usual, they ordered a salad along with several meat-based dishes. Extra glasses of wine were in order for the adults, while the kids helped themselves to bigger servings of ice cream.

No one spoke their regret. They committed to being as cheerful as they could, which before long led to Granny drinking a gluttonous amount of wine.

She flashed a grandiose look. “Ooooh... Peculiar, I must say. I’m certain that’s what my crystal ball told me back then—that the Goddess of Destiny was beckoning Nadja...”

“Whoa there. You’re not going senile from old age, are you, Granny?” The Chief mixed in some cheerful banter.

“Going senile...”

“That’s a bit of an exaggeration, no?”

Abel and Thomas tacked on.

“Hm, I guess there’s no helping it! Even the Goddess of Destiny gets so caught up that she makes the occasional mistake.” Nadja shrugged in concert with her remark.

“Yep, no use worryin’ about it now.”

“Right! Tomorrow will be a new day.”

Kennosuke and Rita smiled.

Deep in their hearts, they were distressed by how the recent affairs had hurt Nadja.

*If only we were more careful... If only we were more dubious of the man who called himself Du Pont...*

Such regrets lingered in the adults’ hearts, the Chief especially shouldering the burden.

*It’s my fault. I was so absorbed in my selfish goal of reviving the Trick Circus Car that I neglected to keep an eye out...*

Venting his frustration would lead to nothing, and the Chief understood this. The past cannot be undone, and the future is best tread with positivity. That’s what he believed.

Everyone went to bed early that night.

*I’ll get a good night’s rest and give tomorrow my all!*



Despite her best intentions, not a wink of sleep came to her. Not with Du Pont's face and his words mooring in her foggy mind, where they stubbornly refused to vanish.

She tossed and turned without end as Rita and Granny snored through the night. She simply could not sleep—no matter how much time had passed.

Nadja rose up from bed.

*Why? Why did such a horrible thing have to happen...?*

She shook her head to repel the unpleasant feelings welling within.

“That’s it! I’ve decided I’m not sleeping tonight.”

She snuck out the inn, taking extra care not to wake up Rita and Granny.

Late-night Paris masked a side of the city that Nadja had not seen before. From dawn to dusk, the city would be crowded with masses of people aboard carriages of various shapes and sizes galloping through its streets. Now, as far as the eye could see, there was no one. She could hear the occasional drunken bellows, the howling of stray dogs in the distance, and the faraway cantering of horse carriages that all resonated with a lonely echo.

Nadja brisked through a silver-paved street lit by the glow of the nearby lamps. She walked along with no destination in mind, marching along the River Seine in her aimless stroll when a sudden sensation struck her deep.

“I... was tricked...”

I didn't do anything bad... Why must I suffer through this?

If only I had been more careful, then none of this would have happened. If only I had looked into his background, then I would have known if he was trustworthy. If only I had read every line of that contract, word-for-word...

Mom... She put her heart into those precious diamonds she got me every year. And now—now they've been wasted.

Her pain welled up even further.

“Your mother’s love is in these diamonds.” That’s what the chairman of La Tour said. That’s how irreplaceable they were.

Mom’s love...

*Mom... I’m sorry...*

The diamonds weren’t the only things Nadja lost.

Fate granted the troupe an opportunity to gain a theatre of their own. Now it is lost, along with their hopes of performing a jaw-dropping show with their dear Trick Circus Car as the centrepiece. Looking back, this rambunctious plan could only have been thought up by them. Nadja also hoped to live together with her scattered Applefield siblings once more. Another lost opportunity.

Two dreams; both that Nadja believed she had seized for her two families. They’ve slipped from the tips of her fingers and have blown with the wind.

Until this morning, a rose-coloured gleam bathed the world. Now, an unforeseen darkness veiled that same world, its depth so profound that no beam of light could pass through. Her endless thoughts swirled into a murky whirlpool of emotions that held her heart and mind hostage as she staggered towards a solitude she never knew existed.

“Ow...!”

Nadja fell over. With great force, she struck her knee against a stone pavement that protruded outwards.

Blood ran from her knee.

“.....”

The wound—the pain—it was truly nostalgic. She often tumbled over similarly with Oliver and Alex in the Applefield courtyard. As she stared motionless at the gash on her knee, her eyes flooded with tears.

Her rage, her sorrow, her regret; Nadja tried repressing her inner emotions, but they burst out all at once. Nadja cried at the top of her lungs.

“Why... why, why, why, why...!”

A childish display. She cried like an adolescent girl who understands nothing.

“What am I supposed to do!? I don’t know! I don’t know anymore!!!”

She clamoured uncontrollably.

“Nadja.” A voice called out to her.

The kind voice sounded warm and nostalgic. Above all else, it was one that Nadja knew well. She sniffled away her tears and batted her eyelids.

“...Miss Appleton?”

Indeed, the voice belonged to Miss Appleton, the caretaker who raised Nadja at Applefield Orphanage in England. Miss Appleton didn’t speak into Nadja’s ears; she spoke straight into her heart.

“Nadja. I know—I know you’re in a tough situation. You’re engulfed in complete darkness.”

“...!”

When she was young, the tears that Nadja shed through sad and difficult times were met with Miss Appleton’s warm embrace. She would take up Nadja’s pain and gently brush it off her back with her palm.

“But every night comes to an end.”

Young Nadja remembers these words well. As she grew older, she consoled her younger siblings Nicole and Phoebe in the same way.

“And beyond the night...”

Nadja, who was here right now in Paris, said aloud the words to follow.

“...Is a bright morning that comes with a new tomorrow!”

“That’s right, Nadja. So don’t give up. No matter how much sorrow towers before you.”

This is what Nadja envisioned Miss Appleton would say with a bright smile on her face. Though she was sitting on a pavement in the streets of Paris, Nadja fastened her words with Miss Appleton’s.

“No matter how sad or difficult it is...” She rubbed away her tears with the back of her hand. “I’ll always believe in tomorrow!”

She steadied herself, raised her head, then took a short breath.

The pitch-black sky; it swallowed all darkness, yet at the centre of it, a faint light pierced through.

“The morning...!” Nadja exclaimed, regaining her voice.

With a new morning comes a new tomorrow for Paris, and Nadja raised her head at the lavender glow blanketing the sky.

*Yes—there’s no shortage of painful things in this world.*

Nadja endured it all. She watched the Applefield Orphanage burn down, she yearned to meet with her long lost mother once more, and at one point she was even thrown into a dungeon.

*But I won’t give in. I’ll always believe in tomorrow...!*

A smile surfaced.

As the sky grew brighter, Nadja realised where she stood: beside the Eiffel Tower. Erected in 1889 to commemorate the Exposition Universelle fair, it’s the tallest structure in Paris. Nadja had climbed it before when she last visited Paris with the troupe. When the construction finished, an elevator tour opened for business in no time at all, giving Kennosuke and his friends a flurry of reasons to fuss over for their first trip aboard an elevator.

Somehow, the tower’s stairway door opened without a key.

“.....”

Nadja climbed its steps. Wire mesh stretched across opposite sides of the stairway that led her ascension through the zigzag-like gaps of the tower’s enormous steel frame. Its scale was daunting, but Nadja marched straight up without a glance left nor right. Ascending to a higher place—she found it delightful, to walk upward with her own two feet. She enjoyed it as she did competing against Oliver at climbing the towering evergreen oak tree at her old home.

“I made it!”

After climbing nearly 700 steps, Nadja arrived at the observation platform of the Eiffel Tower.

A powerful wind blew through Paris. Nadja clasped her hat to hold it down, her frantic movement sending her long, golden hair into the air.

Spreading in all directions from the horizon, a golden light dazzled a beautiful morning unto the city of Paris.

Nadja bent forward to look down at the metropolis beneath her; the River Seine, the Notre-Dame, the Louvre Art Gallery, the Arc de Triomphe de l'Etoile, and the Sacré-Cœur Basilica at the base of Montmartre Hill.

*Our inn's right there! And...*

Nadja's eyes traced along a road.

*That's where our theatre is.*

An epiphany struck her.

She didn't lose *everything*—she gained a theatre. A crumbling ruin it may be, it's still a theatre. A theatre belonging to the Dandelion Troupe.

It wasn't for nought. Set off once more. Don't give up.

Press on to tomorrow and a new path will open!

Nadja took a deep breath before calling out to the city underneath.

“Good morning, Paris! Nadja is doing well!”



## Rosemary's Ambition

Rosemary stood by a window as she watched the fresh morning sun shimmer over the city of Paris. It gave her further reason to smile, for she was plenty content with the briefcase crammed with franc notes on the chair beside her.

“Thank you, Nadja.” She muttered.

*Are you there watching this sunrise, too? Oh, how depressed you must be. Positive as you always are, this time, you might not get back up.*

Rosemary believes she understands everything about Nadja. They grew up together, their shared memories going back as early as when they developed situational awareness.

The Applefield Orphanage in England fostered orphan babies and children no older than 12, and it was Miss Appleton and Mr Evans who cared for them. It seemed to Rosemary, however, that she was somehow different from the other children.

*That much is obvious! I'm a very special person. I'm different from everyone else.*

Rosemary felt proud when those around her acknowledged her peculiarity.

“To tell the truth, I am a princess. Someday my prince will come and take me away from this castle.”

Rosemary's conviction radiated to the other children who spoke of her in a similar light. She loved ‘Snow White’ and ‘Sleeping Beauty’—two picture books that Miss Appleton often read for her. As for ‘Cinderella’, she didn't *particularly* dislike it.

“Cinderella isn't a real princess. She's not like me.”

Unsatisfied with listening to these tales portrayed in picture books, Rosemary sought to compose a tale of her own that she play-acted to the other kids. They treated her like an oddball, despite them sitting in on her fable.

Rosemary thought, “This is practice for when I become a princess in a castle, where I will need to stand on the balcony and answer to my citizens.”

She cradled this belief.

To conduct herself courteously, Rosemary refined her table etiquette, her bows, and her speech for when she will one day live in a castle. She abided any free time she had in front of the mirror, practising her smile and combing her long, golden hair with the hairbrush she always carries with her.

The supreme, loving charm of a princess; she nurtured this quality so that she may properly greet her prince. This subjected her to ridicule from the boys, and even the girls kept her at arm's length. But Rosemary didn't have a care to give.

*They must be astounded! It's no matter. They're merely low-class commoners who don't know a thing.*

The only person who spent time with a girl like her—with Rosemary—was the similarly aged Nadja.

"I'm a real princess! Someday, my prince will come!"

Only Nadja gave ear to Rosemary's spouting. If anything, she played a character in Rosemary's story.

"Princess Rosemary, I am your loyal knight," Nadja said, kneeling to Rosemary like a respectful knight from the middle-ages.

Their matching blonde hair and azure eyes gave Applefield Orphanage's visitors the impression that they were siblings. In a guise of sympathy, they said, "They're like sisters!"

*No! There's no way I'm sisters with Nadja! I'm a princess, and Nadja's just a pitiful commoner!*

The resentment she bore didn't manifest in her actions. Instead, she bashfully smiled when such thoughts arose, just like a princess would.

The Applefield Orphanage arson incident occurred when Rosemary and Nadja approached the age of 13. Nadja disappeared at the same time, leaving everyone helplessly worried.

After some time, Miss Appleton made a duly announcement.

"Nadja has joined a troupe of performers. She is travelling across Europe to various countries where she performs the dances she holds great pride in."



*Oh my! Nadja, a dancer! Very well then. If I become a princess, then Nadja can join a circus troupe. The people of my castle—they won't have seen a travelling circus show before, so it'll be quite novel to them! I appreciate it, Nadja!*

The time for Rosemary to leave Applefield for work had come. She had turned 13-years-old. Miss Appleton offered her several choices of employment, and without hesitation she chose to work as a maid attendant in a noble family's mansion.

*My prince can find me here! Staying at Applefield has only hurt my chances!*

She stepped into that world—into a maid's daily life—to find it wasn't what she expected. A mound of chores awaited her and the work demanded her attention all day long. Even during balls and banquets, not once did she have an opportunity to greet guests while the other fledgeling maids kept her busy. In other words, Rosemary did not exist.

*My prince will never find me at this rate!*

Dissatisfied, Rosemary thought deeply.

*No—my prince will catch on to me. I have to wait. He'll definitely find me.*

The mansion housed an only son by the name of Fernando.

*Fernando, that pampered child... I can sense his gaze on me. Could it be—that he's fallen in love with me!? Yes, of course! That must be it! Oh, what am I to do? Fernando and my prince must duel for my love!*

Rosemary's heart throbbed from this fantasy.

One day, the Dandelion Troupe came to the city. Nadja bumped into Rosemary as she was delivering cheese, ham, and fruits to the mansion kitchen.

