

The cloudy sky was so somber and sorrowful that I couldn't help but wonder if it was truly the same sky that I had always looked up at.

All around there was a strange complete silence—...  
It was almost as if I could hear the sound of the falling snowflakes gathering.

...The sound of my own breathing and my heartbeat seemed so loud they were irritating.

*“Fate-chan, do you like snow?”*

As I stared up blankly at the snowfall, a piece of it touched my cheek.  
In that instant... I suddenly recalled that kind voice.

*“...Nanoha.”*

*“No... I... don't hate it, I guess? ...And you, Nanoha?”*  
*“I looove snow. Because...”*

—...Looking back on it, the snow was falling like this on that night too.

*“Nanoha... Nano-ha...”*

Aah, why do I need you so much?

It's useless.

I never had such a right to begin with.

Why, Why?

—...Just why?...

*“Because, um... well.”*  
*“It's okay, why don't you take your time and calm down? ...Alright?”*

As I pulled my upper body from the wall of rubble I had been letting it lean against, I felt a sharp pain in my side... and a slippery warmth flowing out.

Removing the hand pressing down on it, I reached out to the sky as if I were begging for something and what before had been staining my hand now slowly ran down my arm.

—...Different from snow... I felt something warm fall onto my cheek.

Within this land where everything was dyed pure white, one flower bloomed... A deep red flower. Caressed and scattered by the wind, its petals fell on top of the fallen snow.

It's... hopeless. This is the end, of everything.

This way is fine. This way... is fine.  
—...If I'm gone, this war will end as well.

Happiness will return. NANOHA will smile.

*“Well... Um. Because this way, I can be close to you, Fate-chan.”*

...I don't want to leave.

No, no, no.  
I don't want to leave this world that holds NANOHA.

No good. It's no good.

I have only myself to blame.

I loved NANOHA. I wanted to protect her. I wanted to be by her side.

That was all I wanted.

But.

I didn't even have the right to do that.

Not at all. Not for anything.

Two girls; one a knight and one a princess.  
Such people shouldn't have anything to do with one another.

So I

I—...

*“Nyahaha, Fate-chan, I love you!”*

“ku... a... Nano... ha”

Had I known of everything that would happen, I wouldn't have met her.  
Even if we did meet, I wouldn't have fallen in love.

I wouldn't have... had feelings for her at all.

...What... am I saying.  
That's impossible. I know that.

I met you. And called your name.

—...In that moment

*“I love you too, Nanoha.”*

I had already fallen in love with you.

**【eins ~(Schicksal)~】**

I have few memories of my childhood.

...By childhood, I mean around the age of three.  
That was never a problem for me though.

For as long as I can remember, I lived in the institute. The head of the institute was kinder than anyone I had ever met and I loved her as if she were my real mother.

Still, it had already been decided that I could only remain at the institute until I was ten.

I hadn't really understood the complicated parts but apparently there had been a war occurring in a neighboring kingdom until just a few years ago and the number of war orphans who came to our kingdom seeking help in the aftermath had been large.

Although they had taken in as many as they could, it had been agreed upon that they would enter society once they reached a certain age so that there wouldn't be too many in the institute.

I can still remember listening to the head of the institute as she told me this and thinking, despite my young age, 'I must be one of those war orphans too.'

...Though at the time I wasn't quite sure what that meant.

I was going to be turning ten sometime that following year.

Normally, one would have to be deciding on their future now, but...  
For me, it had already been decided.

Starting next year, I would be living in the castle; the face of our kingdom, you could say.  
Or rather... in the military barracks located on the grounds.

I've always seemed to have a much higher magic ability than other people.

Half a year before, when data was being gathered on the children in the institute, apparently the numbers it had measured in were considered abnormal, and a high-ranked military commander came all the way to ask something of me.

“What do you think, Fate-san? When you leave here, would you like to try joining our military?”

The woman said it with such a radiant smile, I never would have thought she was in the military.  
...I, as someone who had no particular place to go, readily answered.

After that, I had been given a few opportunities to observe her troop to understand what the military would be like. It was on my third visit when this woman who had been looking out for me asked,  
“When you enter the military, will you let me adopt you?”

Like happiness, like being tickled... such feelings had filled my heart and though my blushing cheeks were a little embarrassing...

Without hiding them, I nodded.

\* \* \*

“Wah... It's really late...”

By the time I had finished the requested shopping after my part-time job as a paper carrier, before I knew it the sky had already become dark.

Although the only reason for this was because I had been looking at a poster...

After buying everyone's share of bread from the usual bakery and telling myself that it was about time I headed home, I passed through the door and suddenly saw it.

(A birthday party is being held for the princess.)

Was what was written in large characters.  
...It seems the princess' birthday was next month.

Please come visit the castle to celebrate! ...was what the contents said.

It was completely open to the common folk.

...Though that only went to show just how much they trusted and loved their people, I guess.

—...But... Hmm.

The princess... I wonder what kind of person she is...

I thought that while staring absentmindedly at the poster.

And just like that... I arrived at this point.

“Everyone's going to be hungry.”

In a hurry, I held the bag I was carrying to my chest and ran down the brick-lined street.

—...It takes over 15 minutes to get to the institute from here.

If I return by the direct road, I might not be back by 7 o'clock.

To get there a little faster, I decided to use a backstreet, taking the turn just before of the one I usually took.

The backstreet may not have been much of a street and was rather dark but the city was relatively safe and on top of that, I had been a newspaper carrier for many years so it was a lot like “making my way through my own backyard.”

Without changing my speed, I whipped around the corner... That was when it happened.

From the corner of my eye, I saw the figure of a girl crouching quietly beneath a lone street light.

...A girl I've never seen. I wonder what's wrong? Is she lost?

“Why are you alone in a place like this?”

Approaching slowly, when I called out in a soft voice so that I wouldn't startle her, she raised her head from where it had been buried in her knees.

“...Um, I've kind of lost my way...”

The shy and worried girl looked to be about the same age as me.

“Where do you live?”

“.....”

She slowly shook her head, frowning, as if she wasn't able to come up with an answer.

...Could she have come from a place so far away that she doesn't know...?

“...It's already dark... Anyway, being in this place is dangerous...”

As if asking herself what she should do, she made a small 'mmph' and tightly grasped the hem of my skirt. ...Her face somehow very anxious.

“Um... For now, why don't you come with me? Do you have anyone that can come for you if you contact them?”

I said that while holding out my hand. The girl looked from that held out hand to my face several times before nervously reaching for it and grabbing it tightly.

“Shall we go?”

“Okay.”

That hand was just a little smaller than mine.

...But somehow, it was very warm.

I don't know if it was because it was my first time holding hands, but  
—...the warmth of the hand linked with mine

somehow made my heart race oddly.