

14

JOUGI SHIRAISHI
ILLUSTRATION AZURE

WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina





WANDERING
WITCH
The Journey of Elaina



THE JOURNEY OF ELAINA
+ CHARACTERS

EKINA

A wealthy woman who lives in the small city of Astikitos. She works as a public official overseeing imports.



The Lakeside Witch
KAROLINE

A witch and member of the royal court of the Moonlight City of Eherias. She is a brilliant adventurer and inventor.



SENA

A young woman who lives in Baska, the City of Balance. She holds a unique job as a member of the Judgment Squad.



CRETA

A new recruit to the Security Corps, the organization that maintains public order in the small city of Astikitos.



Two brooms were flying side by side across the plains.
A chilly breeze blew between me and my teacher.

“I don’t
understand
what you
want from
me, Miss.”

“What I
want are
your candid
impressions of
this moment.”



WANDERING WITCH 14
The Journey of Elaina

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WANDERING WITCH

The Journey of Elaina

IOUGI SHIRAISHI

Illustration
AZURE

14


NEW YORK

Copyright

Wandering Witch: The Journey of Elaina JOUGI SHIRAISHI

Translation by Nicole Wilder

Cover art by Azure

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MAJO NO TABITABI vol. 14

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo, in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2024 by Yen Press, LLC

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Yen On

150 West 30th Street, 19th Floor

New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: October 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Emma McClain, Payton Campbell Designed by Yen Press Design: Wendy Chan Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Shiraishi, Jougi, author. | Azure, illustrator. | Wilder, Nicole. translator.

Title: Wandering Witch : the journey of Elaina / Jougi Shiraishi ; illustration by Azure ; translation by Nicole Wilder.

Other titles: Majo no tabitabi. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2020— Identifiers: LCCN 2019052222 | ISBN 9781975332952 (volume 1 ; trade paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy. | Witches—Fiction. | Voyages and travels—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S517725 Wan 2020 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019052222>

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-6869-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-6870-8 (ebook)

E3-20240910-JV-NF-ORI

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CHAPTER 1

Special Offer

The Travelers' Restaurant.

It's hard to believe that anyone who has spent any time visiting the countries in this region could have failed to encounter the name of this restaurant chain. Almost every country has one near its front gates, and it serves as an especially convenient rest stop for travelers and merchants.

I opened the door to the restaurant.

An employee greeted me with a nod from behind the counter, then told me to sit wherever I liked and gestured to the sparsely occupied interior.

The invitation to sit wherever I wanted was meant literally. Staff at the Travelers' Restaurant didn't care where you sat, whether it was at an open table or one that was already occupied.

Most of the customers who came here were travelers, merchants, or adventurers—nomads who made their living wandering from place to place—and the purpose of these restaurants was for those customers to exchange information while eating their meals.

For merchants and travelers, information was a matter of life and death, so to speak. Tips about dangerous cities and regions or stories of places with novel trends and customs were always in high demand. For that reason, travelers and merchants tended to gather at these restaurants when they wanted information, and their presence, in turn, attracted other clientele.

Most nomads were hungry for something or other.

Whether it was an interesting story or the latest news, they craved excitement.

Looking around the restaurant, I noticed quite a few customers facing each other across tables, talking as they ate their meals. Most of them were probably meeting for the first time.

I took a seat at one of the tables.

At these restaurants, once you sat down, someone else sitting nearby was likely to strike up a conversation.

“Good afternoon. Are you by yourself?”

So it wasn’t particularly unusual for a young woman to strike up a conversation with an old merchant sitting by herself.

I had been a merchant for forty years and visited these Travelers’ Restaurants on numerous occasions. So I’d been through this particular routine more times than I could count.

Forty years ago, twenty years ago, and even now—I always visited these restaurants alone.

When I nodded to the woman, she asked me, “May I talk with you for a while?” Then she set her glass and plate down on the table and took a seat across from me.

The woman’s glass was full of water, and on her plate were several slices of bread, accompanied by a poor excuse for a sausage.

These restaurants served their fare buffet-style. For a set price, customers could have their fill of whatever food and drinks they liked, and many a penniless traveler gratefully heaped their plate with cheap cuts of meat. However, it cost enough that most people thought it was a waste to content themselves with plain fare like that of the woman sitting opposite me.

Either the woman across the table had enough money that she wasn’t worried about wasting it, or she was a peerless lover of bread.