*A dancer for a pathetic travelling circus. That's what she is—but look at me! I'm working in a splendid mansion! I should be as kind as I can to her for now. I'm this close to becoming a princess.*

Rosemary deserted this intention in due time. At Fernando's birthday party, a most unexpected guest had arrived: Adorned in a dress proper for a princess, Nadja came forth. She caught the eye of Fernando of all people, who looked at her with a sparkling gaze as their hands joined to dance. Rosemary at that moment felt her body boil with blood.

*You traitor...!*

In her heart, dark emotions swirled into a sordid mess.

*You are my knight! No more, no less! I am the real princess here!*

After Nadja disembarked with the troupe, Rosemary's hatred did not simmer. The incident that followed dealt the final blow. Two odd men visited Rosemary, imparting a truth that wrenched her heart: Nadja is the daughter of a noble family!

*No way... Nadja... Is a princess...?*

Something in Rosemary ruptured—with a crushing sound.

*I won't forgive you! I won't forgive you, I won't forgive you, I won't forgive you...!*

Rosemary's heart wreathed; her emotions bit and tore at it, shaking her to the very core. She couldn't endure a girl other than herself being the princess—let alone that girl being *Nadja*.

*Why? Why did it have to be Nadja? The liar! She said she was my prince! Nadja, you ungrateful...! I showed you so much compassion! So much kindness! It's not fair! It's just not fair! It's not fair, it's not fair, it's not fair!!!*

Her heart turned cold as stone, Rosemary resolved to do just one thing: become a princess by switching places with Nadja. She will come forward as Nadja Applefield—the daughter of a noble family.

*This is no surprise. I was the princess from the beginning, and Nadja snatched it away from me! I'm far more suited to be a princess than her...!*

Deceiving those close to Nadja will be a wholly simple task, Rosemary thought. She believed she knows everything there is to know about Nadja.

Rosemary's cruelty was merciless. On one occasion, she went as far as wearing Nadja's guise to live with Colette. But that wasn't enough to break Nadja's spirit—she opposed with all her might the obstacles blocking her path and convinced Colette of who her real daughter was. The imposter was exposed, and Rosemary fled the mansion of her own accord.

She declared her reprisal. "We're living in the dawn of a new age—the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I see now that I'm not the kind of princess who belongs to a noble family. I'll seek out my castle by my own will. I'll show you."

A short while ago down a street corner of Paris, Rosemary caught sight of Nadja. It filled her heart with joy and put a smile on her face. Nadja, with the ever-familiar heart-shaped brooch on her chest, was dancing merrily alongside her fellow members of the Dandelion Troupe.

Rosemary relived a conversation with Nadja before the two parted in Vienna.

"I, a princess who got her standing by her own will. And you, a princess born into a noble family. We will meet again, and I look forward to that day. Adieu, Princess Nadja."

"Adieu, Princess Rosemary."

They exchanged these words back then.

*That Nadja...! So she didn't settle into a noble mansion like an obedient girl. It's much like her, to want to return to that travelling circus.*

Rosemary stood at a crevice amid a crowd of people and watched Nadja dance. She let out a giggle.

*But to think she's come to Paris where I live... This is proof that fate binds Nadja and me.*

As far as Rosemary was concerned, the timing of their 'reunion' couldn't be better.

*I was just needing a lofty sum of cash when lo and behold, there's Nadja! No doubt she's carrying the diamonds her mom bought for her over the years.*

Rosemary began investigating the Dandelion Troupe's movements. Coincidentally, in the Montmartre Journal newspaper, Harvey Livingston had recently published a detailed article about the Dandelion Troupe; they had lost their Trick Circus Car, their theatrical debut received a warm welcome, and their dancer Nadja sang a particular lullaby on that stage.

Rosemary crafted the plot in her head with ease.

Long ago, a Frenchman who belonged to a theatrical troupe partook in a public performance in Vienna. Colette and Albert, who went to see the performance, invited those performers to their mansion. To show them a warm welcome, Colette sang and played that lullaby on the piano.

She weaved it all together. Composing stories had been Rosemary's strong suit since her childhood, but on more occasions than one, her ability has blurred the line between fiction and reality.

Rosemary's next step involved enlisting a cunning person to act out her story. On some previous 'business', Rosemary became acquainted with a worthless man who, rotten as he was, boasted skill and experience in acting. His plays are highly regarded, and he also knew how to carry himself with sophistication.

Du Pont played out Rosemary's tale. It won over Nadja and the Dandelion Troupe's trust so convincingly that it was comical.

*How blessed Nadja is! How strong-willed she is!*

What's the problem, then? She can handle this much. Just a little prick won't hurt, right? This is the justice she deserves.

"I'll go to America. I'll go to the New World and build my own castle!" Rosemary proclaimed, waving in her hand a ticket for a boat that will ferry her across to America.

America, the New World. A world totally unlike Europe, its customs long-established through tradition rewarded anyone

with an aptitude to strive for more, no matter their birthright. Rosemary heard America was that sort of world.

Rosemary is confident in her abilities. She doesn't baulk at grand ambitions. Moreover, she now has all the money she needs for capital.

Thus, Rosemary embarked on her industrious venture to America with no qualms about failure.

"Hey, Nadja. Have some peace of mind. I don't intend on stealing your money. I'm just borrowing it for a while."

As her quest proceeds in due course, she aims to return to Europe once more.

*When I do, I'll apply interest on the loan.*

Rosemary smiled, spellbound by her vision.

I'll realise my kingdom with my own hands, and I won't rely on any prince to do it.

That's right—I am a true princess!

第 8 章



Presenting... Nadja!

The Dandelion Troupe gathered for breakfast in the eatery beside the inn lobby.

Everyone noticed that Nadja seemed... different, compared to last night when her show of cheerfulness was clear as day. While the troupe saw through it, they understood how she felt. After all, they were in the same boat.

Still, she seemed different today, as if she had cast yesterday behind to believe in a brighter tomorrow. Nadja has returned to her usual self.

“Now isn’t the time to be dawdling.”

Nadja heartily enjoyed a croissant with an ample spread of marmalade before surveying her companions.

“Let’s head to our theatre after breakfast. It may be tattered and scruffy, but it’s still our theatre. Pretty amazing when you think about it, right?”

“Well, Nadja... You’re absolutely right!”

“Thanks, Chief! Everyone, from here on, let’s focus on how we can touch up the theatre. We’ll spend the day giving it some thought.” Nadja shimmered with an extraordinary smile.

“Good thinking, Nadja.”

“We’ll manage this—together!!”

Kennosuke, Rita, and Granny also nodded amiably.

A newfound vigour welled in the Dandelion Troupe’s hearts.

The theatre, as it basked in the glow of the morning sun, remained in an abhorrent state, though its presence seemed warmer than it did at dusk. It had a cosy feeling. Despite its paint coating peeling off, the entrance archway and windows piqued elegance in their shapely construction.

Habitual dust, cobwebs, and the stench of mould awaited them inside the lobby. Its spacious roof hinted at the room’s purpose as a waiting room for people to relax until the main event.

Beyond the door they neglected yesterday was the theatre hall, its stage and seating boasting perfect suitability for the theatrical gamut of the Dandelion Troupe.

Thomas looked around. “The diameter of the seating area is quite ideal! It’s wide, and you get a wonderful view of the stage no matter where you sit!”

Abel ascended on stage and shared his enthusiasm.

“It’s covered in dust, but this timber material is quality. The sound echoes far out too, which is something we should take into consideration. I must say, this is a good theatre!”

Yesterday, it seemed like a sight for sore eyes. Today, it seemed anything but. The positive sides of the theatre came into light.

“Anyway, we gotta go beyond renovating the theatre. It needs to be more than any run-of-the-mill place, so let’s do something about the upholstery and seating arrangements before we think about using the Trick Circus Car’s engine.”

“Righto! We’re in for some hard labour. A tremendous amount of time and effort is due.”

The Chief and Granny provoked sternness from Nadja.

“We can settle all that by bartering another one of my mom’s diamonds. I’m not counting on that, though.”

The troupe agreed.

“Right. They’re your precious diamonds.”

“Unless we’re in a really, really bad pinch, you should keep the ones you have left.”

Rita and Kennosuke voiced their honest thoughts to Nadja.

She nodded back. “I agree. But that’s not the only reason. I mean... I want this to be *our* theatre. This is our home now. Rather than tossing over a neat bundle of money to any Tom, Dick or Harry, we’ll combine our smarts, ingenuity, and strength to bring everything together.”

“Smarts, ingenuity...”

“...And strength, eh?”

Abel and Thomas repeated.



“Right! How do we renovate the theatre with as little money as possible? It’s tucked away in an inconspicuous little side street, but what can we do to encourage people to make their way here? It’s all on us to answer these questions.”

“Sounds like a job worth doing. Bring it on!”

The Chief and his troupe united their enthusiasm. They were ready to challenge the situation head-on.

“I think we should focus first on tidying out however many dressing rooms we have.”

“Agreed, Nadja! Having tidy rooms to stay in will be reassuring. We’ll save money on the inn charges, too,” said Granny before she continued with a smile.

“I went looking around the back and found a garden and a well that’s collected some fresh water. If we can get our hands on a small stove, we can turn this place into our lovely new home!”

The Livingston brothers, Harvey and TJ, have returned to Paris after their month-long America trip.

Harvey plodded along with a long face. With no interview nor a single photo of Harold Brighton to gloat of, he wallowed in his missed opportunity to catch the shady businessman. TJ, on the other hand, was in high spirits.

“Bonjour, Paris! Going home to America after all that time was awesome, but Paris and her wonders are on a whole other level!”

He blurted out while spinning like a musical star before breaking into song.

“Why? The reason is obvious! It’s because Nadja is here—in Paris!”

Harvey looked at him, dumbfounded. “Honest as the day is long, you are.”

TJ paid him no mind.

“Nadja will be so happy with the gifts I brought from America! A cowboy hat, red bandana, and boots made from the finest

leather... She'll look absurdly cute on stage in these. She'll be a huge hit!"

"You're right there. Yep."

"Heh heh heh... Kennosuke, that punk—he's always with Nadja, and that Oliver, too... I bet he tries to see her every opportunity he gets. I'm way more considerate compared to them, and I'll prove it to Nadja and get a huge lead ahead!"

".....Y-You're an honest one. For sure."

The following morning, Harvey dropped by the Montmartre Journal office to report on his findings in America. It was then that he heard the unbelievable from the editor-in-chief.

"Those travellers you're supporting—the Dandelion Troupe—they've had a vast fortune stolen from them in what seems to be a targeted fraud incident."

"What!?" Harvey retorted in disbelief. "Fraud? A vast fortune? The Dandelion Troupe?"

They lost a vast fortune? Harvey couldn't make the connection. For a moment, he thought the editor-in-chief was playing a joke, but the utmost urgent expression on his boss' faces set Harvey straight.

*What on Earth happened to Nadja and the rest?*

Harvey left the newspaper office to meet with TJ at a café by the Moulin Rouge, Paris's famous cabaret club.

"The Dandelion Trouble has been targeted for fraud. From the sounds of it, they've been swindled of a vast fortune."

TJ's reaction matched his brother's. "Fraud? A vast fortune? The Dandelion Troupe?"

"Anyhow, let's hurry off to the inn!"

Arriving at their destination, the brothers met with their acquaintance who worked the reception.

"Ah, those fellows checked out last week," he said before handing over an envelope. "Here, Miss Nadja of the troupe left this with us."

Harvey frantically tore off the seal to find a single memo inside. It wrote, 'Harvey, TJ, welcome back! We are here now!'

The Livingston brothers recognised the neatly arranged writing as Nadja's. A drawing of a simple map with an address accompanied her message.

“Let's go!”

The memo guiding them, the brothers galloped down an alleyway where a dilapidated building stood.

“Um, this is...”

“A theatre, right? Though it's pretty run down.”

The moment they tilted their heads in doubt, familiar laughter and cheerful voices burst out: it was Nadja and the Chief stepping out from the front entrance.

“Oh! Harvey, TJ! Welcome back!” Nadja greeted with her abiding smile.

“So, riddle me this... What the hell is going on?” Harvey responded.

A riddle. That's how the situation appeared to the Livingston brothers who spent only a month away from Paris.

Nadja and the Dandelion Troupe faced a disaster while the Livingston brothers travelled off to America. When they heard the details, they could only see red.

TJ shook his fists at no-one in particular. “That bastard Du Pont...! I'm gonna collar him and beat his lights out!”

Harvey pondered over the situation as a newspaper reporter would.

“He went as far as to fabricate a past encounter with your mother? Sounds to me like he knew about your diamonds from the beginning. We'll shine a light on the nature of this case when we find him. No doubt.”

He continued. “Listen, I'll do everything. First thing's first, I'll publish an article on this fraud case. It'll have a narrative to garner more public interest, and that'll increase the chances of someone coming forward with information.”

Thomas leaned forward in interest.

“That’ll be an enormous help, Harvey. We were quick to file a criminal report with the police, but they only inquired about the money. Why did you have so much? Where did you get it from? That was all they asked!”

“And nothing came of it either! They’re not even on the case, are they!?” Rita’s cheeks swelled up.

“Yeah, a newspaper article will be way more helpful than those pillocks!” said Kennosuke, prompting a response from Harvey.

“Oh, Kennosuke—did you draw a portrait of this Du Pont fellow?”

Harvey too was well aware of Kennosuke’s aptitude in drawing.

“Aye! You can count on me. I drew one for the police already.” Kennosuke proclaimed as he drummed at his chest. “His red hair, dodgy moustache, and glasses are still fresh in my mind! I’ll draw a portrait so accurate you’d think it’s a photograph!”

“Perfect. I’m counting on you for that sketch.”

His moustache and red hair were fake, of course, and Harvey, Nadja, and the troupe were oblivious to this.

“Thanks, Harvey! You’re always there to help us... I really appreciate it,” said Nadja.

“Nah, don’t sweat it.” Harvey’s expression darkened. “If I hadn’t gone to America, I’d have caught wind of Le Cygne supposedly being sold off and exposed their fraud. I just *had* to be away from Paris when it happened. Eh, I can’t help but lament my timing.”

“Hey, don’t feel that way, Harvey.” The Chief shook his head. “We can’t thank you enough for the article. It’s a step in the right direction to get a hook on Du Pont, not to mention the story will net the Dandelion Troupe some publicity too. We’ll still be performing on the streets for the foreseeable future while cleaning up the theatre, so we appreciate the traction!”

“Glad I can at least be of some help. Bearing in mind...”

Harvey stiffened.

“I won’t mention a thing about Nadja’s diamonds. I’ll refer to them as small, personal treasures instead. Treasures that were stolen with malicious intent. And I won’t disclose Nadja’s full name or that she’s a Preminger and the stepdaughter of Count Waldmüller. Being careless with these little details could hoard unwanted attention from wrongdoers, you see.”

“Makes sense, Harvey! You’re attentive as usual.”

“Oh, why thank you, Granny!”

After their talk ended, Nadja and the troupe guided Harvey through the interior of their new home.

“Ooh, this’ll be a great theatre once it’s all straightened out!”

Harvey’s observation contained an important truth: The troupe still had a ways to go before they could entertain an audience. The stage, for instance, has been scrubbed and shined to a gleam, but the same cannot be said for the seating area. The chairs there had springs protruding outwards, and mending each one would be laborious work; however, Nadja and the troupe had already devised a plan to tackle this hurdle, much to Harvey’s surprise.

“There’s a café nearby about to close. We’ve made friends with the owner and he’s agreed to give us his chairs!”

“They’re not exactly theatre quality, but being able to sit down at all is more important, right?”

Nadja and Granny stated their intention.

“Let me tell ya, Harvey. We’ve got it handled! Even the curtains and window glass, too!”

“Granny has a regular she makes hats for—a rich noble! She’s renovating the inside of her mansion and replacing the upholstery. They’re quite old, she said, but they’re top-class!”

Kennosuke and Rita added with a smile.

“We’re putting our heads together and coming up with new ideas. This is tentative, but... The plan is to pare down the elevation between the entranceway and the lobby so our guests who aren’t as physically able will have an easier time entering the theatre. Like Granny, for example.”

“We’re even thinking of working with bakeries to serve pastries and beverages to our guests before the show starts!”

Abel and Thomas spoke cheerfully, their words garnished with enthusiasm.

“Oh, right! Wait one sec.” Rita hurried off to the dressing room, her footsteps echoing a pitter-patter. After a while, she returned holding something wrapped in paper.

“Here, I made this. Try it, Harvey, TJ! It’s delicious!”

“What’s this? It sure smells good... like cheese and toast.”

“Whoa, it’s piping hot!”

It was a baked ham and cheese sandwich made with a pan loaf style of bread. Harvey and TJs eyes lit up after a single bite.

“It’s great...!”

Their voices matched like a duet.

“Right? Isn’t it just!? It’s on the menu Nadja came up with. We’re thinking how great it’ll be if we could serve this to our guests!” said Rita, elated about the idea as if it were her own.

The *croque monsieur*. According to some books, it was, in the year 1910, already being served in some cafés within a certain Paris district. Whether the dish’s original idea belonged to Nadja remains to be seen.

A glimpse at the troupe’s current situation sufficed to bear witness to a terrible affair, but the troupe’s sincere smiles kept their hearts afloat.

“You guys are just incredible.”

“Sounds like fun!”

Harvey and TJ were touched by the troupe’s motivation. Standing back up on one’s feet after getting swindled of such a large fortune would ordinarily be an arduous feat. But not for the Dandelion Troupe, who held their heads high to face tomorrow.

And it was all thanks to Nadja. Her cheerful and forward-facing spirit rubbed off on the troupe. She endowed them with courage.

“Our bag is full of ideas. Ideas no-one has thought of before. It could go well, or it might not, but we won’t know until we try. I think it’ll be a load of fun!”

“What d’ya mean?”

“What’s your idea, Nadja?”

“It’s a secret. For now!” Nadja mischievously giggled before resuming a serious look. “I think... this theatre is a wonderful place.”

“What’re you saying outta nowhere?” said TJ.

“Here, follow me.”

She guided Harvey and TJ to the entrance. On the wall beside it, an epitaph was engraved when the theatre was first built.

*Tales. Music. Dance.*

*These little delights weave colour and joy into our lives.*

*May this place bring joy to the lives of many.*

*- Jean & Mary Duvivier*

The Livingston brothers widened their eyes.

“Isn’t it wonderful? I was really, really delighted when I found it!” Nadja smiled. “It *looks* like a derelict theatre, but I can sense the love that went into it. What sort of people were Jean and Mary? No matter if they were husband and wife, brother and sister, or even father and daughter—what matters is that their love was genuine. I don’t know what happened to Jean and Mary or how the theatre came to be, but... I think we’re capable of succeeding their love. We’ll transform this run-down building into a theatre that’ll make the entire crowd happy.”

“That sounds splendid, Nadja! Truly!”

“Knowing you and the troupe, this won’t disappoint!”

Harvey and TJ renewed a desire in their hearts—the desire to support Nadja and the Dandelion Troupe in any way they can.

The Montmartre Journal's feature article hoarded an audience for the Dandelion Troupe's street shows.

"My word, what a wretched thing to do! Those poor souls."

"What are the police doing? Have they caught the culprit yet?"

"That poor dancer... taking away what little she had. She looks like a fine lass, too."

Though the curious city folk gathered to propagate the fraud incident, by the end of each show, their smiles endured.

"It was fun. I'm glad I came!"

"Let's come back again!"

The Dandelion Troupe hearkened to their words of encouragement.

"I'm so glad...! These people today will definitely be at our premiere!" said Nadja with an airy voice. The Chief wholeheartedly agreed with her.

Everything began to unfold. Yet a lone thought loomed within Nadja.

"I can't keep going on like this..."

*Don't fret, Nadja. You can do it...!*

At every hurdle thus far, Nadja raised her head and bolstered the smile on her face so that it wouldn't falter.

*What do I do? What now?*

Her thoughts enclosed her mind.

*One day, our theatre curtains will open. So long as we keep working together. One day, though...? When will that be? Next year? The year after? A future far and beyond?*

It may never open. But that's if—and only if—the Dandelion Troupe are overburdened with making ends meet on the streets. Without the Trick Circus Car, they've lost the charm that anchored their success from the very beginning, and with this being their second expedition to Paris, Nadja and the troupe know this well.



A wind of renewed interest stirred from Harvey's article. But the day will come when the city folk will grow tired of the same repeated performances. Novelty is their crutch, and the appearance of another travelling circus will threaten their progress.

This is why they yearn for their exclusive theatre; a large-scale mechanism commissioning the Trick Circus Car's engine can set a stage like no other, but for now, they have no choice but to continue performing on the streets. They only have so much money for expenses and so little time in the day to renovate the theatre. Their progress, no matter how much they toil away, is inhibited by time—time that they also need to spend polishing their theatre repertoire and preparing for the ambitious plans in store for the Trick Circus Car. Make no mistake—the theatre will not open for a long, long time.

Another uncertainty loomed over Nadja. She hopes for her siblings—the other youths of Applefield—to meet with her at their theatre. But when will that day come? Will it ever?

*In the end, it all comes down to money...*

One night, in a corner she had set aside for herself in one of the dressing rooms, Nadja let out a sigh.

If the Dandelion Troupe had funds set aside for capital, they could afford timber and the metal parts needed to contrive their mechanically elaborate stage. This would give them total confidence in putting out a show-stopper. Even then, to get that far...

*It makes no difference. Is our only choice to pawn Mom's diamonds?*

A rejected memory emerged from within her.

*That time was... No—is there really no other way?*

Nadja surveyed the room as she grappled with her thoughts. In a fleeting moment, something crossed the back of her mind.

“.....!”

It had no physical form; it was vague, as if it could slip away at any moment.

“What? What is it?” Nadja popped her eyelids again and again as she surveyed her surroundings. At last, she rested her vision at a certain place.

There was a small shelf; a case of assorted makeup, her beloved typewriter, various stationery, and a pile of countless books were arranged on top. The spine of one particular book captured Nadja’s attention. She eyed it, giving it a long, hard look before she realized: It was a book Albert had given her before she left Vienna.

“I think its contents might be a bit difficult for you, but hey, you never know! One day it may come in useful. Even if it doesn’t, reading is always a good opportunity. It connects you with the vast world out there and lets you experience the impossible. That’s why books are precious to me.”

Nadja rose and approached the small shelf. She took the book in her hand and gazed at its title.

“.....”

*This book might be just what we need!*

Still standing by the shelf, Nadja hastily opened the doors to the world within the book.

Three days passed.

Nadja took every opportunity to read, even during short breaks. She made notes in her notebook, looked up unfamiliar words in the dictionary, and even consulted Abel about any of its contents she couldn’t understand.

At last, Nadja withdrew from the world within the book, bearing with her a concrete plan of action.

*It’s all coming together. This... this will work!*

With intense concentration, Nadja chartered her newfound knowledge through the pen gliding over her notebook. Any markings she made, she erased to make room for new ones. She revisited her writing, casting word after word to reinforce the clarity of her ideas.

Her notes were complete, but Nadja still wasn't finished. She grazed through it once more, this time scrutinizing the spelling in her work.

"Hey, Nadja, whatcha working on?" Rita asked, mystified by Nadja's intensity.

Nadja turned away from the notebook. "It's for the Dandelion Troupe. Trust me when I say it's really, really important!"

She gave an answer charged with emotion before resuming the urgency directed at her notebook. Rita and Kennosuke drew blanks; they couldn't fathom a guess at what she was writing. Nadja said it was really, really important, so the two resolved to not disturb her by asking any further questions.

Two further days passed.

Nadja, with her notes in hand, began typing a clean copy of her work with her beloved typewriter. She reviewed it from start to finish, over and over.

"This'll do!" Nadja declared, carefully putting away the finished papers before walking over to Granny. "Granny, can I ask you something? Do you know Leonardo and Thierry's address?"

"Leonardo Cardinale and Thierry Rothschild? Those lads?" said Granny, craning her neck to one side as she polished her crystal ball.

"Yes, them! Doesn't matter who—I want to get in touch with either of them."

Leonardo Cardinale is the distinguished son of the Cardinales, an Italian noble family who made riches as silk drapers. The family runs a company known as the Cardinale Company. Though it is based in Milan, their patrons span all regions of Europe and the New World of America.

Nadja came to know Leonardo on her previous travels with the Dandelion Troupe. She met him countless times, each encounter warming her up to his eager helping hand. Back then, he was dating a girl called Julietta, who Leonardo's parents decided would be his marriage partner. Despite the flock of

female companions who frolicked around him like butterflies, Leonardo confessed that marriage and romance are of secondary interest to him. He went as far as telling Julietta that she would be better off falling in love with someone else.

When Nadja and Leonardo first met, he called out to her with a phrase that never ceases to bewilder her.

“My little rosebud.”

Thierry Rothschild is Leonardo’s friend. He runs a boutique business dealing in dresses of the finest quality. Possessing a preeminent fashion sense, he designs dresses and holds great interest in the hats Granny knits. An unexpected trait of his is that he’s also good at skiing. He, in contrast to Leonardo, has a calm disposition about him, his demeanour proving to be gentle. Following his first encounter with Nadja, he too had several run-ins with her as he was often out socializing with Leonardo. Perhaps it is natural for them to always be together with the two seeming like two close brothers.