“Recently,” she said proudly, “I happened to come across some information from a special source of mine about an interesting country—”

Her hair was the color of ash. She wore a black robe and looked at me with eyes as blue as lapis. A star-shaped brooch adorned her breast. Apparently, she was a witch.

“Huh.”

I didn’t know what she meant by “a special source.” But her expression,

brimming with confidence, seemed to say the information she spoke of would be something very profitable.

However, in my experience, those who approached me with such an expression usually turned out to be spreading nonsense in an effort to separate me from my money. It had happened before.

I wonder if the same is true about her.

The young lady lowered her voice so that the people sitting around us couldn't hear her and told me, "As a matter of fact, the country I speak of has undergone a recent change, and now it's the loveliest and most beautiful place in the region—"

"I see."

This already sounds suspicious...

She spoke restlessly, gesturing with her hands and body. "It's really difficult to describe exactly how amazing it is, but anyway, it's an incredible place—"

"I see."

That's not very much to go on...

Her story had a truly suspicious ring to it. But I lent her my ear all the same.

Most nomads are hungry for something or other.

Whether it's an interesting story or the latest news they're after, they crave excitement.

Whether a story is true or false, our curiosity is insatiable.

Then the woman told me, "The country I'm speaking of is called—"



CHAPTER 2

The Country of Stories

“Do you know about the ‘Country of Stories’?”

It happened while I was eating a meal at a Travelers’ Restaurant in a certain country. A male customer who had been sitting nearby suddenly came over to me and posed that question.

When I answered that I did not know of it, he reacted with surprise.

“Imagine not knowing about such an amazing place! If you like, why don’t I tell you a tale about the Country of Stories?” he suggested.

The story about the Country of Stories the man proceeded to tell me was very strange indeed.

“It’s said that everyone who goes to the Country of Stories finds happiness,” he began. “A while ago, a friend of a friend of mine went to visit, and we never saw him again. Apparently, it’s simply too wonderful, and he immediately fell head over heels for the place... This here is the diary that this friend of a friend sent to me. If you like, how about you give it a read?”

As he spoke, the man handed me a small booklet.

I flipped through it, and sure enough, the diary was full of lengthy passages singing the praises of the Country of Stories. Its pages were filled with lots of abstract words about how beautiful a place it was, how nice the people were, and so on. The diary also recorded testimonials from others, such as “*An acquaintance of mine separated from his wife and fell into the depths of despair, but he reclaimed his happy life by going to the Country of Stories.*”

“I see,” I said, nodding.

It seems people who go to this country are able to pass the days as if in a dream.

The man nodded back. “As you can see, it’s an amazing place.”

“By the way, where is this country?” I asked.

The man cocked his head to the side suggestively. “Hmm, I wonder...” he said. “It might interest you to know that the booklet you’re holding is only one part of the story. In truth, my friend’s friend sent me many more.”

The man smiled suspiciously and advised that I might determine the country’s location if I read them all.

So I did as he suggested and bought the diaries.

The story about the Country of Stories the man told me was very strange indeed.

I had heard tales about this mysterious place before in various other countries, but...

...no matter where I looked, I had never found any trace of it.



I suppose the first time I ever heard about the Country of Stories was around one month prior.

It happened right after I entered a certain other country. Not far from its gates, I noticed a barker shouting, “Welcome to the Travelers’ Restaurant! All travelers, please come and visit us!”

My, my. “The Travelers’ Restaurant,” hmm? What a wonderful name. I wandered over, drawn to the barker’s voice, and before I knew it, I had entered the restaurant.

Apparently, this place called the Travelers’ Restaurant operated like a buffet. In the center of the dining room, they had set up long tables, and on those tables were rows and rows of every kind of food you could imagine. There were croissants and toast, muffins, omelets and sausages, salad and bacon, even hamburg steaks.

Am I dreaming...?

Feeling euphoric, I practically danced alongside the table. I picked up a plate and filled it with all my favorite things from the many dishes. Then I found a seat, still bouncing with joy.

“Goodness... That’s quite a strange meal you’ve assembled...”

After I had spent a little while sitting and eating, a young woman stopped by my table and stared in wonder at the number of dishes set before me.

“Sorry,” I replied. “I don’t know who you are, but I’m not giving you any.”

“I don’t want any... And anyway, this is a buffet...”

Incidentally, the food piled up before me consisted of croissants, toast, muffins, bagels, and sandwiches—in short, every kind of bread imaginable.