“The Cardinale Company in Milan... If their address is what you’re after, I have it right here,” said Granny, pulling out an address book.

“Milan? Leonardo mentioned before that the Cardinale family owned apartments in Paris, though...”

“I’m not sure where that might be. Unfortunately, I don’t have Thierry’s address either.”

“I see... Well, didn’t Leonardo and Thierry say they were always travelling within mainland Europe?”

“Indeed! They also said that they spent most of their time in Paris.”

“I want to reach them as soon as possible. If they’re in Paris right now then I’d consider myself lucky. I’ll start writing a letter to the Cardinale Company in Milan.”

“Oho!” Granny made a note of the address for Nadja. “Here you go then—this is the address.”

“Thanks, Granny! I’ll try to send it out right away.”

When Nadja took off, a flame kindled in Granny’s eyes.

“Nadja—wait!”

“W-What is it?”

“You know me, I can be a bit of the clumsy sort. I might not have the exact address number of Thierry’s boutique, but I can find that out. The boutique must be somewhere down Faubourg Saint-Honoré.”

“Faubourg Saint-Honoré... That’s near the jewellery store where we sold Mom’s diamonds!”

“Oh! You’re right about that!”

Home to the Louvre Art Museum and Vendome Square, Paris’s Faubourg Saint-Honoré runs parallel from east to west with Les Champs-Élysées, the main street of Paris. There, the major branches of world-renowned brands showcase their dresses, accessories, handbags, and watches in a florid arrangement. This point of interest remains unchanged, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nadja is sure to pass Thierry’s boutique if she goes from top-to-bottom and door-to-door on that street.

Nadja gave her thanks and rushed out of the theatre. “Thanks for remembering, Granny!”

Out of the blue, a single horse carriage dashed towards her.

“Whoa!” The driver yelled as he swerved from Nadja’s direction, skidding the carriage to a halt.

“Well, well, well... If it isn’t my little rosebud!”

“Nadja! I didn’t think we’d bump into you like this!”

Those voices—Nadja couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She craned her head up, and peeking through the carriage window was none other than the pair she sought to find.

“Leonardo! Thierry! This is too good to be true! I just set off to find you two!”

“This is no coincidence, my little rosebud. We came to see you.”

“You surprised me, rushing out in front of us like that.”

Leonardo and Thierry galloped down the carriage.

“Oh, Nadja—how beautiful you’ve grown. A bud you may still be, but soon you will blossom... You are, after all, that sort of rosebud.”

Leonardo lined up one embarrassing phrase after the other. He took Nadja's hand and greeted her with a kiss. Thierry, who stood by their side, told an earnest account of their travels.

"The two of us just came back from Switzerland! We read Harvey's article in *Montmartre Journal* a while back, and the news that the Dandelion Troupe has returned to Paris was too much for us to simply stay put. So, here we are!" he said. "You poor things. That was quite the swindle you guys got caught in."

"But—we're relieved to see you in good spirits, Nadja!"

Nadja guided them into the theatre.

"Hm? What happened? Looking for something?"

When the boys stepped inside, Granny looked as if a fox had bewitched her.

The Chief greeted them. "Hey! It's been a while."

As Nadja gave the boys the same tour she did for Harvey and TJ, she shared the Dandelion Troupe's vision to perform in this very theatre.

"Sounds splendid! I love that about you—the little rosebud who perseveres through all disheartenment."

"Nadja, the forward-facing dancer, and the Dandelion Troupe. I support the lot of you. Tell us right away when the prospects for a show are looking good and we'll no doubt lend a hand with stage outfits."

"Leonardo... Thierry... Thank you!"

"Now, is there anything Thierry and I can do in the meantime?"

"Actually..." Nadja already brooded over the right moment to ask. "I wanted to meet with both of you to ask for something important."

"Something important, eh?"

"What might that be?"

Nadja demanded with an austere expression. "I want to be introduced to someone who runs a salon, like the late Madame Moreau."

"Someone who runs a salon...?"

“Exactly. I need to meet someone like her—someone committed to artistic efforts who fosters experts in the making.”

Leonardo and Thierry exchanged a glance before turning to Nadja.

“My little rosebud... I have an idea.”

“A lady—she goes by the name Madame Boyeaux.”

“What kind of person is she?”

“She doesn’t have a salon, but I think she’ll fit the bill. Her astute eye for aesthetics can’t be matched, and she’s a lovely person to boot,” said Leonardo.

Thierry explained further. “Boyeaux brings out the best in artists with talent who haven’t yet made a name for themselves. And she’s financially clever about it too. She’s helped countless artists and musicians gain recognition around the world!”

He expressed these loving details about her before facing Nadja. “Well how about it? Does she meet your needs?”

“Whether she does or not, she sounds like someone I’d love to meet!”

“Oh, what a relief.” Leonardo witted. “You’ll be glad to know that the Madame is organising a masquerade in the coming weekend.”

“Leonardo and I have been invited. Let us take you along and we can introduce you to her.”

“Really? Can I attend without notice? I’ll need to talk to the troupe about this too...”

Nadja’s worry prompted Leonardo to smile gently at her. “Cast your worries aside, dear Nadja. It’s not a ball where guests merely dance. It’s a social event for people to gather and form new bonds.”

“Madame Boyeux values social intercourse on such occasions. Not just that, but there’s always some element of surprise at her masquerade balls.”

“Hm, I see. I won’t worry too much then! I shall leave it to you two.”

Nadja gestured a formal bow of her head.

“Alas, my little rosebud—the Madame can aid you in your financial troubles, should she become a patron of your theatre.”

“No, Leonardo, that’s not it. I’m not looking for patrons.”

“Eh? What are you looking for, then?” he asked, Thierry too confused by her dismissal.

“I’m planning something. For the future of the Dandelion Troupe. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you what it is just yet. I need to chat with this Madame Boyeaux first.”

“Is that so? Got it.” Leonardo replied.

“By the way, would you like us to arrange a dress for you as we did before?”

“I appreciate it, Thierry. This time, I’ll go in the dress that Mom chose for me.”

“Very well then! I think a dress chosen by her will draw out your beauty like no other. I look forward to seeing you then.”

Thierry and Leonardo smiled in unison.



第9章



# A Maskless Keith

It was the evening hour of Madame Boyeaux's ball. When Thierry and Leonardo returned to Le Cygnet, they witnessed a marvel that hoisted their eyes open. Their breaths were, quite literally, taken away.

"Nadja, you are..."

"Simply beautiful!"

A base of pale blue followed the contours of her lined dress that made her seem just a bit more mature than usual.

"Your hand, please," said Leonardo and Thierry before stretching their arms out in unison.

Leonardo taking her right hand and Thierry her left, they escorted Nadja into a carriage belonging to the Cardinales. Its interiors were decorated with a silk fabric fashioned with a deep green and scarlet red paisley motif that was much to Leonardo's liking.

*How stylish this is*, Nadja thought.

They passed through a long stretch of rural landscapes, leaving the rural areas of Paris towards Madame Boyeaux's mansion in Versailles.

Versailles is a city where dozens of fortified noble mansions are built on its outskirts. It is also the city where King Louis XIV lived amid the Palace of Versailles's splendours. Incidentally, under the reign of King Louis XVI, Queen Marie Antoinette was sentenced to death at a public guillotine which was a tragedy that occurred only a hundred years before Nadja's time.

An ordinary citizen. Madame Boyeaux's husband isn't of noble descent, but he reaped massive profits from the shipbuilding industry. With his superfluous coin, he gained one of the fortified mansions built on the Versailles's outskirts.

Amid the twilight of dusk, a magical light emanated from the mansion. People attending the ball arrived one after the other in different carriages, and the Boyeaux mansion's servants welcomed them with brisk greetings.

Leonardo and Thierry escorted Nadja into the entrance hall, where her first step inside propelled her excitement.

“Woow! Everything’s so lovely!”

A ball it is, but compared to the ones held at Duke Preminger’s mansion in Vienna, Madame Boyeaux’s ball exuded a unique grandeur; the chamber decorations flaunted a style with its veins in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the guests wore fancy garments that showed freedom of expression.

Madame Boyeaux welcomed her guests in. She appeared to be a distinctive woman; she wore her black hair up high, and the sequin on her black, lamé fabric dress emanated a starry glitter. Even the mask she held in her hand sparkled silver and gold.

*I’ll be discussing my ideas with her...?*

Nadja’s heart raced.

An exuberant waltz resounded within the hall, putting an end to any preliminary toasts. As everyone finished greeting each other, Leonardo and Thierry found their cue.

“Come, Nadja.”

“Soon it’ll be our chance.”

They escorted Nadja to Madame Boyeaux and politely introduced themselves.

“Allow me to introduce you to Miss Nadja Applefield of the Dandelion Troupe,” said the boys as they pressed Nadja’s back forward.

“Pleased to meet you, Madame Boyeaux. My name is Nadja Applefield.”

Nadja gave a courteous greeting she learnt back in Vienna.

“What do we have here! A lovely young lady.” Boyeaux smiled after a pause and said something unexpected. “I read about it in Montmartre Journal. You have my sympathies—what happened was a disaster.”

“...!”

It startled Nadja. Not even in her dreams could she imagine that the Madame would be familiar with the Dandelion Troupe.

“Thank you for your concern.”

“I hear that you and your troupe mates will perform on the streets while your theatre renovations are ongoing.”

“Indeed!”

Nadja sighed out her tension.

*Madame Boyeaux knows about our situation! Bringing it up should be easy then!*

Reality, however, wasn't so kind.

“Listen, Miss Applefield. I make my own decisions. I do *not* rely on anyone else. No matter if it's the dress I wear, the shoes I put on, or how I do my hair—I decide for myself, and on that matter, *I* decide the artistic efforts worthy of my support.”

“...?”

It perplexed Nadja. She couldn't understand what the Madame was trying to say.

“That's why, Miss Applefield—no matter how low you bow your head and beg for donations, I won't be moved in the slightest. I apologize.”

The Madame showed a beguiling smile then signalled the end of the conversation by turning away.

“Wait! I...”

As she tried calling out to her, Leonardo and Thierry cut in for a timely rescue.

“Madame, could you please hear Nadja's story to the end?”

“I think that even you, Madame, will surely take a liking to Nadja and her troupe, should you watch their show. If you'd like, we'd be happy to lead the way.”

This took Nadja aback. Their thoughtfulness already made Nadja feel more than grateful.

*But how would I feel if the person asking a favour from me is stood up for by someone else? I'd give them a slap on the back and tell them to get their act together!*

Nadja resolved to speak out.

“Leonardo, Thierry—I appreciate it, but I'm the one asking for the Madame's help. It's my request and I want her to hear it from me.”

Leonardo and Thierry, their eyes wide with surprise, gave a slight nod to Nadja who looked directly at the Madame.

“Madame Boyeaux. I ask for your help, but a donation has nothing to do with it.”

“...? You don’t want a donation?” She looked surprised.

“Exactly—I want your investment.”

“What’s that? You want *my* investment?”

The sidelined Leonardo and Thierry seemed just as confused. All three of them peered at Nadja.

“We, the Dandelion Troupe, plan on integrating a massive engine into our stage setting. It’ll be the chief feature of our theatre.”

“Engine? What ever do you mean?”

“This engine belonged to our Trick Circus Car. Ah—the Trick Circus Car was our means of transportation that also served as the stage for our street shows. It was an amazing automobile.”

“So, what happened? You don’t have it anymore?”

“We don’t. We lost him in an accident mid-journey.” Nadja’s features darkened. “But with the engine we saved, we can use its dynamic force to rotate the stage and even raise portions of it. It’ll be a flashy production—one that no one’s ever seen! The stage—it can elevate a water fountain, and send out gushes of wind and whiffs of perfume into the audience! There’s all sorts it can do!”

Admiration showed on Leonardo and Thierry’s faces.

“Wow! So that’s what the Dandelion Troupe have in store.”

“Oh, I like the sound of that. It’s a new style.”

Nadja resumed her talk with the Madame.

“That said, the theatre isn’t in the greatest location. Nor did it see much success in the past, so incorporating the Trick Circus Car in our shows is half the battle. How will we convince a crowd to come out and see us? Everyone in the troupe mulled over their ideas again and again.”

A constricting pressure weighed on Nadja’s beating heart. This negotiation will decide the Dandelion Troupe’s future and

fulfil Nadja's ambition of reuniting with her Applefield siblings. Failure was not an option.

*Speak with warmth, like my mother. Speak with dignity, like my grandfather. Speak with clarity and make my point clear, like my stepfather. I'll bring all this together and pull through...!*

"Let me explain."

Nadja's persuasion bolstered her conviction.

"There are people who want to see a theatre show but aren't able to. What if we focused our efforts on their needs? For instance, those who can't walk freely will be given access to convenient seating, and we will remove any differences in elevation within the theatre. Compared to the Moulin Rouge, a cabaret that mostly serves gentlemen, I want our theatre to be a place where women and their families feel comfortable to attend. On that note, mothers who bring their children along can leave them under our care during the show. Also, I want to allocate certain days where female guests are granted discounts upon admission, which is important to me. Some can't enjoy dinner because they work until the last tick, and I want to serve them simple and light meals that we prepare."

Nadja shared the various ideas she had in mind.

"This is rather extraordinary..." said the bewildered Madame Boyeaux.

"Extraordinary, sure, but I think a carefree acceptance of guests, even if they bear no relation with each other, will be a wonderful standard for our theatre. You may think it's extraordinary, but in the distant future—no, in about a hundred years, at the dawn of the 21st century, this acceptance will be natural and commonplace."

"A hundred years..." The Madame smiled wryly. "You say some ridiculous things."

*Calm down, calm down...*

Nadja appeased herself against Madame Boyeaux's brusque statement.

“Here. The Dandelion Troupe’s proposal, in detail.”

She presented a bundle of papers she brought with her.

“The plan we discussed starts with preparing the engine for our stage setting. Furthermore, the parts of the theatre that are badly damaged need to be renovated. Our efforts are ongoing. For now, we’ll manage with the seats, curtains, and so on, but we still need a considerable amount of money.”

The Madame pierced Nadja with an icy stare. “So, you *are* asking for a donation.”

“No, not at all. Like I said earlier, I don’t want your donation. I want your investment.”

“.....”

The Madame quietly listened.

“I humbly ask you to read our proposal. If you have any wish to see the troupe’s performance, please do so and judge whether we are worthy of your investment. There will be profits when the theatre gets on track. A proportion of the sum you invest will be paid dividends from our earnings, and the bigger the earnings, the larger yield of profit.”

Madame Boyeaux leered at Nadja. “Your way of thinking is, so to speak, how a public company operates.”

“Indeed.” Nadja smiled.

When a company’s stocks are published on the market, shareholders buy their stocks, thus becoming investors who supply the required capital and are paid their dividends on a later date. Public companies that do this are commonplace in Nadja’s era. The first case in point of such a company is mentioned without fail in every history textbook: the Dutch East India Company. Formed in 1602 to trade with the many Asian colonies at the time, they had even established several branches on the islands forming Nagasaki. Their trade developed with the times, all the way into the Industrial Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the company’s influence pervaded.

“But, how strange it is.” The Madame confessed, cocking her head to one side. “It may be rude of me to say, but how did a

young girl like yourself happen upon ideas about investment and public trading?”

“I thank my father for it.” Nadja answered.

“Your father?”

“Yes, my stepfather who I lived with for three years. To support myself in the coming era, he said I needed to gain knowledge across various fields where gender bears no importance. And so he taught me social studies, politics, and even business.”

“My!”

“I’ll be honest—when he taught me business, I couldn’t grasp it and thought myself poor at the subject. With the theatre at stake, it all came to me. My stepfather gave me a mountain of books before I left home, and among them was one I referenced for my public trading research.”

A giggle slipped out of the Madame.

“I don’t think many fathers out there are teaching their daughters business, let alone them being able to put the knowledge to practical use.”

Leonardo and Thierry nodded, still standing by the girls’ side.

Nadja giggled. “I’m considering many things! I may be overselling this on the topic of investment, but I want to appeal to the wider audience by offering advance tickets priced for better value. These can be bought before the theatre opens.”

“Advance tickets...?”

“Exactly. What if in the theatre lobby, we serve coffee to customers who bought an advance ticket outside opening hours? It’s only an idea, for now.”

Nadja, earnest as she spoke, was enjoying herself.

“That’s it! We’ll display a placard in the lobby listing the names of everyone who’ve invested into our theatre!”

She held out the proposal papers to the Madame once more.

“If you could please have a look.”

A tremor quivered through her hands. A furious, heart-beating pain pounded in her chest.



*It's fine. It'll be fine...* thought Nadja, desperate to persuade herself.

Madame Boyeaux, without uttering a word, showed no emotion when she took the papers.

*Please... Please, let the Madame see value in our ideas...*

Nadja prayed, when a voice caught her flank.

“Hey, aren’t you the young lady who performed at Le Cygne a month ago?”

“Y-Yes!”

Nadja turned to face a stout, middle-aged lady wearing a good-natured smile on her face.

“My husband and I went to see the show! My, how fun it was! I often attend operas, ballets, and theatre performances, but never have I seen a show like yours. Your singing and dancing were wonderful—like an angel sweeping down from the heavens! That man, too, with the amazing musculature, and that far-eastern samurai... Oh yes, they were splendid, as were those lion twins!”

The lady paraded the same joy she felt when watching the troupe’s show, and Nadja was overjoyed to hear it.

“Thank you very much! I’ll share your kind words with everyone.”

“My pleasure. The name’s Agatha Niellon. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Nadja Applefield.”

Madame Niellon wrapped both hands around Nadja’s for a firm handshake.

In a low tone, Niellon murmured. “Pardon me. I overheard your conversation with Madame Marine just now...”

*Marine? You mean Madame Boyeaux?*

Niellon continued before Nadja could explain.

“If you don’t mind, I would like to invest in your theatre.”

“Huh!?” Nadja piped her vocal cords in disbelief. “Are you sure?”

“Why, of course. I have no business cajoling you.”

“Ah, um. My apologies.”

“Oh-ho-ho. It’s nothing to apologize for. Although... I’m not sure how much I’m able to invest yet—I’ll speak to my husband first. I’d love to see your troupe perform on stage again. Just thinking about it gets me excited!”

“Thank you! Thank you so much! I’m so glad... I’m really, really glad!” Nadja radiated a deep red through her cheeks.

Leonardo, who stood by Nadja’s side, gave Madame Niellon a hand-kiss.

“I expected no less from your discerning eye, Madame Niellon.”

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho. How flattering!”

“I want to thank you as well. Your encouraging words have given Nadja immeasurable confidence. Thank you, Madame Niellon,” Thierry said before following up with a cordial bow. “Nadja, I will of course invest in you as well.”

“Thanks, Thierry!”

“Hey, don't think you can sweep me under the rug. My investment will be far bigger than Thierry’s, so look forward to it, my little rosebud!”

“I...! Thanks, Leonardo!”

There were other guests nearby who caught wind of the conversation.

“What’s that? Street performances in a theatre?”

“I’ve watched their show in the plaza before. Their standards are nothing to squawk at!”

“Engaging investors with incentives, eh? It’s certainly uncommon.”

These remarks drifted by Nadja.

“Everyone—if you’d like, will you listen to what I have to say?” Nadja declared before being interrupted.

“Wait.” Madame Boyeaux called out as she finished scanning the proposal.

“.....!?” Nadja turned to the Madame whose expression exerted a crushing pressure.

*No good...*

She gulped, and not long after, the Madame curtly judged her.

“I’ve only dabbled in doing business, but your views of the world are beyond ignorant. Like that of a little girl’s.”

“.....!”

“This is a proposal? Don’t make me laugh. It’s nothing more than ideas listed one after the other. It’s not a proposal—not by any definition of the word.”

Her harsh words pierced Nadja’s heart, yet the Madame was not finished.

“A proposal is for persuading others. Got it? What is your troupe trying to accomplish? What will you do to achieve it? How can we be assured that it’ll go as planned? And if it does go to plan, what exactly do your investors stand to gain? Be precise and thorough. Anyone reading your proposal needs to spot these details.”

“I understand...” Nadja meekly nodded. She agreed that she didn’t consider such things when writing the proposal.

“This little essay of yours won’t suffice. You need diagrams and sketches to support your claim. Also, I overheard Agatha earlier...”

She paused and then stole a fleeting glance from Madame Niellon.

“The Dandelion Troupe is home to a superhuman giant, a Japanese samurai, and even a pair of lion twins.”

“That’s correct.”

“Then why isn’t there a single mention of such important details in your document? The renovation plans are important, yes, but it’s ultimately the troupe’s collective charm that decides whether you will attract a crowd. Understand that for your investors, these finer points are crucial—even more so than the theatre itself.”

Her eyes no less stern, Madame Boyeaux chided, with a hint of kindness in her eyes.

*Um... Is she giving me advice?*

Evidently, that was the case.

“Rewrite your proposal. Get across how this exclusive theatre of yours will emphasize the charm of the Dandelion Troupe, and then...” She paused before smiling. “I will invest in your theatre.”

“Madame Boyeaux...! Thank you!”

Madame Niellon too looked astounded.

“There you go again, showing approval in such a knotty way. You never change, Marine.”

Her giggling turned to laughter, and Leonardo and Thierry sighed with relief.

Madame Boyeaux extended her offer.

“I have an inkling as to who might also invest in your theatre. Let me introduce you to them once you’ve made your revisions,” she said. “Of all the interesting ideas you shared with me today, Miss Applefield, these words of yours fascinated me the most. ‘In about a hundred years when the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawns, this acceptance may become both natural and commonplace’. It’s a wonderful outlook. I feel that, a century later, a girl just like you will look fondly back at those words.”

Her words and smile assured Nadja whose heart filled to the brim with warmth.

“Thank you, Madame Boyeaux. I’ll keep your advice close to heart when I revise my proposal. I’ll give this theatre my everything!”

Out of nowhere, the surrounding people clapped and cheered at Nadja’s resolute announcement.

The impresario of the evening’s masquerade ball beckoned to the lady of the hour.

“Come, Miss Applefield. Tonight is a ball, and you will head over there to dance,” said Madame Boyeaux.

“Okay!”

A smile that resounded freedom. Nadja ushered with joy as if she was striding above the clouds.

*Madame Boyeaux will work with us!*

The proposal she earnestly prepared for several days didn't go pear-shaped. Rather, it gave her a bite at the cherry.

The Dandelion Troupe's ambitions and the Applefield orphans' future; this path that Nadja walks leads to happiness and fortune for her two families. Her dream of realising the Dandelion Theatre that will bring joy to the masses is within firm grasp, but whether any of it will come to fruition depends on the troupe's perseverance. Nadja herself understands this well.

Tonight, however, she has taken the first major step towards her goal—a step that has rewarded her with hope and confidence for tomorrow.

*I'll make it come true. I'll work even harder from tomorrow!*

But before that, Leonardo had a request to ask of Nadja.

“Will you dance with me, my little rosebud?”

He offered his hand before taking off with her to dance the waltz.

“All things considered, my little rosebud, I expected no less.”

“Oh?”

“To start with, Madame Boyeaux wasn't eager. Not in the least. She decided in her head that you were asking for a donation and turned a deaf ear. Thierry and I were panicking, you know! We didn't know what to do! We thought about what could change her mind, but alas, it was you who managed it in the end. It was your passion and sincerity that convinced her.”

“I... I was desperate...”

“Yeah. You always tackle whatever's ahead, as if fighting for dear life. That's how you win the hearts of people, and I love that part of you. I think you're incredible.”

Leonardo's remarks soaked into Nadja's chest.

*His compliments are... a bit much...*

Despite the resistance, Nadja persuaded herself that tonight is a special night and accepted Leonardo's compliments.

The next song started. This time, it was Thierry's turn to take Nadja's hand.

"Nadja, your words and your resolve have really touched Madame Boyeaux's heart. And they've touched mine, too."

"Thierry..."

"You speak of the less able and women with small children. Indeed, going to a theatre is hard for them, and it's much like you to conceive a way to overcome their challenges. You think about what you can do for others, and it's this outlook of yours that got through to the Madame."

"My outlook..."

"If you only planned on making money, I don't think she would have backed you. Yet here we are! Not only is she investing herself, but she's going to the lengths of introducing you to her acquaintances, too!"

Leonardo brought drinks while Thierry went off to dance. A ruby, deep crimson liquid filled the daintily ornamented glass he held.

"Is this wine? I can't drink alcohol—"

"It's juice, don't worry!" Leonardo winked. "It's made with the same variety of red wine grapes used to brew Cabernet Sauvignon so it has more of an adult flavour."

Thierry, to their side, let out a chuckle.

"It's the perfect drink for you, Nadja, who has paved a way forward for your ambitions. A fine choice, Leonardo."

"Your praise heartens me, Thierry."

"You're very welcome."

"An adult flavour, huh..." Nadja stared into the red liquid before she took a sip.

".....!" She relished in the newfound taste. "It's not only sweet—it has a puckery taste to it, too!"

Though the beverage was unfamiliar to her, Nadja heartily gulped it down to quench her thirst.

“Ha-ha! I look forward to when my little rosebud grows into an adult.”

“Let us enjoy some wine together, when the time comes.”

“Yeah!” Nadja beamed at Leonardo and Thierry.

“Now then...” Leonardo, taking Nadja’s glass, announced with theatrical effect. “My little rosebud, our time together has ended. Your next dance partner awaits.”

“Oh, I saw him too. It’s been a while since I’ve seen him in Paris.”

“Huh?” Nadja was dumbstruck. “Um... who is it?”

“Look.”

“He’s right over there!”

Nadja gazed in the direction Leonardo and Thierry pointed to, where a great many people in extravagant attire danced and chatted away.

“It’s...!”

That brief moment amazed her. By some miracle, as if a spotlight had pivoted to a lone figure amid a sea of people, *he* emerged.

“Francis!”

There stood Francis Harcourt, dressed in a white suit and white mask. He smiled at Nadja with a pleasant curve to his lips.

“Go on. Head over.”

“Pay no mind to us.”

“Leonardo, Thierry... Thank you.”

The boys gave her a muted bow, and Nadja approached Francis who was walking in her direction.

“You look well, Nadja.”

“You too, Francis!”

“Care to dance?”

“Of course.”

Francis smiled tenderly at Nadja and took her hand. They danced and glided along to the waltz's florid melody.

"It's been a while. The last time we danced was on your birthday."

"Yeah. So much has happened since then... I don't even know where to start."

It's been a little over three months since Nadja had left Vienna. Scores of remarkable things have come to pass, yet the passage of time endures and flows.

"To start with, the Trick Circus Car..."

Recollecting the troupe's adventure to Francis, Nadja sensed an abrupt discomfort in the depths of her heart.

".....!?"

She gasped, looking up once more into the eyes of the shapely face before her.

With his usual calm expression, Francis smiled back.

Francis was...

*You're... You're not Francis...!*

Nadja sharply exclaimed. "Keith...!"

"I'm glad you noticed, Nadja. I was wondering what I'd do if you still hadn't."

His lips parted, a faint irony sneered in his words.

The man before her was none other than Keith.

Keith Harcourt, the elder twin brother of Francis and one of the sons of the prestigious Marquis Harcourt noble family.

On one side of the coin, wealthy people idle their lives away; on the other, poor people fight tooth and nail to survive the cruel fate they had been dealt. Humans are born equally, yet such inequality exists. Keith walked the path of a chivalrous thief to even the scales of this imbalance, even if just a little. With his visage hidden beneath a dark mask and a flutter of his black mantle, he became the Black Rose, a phantom thief who steals money and goods from the crooked to aid the poor. The last time Nadja met Keith was after her reunion with her mother at Count Waldmüller's mansion in Vienna.



“So, what have you been doing? Where have you been? Francis is worried, you know! Can’t you at least get in touch?”

Nadja shot questions out in rapid succession.

“Shh...” Keith whispered closely into her ear as he put a finger on Nadja’s lips.

“...!”

A moment’s touch of Keith’s finger left a tingling, cold sensation.

“Keith...” She lowered her voice.

Keith sneered. “You haven’t changed. Not one bit. Your eyes may begin to resemble a lady’s, but they’re adolescent underneath.”

“You’re no different. Keith. You haven’t changed either.” Nadja countered his remark with her own cynicism.

“Why thank you. I overheard your conversation with Madame Boyeaux earlier. Investing in a theatre for its profits over a century? You spoke so ardently about it! I remember it well, this naivety of yours. You’re still a child spinning tales of empty dreams, even as a 16-year-old.”

“Wha...!” Nadja, rendered almost speechless, glared at Keith. “Excuse me! I’m quite serious! Making fun of me is—”

“Whoa, that’s a scary face. But what I’m saying is true.”

A wave of boiling anger simmered in her chest.

“You jerk! You’re still as boorish as ever!”

“Nadja, wait—I think your fantasy tale sounds wonderful. That’s why I’m considering making my own investment.”

“Huh?”

“How much will do?”

“No thank you!”

The mockery in Keith’s tone clearly irritated Nadja.

“My goodness, how frightening!”

“Stop messing with me! I don’t need stolen money from a thief!”

She flipped a switch in Keith who tightened his grip on Nadja's hand.

"...!"

"I don't do that anymore. The Black Rose vanished in Vienna for eternity when Francis turned himself in for my sake. You too must have read Harvey Livingston's article by now."

"Ough..." Nadja grimaced at the domineering force exerted onto her hand.

"Sorry—my bad." Keith quickly released his grip and murmured into Nadja's ear. "When this song ends, let's talk somewhere quiet."

The waltz ended.

Nadja and Keith walked out into the garden, withdrawing from the crowds of people absorbed in lighthearted chatter.

No person—not even a shadow—could be seen in the garden. Light from the banquet hall leaked into the darkness, whose only companion was the chamber music that echoed like faraway roars of the sea. Whether a rose garden was nearby, Nadja couldn't tell, but a hazy, rosy scent tickled her nose.

"It really has been a while. I'm relieved to see you're okay."

Keith slowly removed his mask, unveiling his true face.

*Keith...*

Keith has matured considerably over the three years they've been apart, yet it came short of unravelling the transformation he had undergone. That's how Nadja felt.

*He's lived through immense hardship. I can tell. Something must have happened since we broke contact...*

Nadja and Keith stood in silence. They could hear the distant commotion of guests riling up as another waltz commenced. In the end, the first person to break the silence was Nadja.

"Keith, where have you been? I heard from Francis that you were in Switzerland before you ran off somewhere."

“It’s as you say. I was living a quiet life in the Swiss city of Lucerne, waiting for the trail to cool off on the Black Rose. Francis visited me now and then. We talked about various things—about this society where people live in inequality. We agreed on this for the most part, but...” Keith shrugged his shoulders. “The more we talked about it, the more we felt it was all in vain.”

“In vain...? What do you mean?”

Keith’s expression turned lonely.

“*Noblesse oblige*. Francis still clings to this creed of his that I simply cannot agree with. I’m not making compromises for his sake.”

“Even then, you ran off on your own.”

“.....I wanted to witness a new world, and my heart led me to cross over to India.”

“India!?”

Keith peered at Nadja's astonished face.

In Nadja’s time, the United Kingdom built colonies in countries around the world to form what came to be known as the British Empire. India also belonged to it. From Nadja’s perspective, India was a foreign country in an absurdly far-away place. She had heard the rumours from Harvey already, but to hear it straight from Keith—she couldn’t help but be surprised.

“Why travel so far away?”

“The people there live in destitution.”

“.....!”

“I went to India and witnessed it. It was overwhelming—the wealth gap couldn’t even be compared to Europe. Oppression and exploitation rule and they rob people of their human dignity. In India, you live with death right by your side.”

“.....!”

“I couldn’t stand by and watch the poor suffer. I just couldn’t!” Keith’s expression strained as he continued. “That’s when I realized—Francis’s noblesse oblige and my deeds as the Black Rose are powerless against penury. It was all good for nothing.

Babies, even children free from sin, will die in shanties. They're born into families stricken with the very same poverty they were raised with! With no chance to even dream about the future, they're killed by that same poverty! If they're lucky enough to survive into adulthood, then the cycle merely repeats, penury passed from parent to child. Yes—that's what I witnessed in India. A chain of abject poverty."

"...!"

Nadja lost her breath to Keith's tragic story.

*Francis, he... He said the same thing! They may be separated but their thoughts are one and the same!*

Nadja felt relieved by this realisation. Keith, on the other hand, sneered at himself in contempt.

"Hah! It was nonsensical. Pretending to be a chivalrous thief to help the poor? Foolish."

Nadja had to interject his remark. She couldn't hold back.

"No! It wasn't foolish! To tell the truth, I think your methods are wrong, but Keith—it's thanks to you that so many people have been saved!"

She exclaimed at Keith who retaliated.

"I couldn't care less about that."

"Couldn't care less? How could you...?"

"I've devoted myself to an entirely different field now."

"Field...? What do you mean? What do you do now?"

"Business."

Keith gave an answer that Nadja couldn't fathom even in her dreams.

"Business...?"

Keith shrugged, regretting his careless slip of the tongue.

"Business is... well, business. I invest in industries with good prospects, manage projects of my own, and run companies. Simply put, I'm a businessman."

"Wow! I think that suits you plenty!"

Nadja's spat out those words from her gut.

*I've done it now... Is he going to scold me?*

On the contrary, Keith's face was devoid of expression.

"I'm no longer the Keith you knew."

".....!"

"There's much to gain from business. The opportunities I happen upon ride on an acquaintance of mine. I invest small amounts into his ventures."

"....."

"My investments double according to my predictions, and then he contacts me about his next venture. We carried on like this for a while, and before I realised it, I had amassed a fortune."

Nadja watched Keith from the same distance she would withhold to a stranger.

"Negotiations have started on the first company I'll soon possess, though it is only a small one. I've no doubt it'll all come together in rapid strides so long as I comply with the other party. As it stands, I myself don't even know how many ventures I've gotten involved with."

*No. This isn't Keith...*

Nadja kept listening despite her growing discomfort.

"It seems I have what they call good business acumen. I have an eye for predicting future prospects."

"Future prospects?"

Keith nodded at Nadja.

"I'm investing in aeroplanes, for example."

"Aeroplanes? I know many people have flown in them, but what do you mean by investing?"

"Aeroplanes are, as of yet, a luxury only a few people have access to. This will change soon. An era will come when even ordinary citizens are free to travel on aeroplanes."

"Really!?"

"Look at the Transatlantic Route that links Europe and the Americas by sea. Those large-scale luxury liners can traverse the

Atlantic Ocean in just a few days, and the race to overtake those furious speeds has only begun.”

“Ah, I know this. It’s because of the competition that new vessels keep breaking record after record.”

“It’s as you say. But a ship can only travel so fast. Eventually, the day will come when aircrafts will supersede waterborne vessels.”

“.....!”

Speaking of which, Kennosuke said something similar. When he lived in Japan, he revered a certain man who set out to build such aircrafts.

“Aeroplanes have infinite potential, he said! In the future, a day will come when hundreds of people can board enormous aeroplanes that travel at amazing speeds!”

Kennosuke vigorously exclaimed as such.

*Will that day come, I wonder? It does sound like fun, Nadja thought those many moons ago.*

*Is airborne travel the future Keith is set on? Is this his business acumen at work?*

The face of Nadja’s stepfather Albert emerged in her mind. He also said something similar.

“Nadja—there are many people who claim incredible, impossible things in this world. They have what it takes—a stern conviction to actualise the impossible through colossal efforts. The growth of mankind is brought about by these sorts of people.”

*This must be the power that Keith wields.*

Nadja reminisced over Albert’s words and looked at Keith anew.

“What other business do you do?”

“A wide variety, to be honest. I’ve dabbled in marine transportation, railroad companies, oil mining, the steel industry... Oh—and department stores in London and Paris, Italian wineries, and...”

....*Wait.*

A most curious feeling shrouded her.

The steel industry. Railroad companies. Department stores. She's heard these things recently, somewhere.

She continued musing, until...

"Ah!" Nadja blurted out. "Harold! Um... Harold, something or the other..."

Her search through her mind was futile. Keith told the answer straight to her.

"Harold Brighton."

".....!?"

A composed smile covered Keith's face. "Oh, so you know of me as well! It's a surprise *and* an honour."

"I knew it! Harvey said so! He's investigating a businessman who keeps his identity secret!"

"So it was Harvey Livingston..."

This time, a bitter smile emerged.

"I was surprised that he had taken such an interest in Harold Brighton to go to the lengths of uncovering his identity. Harvey pursued the Black Rose and his persistence back then led him to *me*. And look—now he's zeroing in on me again! He's stubborn, that fellow, tailing me as much as he did last time. You can imagine how shocked I was when I found out he travelled all the way to America to find me."

"It must be your predestined bond that brings you two together!" said Nadja in jest, Keith grimacing in disapproval.

"That's one bond I can do without."

"Hee-hee."

A brief calm spread in the atmosphere, though it soon faded with Keith's serious demeanour.

"Anyway, all I'm focusing on right now is business."

"But, Keith..." Nadja rebounded with a straight face. "Doing nothing but making money... Do you really find it enjoyable?"

“Of course I do! My wits lend toward managing large amounts of money, and it’s satisfying to see results align with my predictions. Business is a game that entertains me like no other.”

“But—”

A sudden realization struck.

“Oh, I know! Keith, you’re earning all that money to help the poor! Right?”

That must be it! That’s the Keith I know—that’s what binds him to the Keith standing before me!

“Tch. You’re utterly naive.” He sneered at her.

“What...?”

“I said so, didn’t I? Recklessly scattering money is nonsensical. That’s why, no matter how much money I’ve amassed, I have no intention of handing out a dime.”

“That’s...!”

“I don’t plan on convincing you otherwise.”

“.....!?”

Keith dealt a rugged blow to Nadja.

He continued. “I’m also here today for business. Madame Boyeaux’s balls attract many influential people so it’s the most ideal place to discover new business prospects.”

Then, he gave Nadja a sarcastic look. “But I never would have thought I’d see *you* approach others for their investments. Not in my wildest dreams.”

“.....!”

“It’s a shame you’ve completely turned me down! All of it seems to me like you’re playing house, but some of your ideas do seem to have merit!”

Nadja’s irritation came full circle.

“Not interested. I don’t want your money.”

“Yeah, you said so already. I’m not putting money in your pot.”

“Good. I’m fine with that.”

Keith let out a chuckle.

“Well then, I must take my leave.”



“What, already?”

“Hmm, that reluctant to leave me, are you? How cute.”

“You’re way off the mark!”

Nadja’s face burned up. She clearly regretted the disappointment she revealed.

“Ha-ha-ha!” Keith chuckled, enjoying himself before abruptly jutting his face in front of hers.

“Wha—”

Keith pulled her body towards him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t kiss you out of nowhere.”

“.....!?” Nadja’s face burned a crimson red. “I-If you dare, I’ll slap the hell out of you!”

“Yes, yes... I just wanted to make sure of something.”

“Make sure of what exactly!”

Nadja looked straight into Keith’s eyes for his response.

“Harvey Livingston. Don’t you dare speak a word of this to him.”

“Hmph! I say what I like and it’s none of your business! If you wanted me to stay quiet, you shouldn’t have said anything in the first place! I’m telling all of this to Francis. He’s really, really worried, you know! There’s no way I could keep quiet about this!”

Nadja resoluteness delighted Keith with nostalgia.

“You really haven’t changed one bit, Nadja.”

“W-What do you mean!”

“I mean exactly what I said.”

As Nadja tried pushing Keith away, he dropped his hand on her head and brushed it gently.

“.....!”

“Don’t worry. I’ll reach out to Francis on my own.

“Really!?”

“It’s about time. I’ve been thinking about it. I ought to tell him about how much I’ve changed.”

“.....!”

“So long. We’ll meet again.”

Keith, with a gentle wave of his hand, wandered into the dark depths of the courtyard.

*He's not the Black Rose anymore, yet there he goes, retreating into the darkness...*

Nadja saw him off without budging an inch. She watched his figure dissolve into the darkness of the night, before a second wave of anger surged up.

*Unbelievable! All he cares about is making money!? What kind of joke is that!?*

Nadja recalled a memory of Keith as the Black Rose.

“I want to create it... A world where everyone can live in equality,” he said with immense passion.

Now, he's...

*Why! Why'd you have to change! Even though you went to India feeling the same as Francis! How... just how did you change into that person...?*

Sadness blended in with the rage.

*Keith... The Keith I knew is...*

“I really, really hate you!!”

Nadja cried out, reverting to her 13-year-old self.

Keith Harcourt strolled through the garden to the back gates of the Boyeaux mansion where he cracked a wry smile.

*She really hates me, huh... Nadja hasn't changed, has she?*

Of course, it isn't that nothing about her has changed. Over the past three years, Nadja has matured with remarkable beauty, a shining example of her growth being the conviction that won Madame Boyeaux's trust. As for the inner flame that fuels her motivation, it remains capricious along with her ability to honestly face her feelings.

All of this pleased Keith more than anything.

*I look forward to our next meeting.*

Keith huffed a quick breath.

Though they walk separate paths, the two will cross each other once more. It is inevitable. Keith believes this, and his reason for it is clear.

*Nadja. You are my Goddess of Destiny.*

第10章



The Door to  
A New Tomorrow

Nadja rewrote her proposal the day after Madame Boyeaux's masquerade ball. The Dandelion Troupe lent her a hand, particularly Kennosuke who drew countless blueprints and illustrations to enliven Nadja's ideas.

"So sentences on their own won't do, huh? In that case, leave any diagrams and sketches to me!" He proclaimed, tapping at his chest.

Rita also had an idea. "Listen, Nadja! I came up with something really good!"

At her suggestion, the Dandelion Troupe's introduction page will be stamped with Kremé and Chocolat's distinctive paw prints. A pair of lion twins is a rarity, and what better way to show this than to embed their prints onto the proposal.

The adults shared their ideas and suggestions too. Ultimately, it was Nadja who decided whether an idea would be included.

After her final touches, Nadja put the proposal forward to Madame Boyeaux. She examined it page-after-page, meticulously gleaning over its contents.

Nadja couldn't stay calm—she gripped the brooch on her chest to still herself despite her heart beating at a deafening rhythm.

Madame Boyeaux raised her head after turning to the last page.

".....!"

Nadja could only gulp. She swallowed the spittle in her throat, and out from the Madame's mouth came two words that Nadja wanted to hear.

"Looks great."

"Thank you..!"

Boyeaux nodded and handed Nadja a memo pad. Written on it were the names of ten people and their home addresses.

"As I mentioned, these people may be interested in investing in the Dandelion Troupe. I've told them the gist of it, but they ought to meet with you. Here—take these."

Ten reference letters landed one-by-one into Nadja's hand.

"I can't thank you enough for all that you've done, Madame Boyeaux! I'm... not quite sure what to say."

"Well now! It's still too early to feel relieved. Whether or not they invest will be a matter in your hands."

"Okay!"

The Madame smiled. "He-he. You'll receive a thank-you message from me when the Dandelion Theatre becomes a huge success."

"I'll give it my best!" Nadja answered firmly.

Nadja met with the ten people who Madame Boyeaux introduced; aristocrats, businessmen, investors, and even artists all listened to Nadja's offer with interest. Among them, two refused.

"I'm sorry. I'm not taken in by your offer."

Another two answered. "Could you give me more time to consider this?"

Thus, six people showed willingness to invest. Madame Boyeaux's referrals aside, Madame Niellon and the others who caught wind of Nadja's speech at the ball came forward, including Leonardo and Thierry.

"And with that... we have all the money needed to renovate the Dandelion Theatre and open it for business!"

The Chief shivered in delight, his hands clenched into firm fists. The rest of the troupe were on the same wavelength. But it was by no means a happy ever after for the Dandelion Troupe. Not in the least.

Nadja and her troupe mates have yet a mound of obstacles to conquer. First, they must cooperate with a repairs outlet. The troupe will consult a middleman who manages referrals with tradesmen. A sound move, given the potential for another fraud disaster. That middleman turned out to be none other than Oliver's boss; as a leatherworker based in Paris for many years,

his credibility has been tempered through experience of working with a myriad of the city's stores and tradesmen.

Most of the theatre repairs were carried out by workers specializing in the repairs trade, but the stage itself remained untouched so the Chief and Kennosuke could have a crack at preparing their dear Trick Circus Car's engine. They adhered to the few blueprints they drafted beforehand and saw the major parts of the work to completion.

"All that's left is to put it all together!"

"I'm so pumped for this, Chief!"

"Me too, Kennosuke... Me too...!"

There was more at hand for the Dandelion Troup than opening shop. Attracting publicity for their grand opening will pivot their success—they cannot hope to betray their investors who have banked on the theatre's growth. Any earnings, however little, must be swiftly apportioned from day one.

Abel, Thomas, and Rita played a key role in drawing posters and leaflets that advertise loyalty rewards for advance ticket customers. The troupe also scattered leaflets during their street shows, and the audiences were in no small number tempted by the Dandelion Theatre's offerings.

"No way! They'll engrave our names in the theatre? That's a commemoration of a lifetime!"

"Wow, how generous of them to offer free coffee. I'd have no qualms about bringing my friends to a place like that."

Their audible voices fluttered to Nadja and the troupe's ears.

Granny suggested including the Dandelion Troupe's programme in their advertisements. Their established and time-honoured opener, "Hello, Hello, Good Afternoon!" has been enlivened with a new melody and new lyrics for each member to sing.

*Song and dance, laughter and joy!*  
*Your love, and your dreams!*  
*Let's meet with them at the Dandelion Theatre ♪*  
*Let's meet with them at the Dandelion Theatre ♪*

Children in the audience hummed along, and before long, the adults did too.

Harvey wrote in *Montmartre Journal* an account of the troupe's recent affairs.

"I'll be frank. I wrote my last article about the troupe to support you guys. This time, it's different—your ventures and ideas are laying the foundations of a new era, and as a newspaper reporter, this is a precursor that really piques my interest!"

One day, after a street show, an unexpected figure appeared before Nadja: the *Le Cygne* theatre manager. Dressed in his usual form, he greeted her, black hair and stiffened moustache alike.

"Will you entrust me with posters and leaflets for your theatre?"

"That's... more than we could ask for. Are you really okay with it?" asked the Chief.

The manager silently nodded back. "Back then, when you arrived at my theatre after getting mangled in that fraud incident, I regretted not offering my help. I truly did. So I'm delighted to hear that your troupe is opening a theatre. If you could let me be of assistance, that would make me ever so happy."

"Thank you so much!"

Nadja, shouldering the troupe's sincerity on their behalf, showed him utmost gratitude. The Chief was on the verge of tears. Overcome with emotion, there was no end to his bawls of appreciation.

"No, no. Pay no mind to it!" said the bashful-looking manager. "The Dandelion Troupe will be a guaranteed success given how



brilliant you lot are on stage. When you bring the crowds in, I'd ask to put up my own posters so you can return the favour."

The Chief at last shed tears, the manager's gentle smile proving too much for him.

*We have so many people supporting us...!*

That feeling—it resurged within Nadja.

*My heart is set. I'll give everything to those going through hardship.*

Oliver and TJ visited the theatre every day without fail. Or rather, it'd be more accurate to say it was Nadja they visited.

"Heh-heh! Nadja and I—we're always together!"

Cutting out Kennosuke from the love triangle was, for the most part, something to gloat about. Yet it ensues—their fruitless battle with their prides at stake.

"Hey, hey! Hold up! I bought Nadja a dance costume from America! She said she'll wear it for me when the theatre opens!" TJ announced.

Oliver swiftly responded. "And I made a pair of dancing shoes for her! It's homemade, y'know! Homemade!"

"Oliver...! If that's how you want to play, I'll bake homemade cookies for her! American-style!"

"You'll what!? Then, I'm baking a cake all on my own!"

"Cookies... and cake? TJ, Oliver, you guys know how to bake!?" Kennosuke gaped in wonder.

"Uh... I-I mean baking must be a piece of cake!"

"Oi! Don't lump me in with you!"

Alas, their quarrels often turn out like this.

"Seriously. I can't tell if they're friends or enemies," said an astounded Rita.

One night, as was Nadja about to head off to sleep, an abrupt crash sent her jumping to her feet.

*It can't be... A burglar!?*

She gingerly inched towards the noise, wielding a performance baton in hand. But a thief it was not; she happened

upon the Chief who gazed motionlessly at the half-finished perforation on the theatre stage that housed the Trick Circus Car's engine.

*Chief? What are you...*

He started speaking. "Hey there, partner. Not much longer now. Not much longer until we perform together again, so sit tight!"

The Chief lovingly brushed the engine with his rugged hands.

*Chief...*

A solemn smile rose on Nadja's face, and she decided to head back to bed.

*Not much longer now...! Not much longer until our dream begins anew, with the Trick Circus Car by our side!*

The Dandelion Theatre's path to completion was blessed with fine weather. The troupe's practice for their new stage routine was also making solid headway, while the excitement in Nadja's heart fortified her to push through the arduous work in the many days to come.

On Champs-Élysées, the main street of Paris, a lone girl strolled along with her trunk. Her glasses reflecting a sparkle and her hair done into three formidable braids, the plain curiosity of a country bumpkin took her over as she restlessly surveyed her surroundings. She arrived a while ago from a district not-so-far-away from Paris where she worked as a seamstress at a sewing boutique.

Ten people worked there, all of whom were girls. They often encircled a table and chatted away while sewing women's clothing for other subcontracted boutiques in Paris.

She had no relatives. Among the girls, she was the youngest of them all, being an orphan who grew up at an orphanage in England. The matron there introduced her to work at the sewing boutique where she is often by others seen as strict and formal.

This stubbornness of hers predicates the meticulous embroidery she makes with her dexterous hands.

A nonchalant atmosphere filled the sewing boutique, and the girl took a liking to it. But one day, their circumstances changed entirely.

Several sewing machines had turned up. Seamstresses needed to be made redundant, and the married couple who manages the business decided who would be dismissed. Fortunately, the girl wasn't one of them, but Catherine, her close friend of the same age, was shown the door. Catherine proved herself quick and proficient in her work, yet she wasn't *quite* at the girl's level.

*What now...?*

She worried about her friend Catherine, who—for as long as she can remember—has no place to call home and works to support her very young siblings.

*A complete sense of freedom comes with having no relatives. But—she's not in a position to be without a job. Catherine is in trouble... With the savings I've put aside, she can at least eat until she finds work. Would it be better, then, if I leave in her place?*

As a matter of fact, the girl already harboured such a thought: she wanted to go work as a seamstress in Paris where the latest and greatest fashion trends are born. This ambition came with uncertainty; would she be willing to part with the comfort and stability that the sewing boutique provides?

*What to do...?*

The girl put her hand on her chest and closed her eyes. What would *she* do—that girl, who I grew up with in England? What would *she* do in this situation?

Whenever the girl faced a fork in the road, *she* came to mind.

When she opened her eyes, the path became clear. In her position, *she* would quit the boutique. *She* would believe in a brighter tomorrow. *She* would take that path.

The girl quit her job at the boutique and travelled to Paris, which, contrary to her expectations, was busier and larger than

she had imagined. Where would the girl go to find sewing work? She stood at a crossroad once more without the faintest sense of direction. Reality seemed hopeless—until her nimble eyes rested at a particular spot where a vivid poster was stuck.

*Meet us at the Dandelion Theatre!*

The large, handwritten letters crowded her vision.

*Dandelion Theatre...*

She had received letters before from *that girl*, who took a leap of faith from her orphan home in England to journey with a travelling circus troupe. Each time a letter arrived at the orphanage, the matron read it aloud to the children. The girl remembered—that the group of performers *she* travelled with—is the Dandelion Troupe.

“It all adds up...”

She approached the poster as if being drawn into it. Sketched on it were seven people and two lions; one black, one white. At the centre of it stood a smiling young girl, whose face and clothing were entirely familiar. The girl opened her eyes wide.

It was, without a doubt, *her*.

“Nadja!!”

The girl cried out at the top of her lungs.

At last, the day has come for the Dandelion Theatre to open for business.

Free admissions were allowed on day one which was the Chief’s idea. As with their street performances, the audience can put tips into a hat at the end of the show.

The theatre was a full house. It was unclear whether the free admissions attracted the crowd, but there were people both sitting and standing up.

Nadja.

Kennosuke.

Rita.

Abel.

Thomas.

Granny.

The Chief.

Everyone huddled into a circle that Crème and Chocolat thrust their heads into without a moment's delay.

“The Dandelion Troupe are setting sail on a new journey.” The Chief proclaimed. “Let's get out there and ride the tailwind!”

“Roger!” The troupe yelled.

“Alright, then! I'm setting the engine in motion!”

The Chief merrily grabbed a backstage lever and gently lowered it.

*Bang!* Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...

The engine racketed. To Nadja, it was an echo most beloved; most nostalgic; most kind. The echo had a reassuring warmth.

“Welcome home, Trick Circus Car!” She beamed with a smile behind the stage curtains.

Granny spun her gramophone, welling out a stream of music. At the dead centre of the stage, a partitioned platform rotated round and round. Utilising the Trick Circus Car's horsepower, it rose up, elevating its tray-like platform to the peak where a girl stood. Dancing at the top of it for her entrance act was none other than Nadja.

“Whooooa!!”

Roaring applause stirred through the audience.

The troupe one by one entered the stage atop the revolving platform as they conducted their entrance acts.

Crème and Chocolat performed tricks under Rita's every command.

Kennosuke poised with his sword.

Thomas played the violin.

Abel performed his ball juggling act.

The Chief balanced a bulky wine cask on his shoulder, with the small yet wise Granny perched quietly on top of it.

A successive rhythm complimented each member's introduction, and the troupe en masse bowed to their guests.

The Dandelion Theatre's first show has begun.

The show was a resounding success.

An overwhelming sense of joy came over the troupe for their first theatre show. It was a radiant joy—of living a dream turned reality. They shared this feeling with their audience who reciprocated their excitement. Their thundering applause and cheers after each member's performance shook the theatre grounds.

The Dandelion Troupe, stood side-by-side on stage, bowed in every direction towards their spectators. They lowered their heads, and a further triumph of claps and cheers ensued. Nadja bowed to the audience once more, waving her hand as she withdrew into the stage wing. But the tempo of claps and cheers did not waver—nor did the endless chants for an encore. It was that moment when the hearts of the Dandelion Troupe and their audience merged into one, and Nadja relished this joy.

*I'm... so happy...! I'll keep doing my best for this wonderful audience!*

Afterwards, the troupe returned to the lobby.

"Thank you very much!" Nadja exclaimed, seeing their guests off.

There were familiar faces in the audience; Harvey and TJ, Oliver and his boss, Leonardo and Thierry, Madame Boyeaux and Madame Niellon all turned up, and so did the Le Cygne manager, the president of the jewelry store, and the inn receptionist. Everyone was content, and it showed in the smiles on their faces.

*Mom. Today, one of my dreams came true.*

Nadja saw off the remaining guests. She caressed her brooch as she spoke to her mother's heart.

*I'll be so happy if you and Albert could come and watch us. It'll be a dream come true. But I still have another dream to fulfil. One day, when the theatre and the Dandelion Troupe become renown, I'll reunite with my Applefield siblings.*

Nadja immersed herself in this vision, when a pitter-patter of footsteps came into her awareness.

*Oh, there are still guests!*

A bolt of surprise struck her as she turned around.

Her glasses polished to a gleam and hair done into three formidable braids, the girl standing before Nadja was one she knew well. She was a precious friend who Nadja grew up with at Applefield.

“Nicole! Is that really you!?”

A bashful smile spread Nicole's cheeks as they were covered in tears.

Nicole galloped over to Nadja and hugged her close. “Nadja!!”

“Nicole!!” Nadja returned her forceful embrace. “I'm so happy to see you! This... This is too good to be true...! I didn't think both my dreams would come true this soon!”

Nadja was swept with tears. How did Nicole get here, and what has she been doing? Nadja didn't yet know the answer.

*But I have a feeling that from now on, Nicole and I will be together for a long, long time.*

Mysterious—that was the only way Nadja could describe this feeling, and her hunch was right. Since then, Nicole has become a member of Dandelion Troupe where she now works alongside Granny as her costuming assistant.

Though it was nighttime, the rousing heat and excitement of the performance still hadn't left her. Nadja could not sleep.

She climbed onto the roof of the theatre where she gazed at Paris's serene night sky.

*The stars in the sky guide us to a new tomorrow.*

Nadja whispered with a rosy smile. “Tomorrow—will surely be better than today.”

In those gentle eyes of hers, reflects what is more certainly, tomorrow.

Once upon a time, about a hundred years ago.

A new tale unfolded for Nadja, who opened yet another door of destiny.

What future awaits her tomorrow?

That—is another tale of its own.



Commentary  
~The Goddess of Destiny Smiles Upon Us~

Producer: Seki Hiromi

To everyone who remembers *Ashita no Nadja* and picked up this book: thank you. I'm grateful from the bottom of my heart.

*Ashita no Nadja* was broadcast nationwide 13 years ago (2003-2004) on TV Asahi, a subsidiary station of the Osaka-based Asahi Broadcasting Corporation. The anime aired every morning on Sunday at 8AM. You may remember it being the successor to *Ojamajo Doremi* and as the show that aired before the *Precure* series.

A year into its runtime, *Ashita no Nadja's* broadcast unfortunately ended. The reason was because business in televised anime was not doing well at the time.

The planning and preparations for the show went as expected. The staff and I were incredibly enthusiastic about putting out a show whose genre was entirely different from *Ojamajo Doremi*.

Incidentally, immediately after the show began its broadcast, the SARS epidemic began to spread on a major scale throughout Asia. Many people died from the illness and this had an unexpected effect on the show's production.

The dress that embodies Nadja was being manufactured by a factory in Hong Kong. However, they had no other choice but to halt its production due to the epidemic. The show had already begun its broadcast, but the dress for Nadja—a character who wears costumes and performs dances that represent various countries and their backgrounds—was not ready according to plan. On one hand, the show's popularity rose along with demands for the dress. On the other, any backup plans we had to pull us up from the red were massively delayed. It was a huge blow for the TV show.

We wanted to avoid any misunderstandings. So to not leave a stain on the anime industry, the staff members and cast worked

to the bitter end to create a show that could convey deep emotion to those sat in front of the TV. Even the manufacturers who sponsored the production of the toys and dress wanted to shape *Ashita no Nadja* into a work that the children who watched it could live vicariously through its world.

The show—its destiny—was but to end with a short lifespan.

“Poor Nadja”.

I murmured this to myself in the countless of times I cried in bed.

During an unrelated briefing session, I caught sight of Nadja’s calendar illustrations in the conference room. I began to feel as if I was about to cry and had to frantically rush to the bathroom.

An old lady of a producer I was, yet I was still astonished by how I feel as if I had been rejected by my first love.

Only now do I understand why it was such a shock to me. Heaped into this project were my young self’s feelings as a producer and her dreams of the 20th century.

30 years ago, *Ashita no Nadja* was a project I conceived around the second year of my joining the company.

I had grown bored of writing concepts requested by higher-ups (I’m sorry... I know it was my job!) and I couldn’t resist the temptation to write up a project with an original concept. I persistently worked late into the night on my days off, but it was a story I had well-nigh written in one swoop.

Around that time, Britain’s Princess Diana was often being featured in the news, and I discovered that she worked at a kindergarten despite being the daughter of a noble family. “She’s a princess born from nobility, yet she does labour?” My surprise at the time sparked a new motive, and I began reading many books about aristocracy. That was when I came across *noblesse oblige*.

“Those with social status who are blessed by circumstance have a responsibility they ought to fulfill.”

It explained that those who belong to the privileged class would act imperiously while exercising authority. They refrain from all forms of arrogance and speak with a dignified tongue. When I realised that this description was similar to the guidelines imposed onto senior producers whenever they refer to executive supervisors, something in my heart dropped with a thump.

It said, “It is the duty of the producer whose name is the first to appear in the program to bear full responsibility of the staff named afterwards.”

At the time, I was a desk worker in the planning department. I looked through the ratings as I wrote my proposal day after day, and I found out that there were a few women producers who, even in their 80s, did live filming. “In the world of anime, women who become producers are in their 20s,” is what was being said around the time.

But, young ol’ me said, “This is no time to be waiting around!” and, “In this world, there are now more women than ever realising their dreams, so I’ll make something of mine!”

This was what I believed, and I saw no other choice but to press forward.

And thus, the protagonist to herald my ambition was *Nadja*.

At the time, my proposal only had writing in it without any character images, and the Chief’s name I even borrowed from a character in an old movie. I named him Master Zampano, and Francis I named Francois. My idea for the twins was already in place, but the elder brother’s name wasn’t Keith.

Regardless, I had it all written down: the protagonist Nadja meets all sorts of people on her travels as she learns life lessons along the way and matures into an adult. That much hasn’t changed. Nor has her receiving help from various handsome men who cause mischief and trifles with her destiny. I worked on the proposal for two years with this direction in mind.

To the right of my desk was a drawer, second from the top and locked with a key. In its depths, my proposal laid dormant for

nearly 15 years. I became a producer with the help of my assistant and created an original anime with my anime concept. I began to hinge on my self-confidence that grew with every approved proposal that I submitted.

*Ashita no Nadja* was a project I was so emotionally invested in that I myself was surprised by how sentimental I felt when its broadcast ended.

Despite the short life span of *Ashita no Nadja*, it was broadcast in 28 different countries, and its orchestral-focused music I was delighted with won the JASRAC International Award in 2009. It had the support of all young girls and their mothers across the world.

I want a sequel. I want to know what happens afterwards. Francis and Keith—whose love will bear fruit for Nadja? What happens to Rosemary in the end? Why didn't Nadja become a princess of nobility?

We received such letters from fans around the world. They voiced questions and doubts, as did they voice demands for a sequel. As the producer who nurtured the show for two years, I could only wallow in deep regret.

At a certain party in 2016, the “Goddess of Destiny” once more smiled upon Nadja. The name of that goddess is Konparu Tomoko. She wrote the series composition of the program and worked on it as a screenwriter. And, she is the author of this novel.

Konparu-san played an active role in many other works after the original broadcast ended. *Ashita no Nadja* is an anime aimed at young girls, and now, in the height of prosperity of the genre, Konparu-san announced with a smile full of conviction that it was time to create a sequel and gave me a push to make it happen.

And now to you, dear readers. Will you believe in the goddess' smile to lead you on a path to a bright future? Were we able to answer any of your expectations? As for me, I've already placed my faith in that bright future!

There's no need to wait 100 years. Nor should you wait 15—no, the 30 years that I did. If you may join hands with me and believe in Tomorrow, I would be truly blessed.

Toei Animation's Planning Development Supervisor