I must be dreaming..., I thought, looking over it again.

Staring at me in disbelief, the young woman continued, “By the way, I wonder if you’re familiar with the rules of this establishment?”

Um...rules?

I felt a shock run through me, like I had been struck by lightning.

“Don’t tell me it’s against the rules to only eat the bread...”

“No, it’s not, but...”

Shaking her head slowly, the woman introduced me, a total beginner, to the concept of the Travelers’ Restaurant. She informed me that these buffet-style restaurants were common to the region and most often found near country gates. As the name suggested, they appealed to travelers, and most of the customers who dined there were nomads of some sort. These restaurants did not assign diners to seats, and customers could move between the tables freely.

It was hardly necessary for me to ask why—obviously, it was so that travelers who had never met could get together and talk over a meal.

“...So basically, you’re saying these restaurants are meant to facilitate information exchange between customers?”

“You catch on quickly,” the woman said, nodding. “By the way, is this seat taken?”

“No. Please sit.”

But I’m not giving you any of my bread, I thought as I offered her the seat across from mine.

The young woman sat down, and we began to exchange small talk. We told

each other what kinds of countries were nearby and about interesting places we had been.

The first time I ever heard of the Country of Stories was during that conversation.

“...This country is more frightening than interesting, but...do you know about a place known as the Country of Stories? I hear it’s not all that far from here.”

She lowered her voice and stealthily told me the tale of the Country of Stories. “As a matter of fact, a little while ago, a friend of a friend of mine apparently went to the Country of Stories. But the place was so terrifying, the experience drove them insane.”

“Oh no.” *That’s just terrible*, I thought as I chewed.

“We still don’t know exactly what happened, but—please take a look at this.”

As she spoke, the woman handed me a little booklet. When I looked at it, I saw it contained a detailed description of the author’s terrifying experience in the Country of Stories.

The place was so terrifying, my stay ended after only two days. I cannot express in words exactly what I experienced there. I once heard of a case of someone who stayed longer than I did. They told their family about their experiences, and all of them immediately went missing.

The booklet continued along this vein. It went on endlessly about how, at any rate, the writer had had an extremely dreadful experience.

“There are many things we don’t know about the Country of Stories, but I suggest you take care.” The woman looked at me with a stern expression and continued, “By the way, that booklet is just one of many. I have quite a few others concerning the Country of Stories. If you like, why not buy them?”

“.....”

As I flipped through the booklet, I listened to what she had to say.

“You might inadvertently wind up in the Country of Stories, you see. So what do you say? You’ll buy them, won’t you?”

“Hmm...” After flipping through the booklet for a little while longer, I nodded.

“Well, all right then.”

Certainly, if what she says about the Country of Stories is true, I had better do my best to avoid going there.

“Oh-hoh-hoh-hoh. Thank you for your business.”

The young woman handed me the booklets with apparent delight. “By the way, what is your name?”

“Elaina,” I answered.

“Elaina, is it? I’ll remember that.”

She never stopped grinning as I handed her the money in exchange for the booklets.

I noticed quite a few branches of the Travelers’ Restaurant in nearby countries. In fact, I’m not sure I ever passed through a country’s gates without seeing one. It seemed like the restaurant in question was truly beloved by the nomads of this region.

“I don’t see much point in concentrating their business so heavily in such a small area, though...”

Won’t news just keep circling around and around the same places? Will any new information ever enter the mix? It made me wonder.

That said, as a traveler, it also seemed to me that there was no better place to gather information. So in the end, each time I crossed from one country to another, I found my way to the Travelers’ Restaurant.

“Oh, young lady? Do you know about a place called the Country of Stories?”

“You’re a traveler, aren’t you? Where did you come from? By the way, have you heard of the Country of Stories?”

“Good afternoon. Lovely weather, isn’t it? What a lucky man I am, to meet a girl as lovely as you on such a fine day! By the way, have you heard of the Country of Stories?”

“Hey, you! What’re you lookin’ at? You wanna piece of me? Huh? Oh, right—you know about the Country of Stories?”

I soon noticed a mysterious phenomenon. The more I visited the Travelers' Restaurant, the more I heard about the Country of Stories.

One person introduced it to me as "A country where you spend your days as if in a dream, a truly incredible place."

Another explained that it was "A country where every person, without exception, gets treated like royalty."

Someone else called it "An awful place where you fall into the depths of despair the moment you enter."

And another person told me it was "A horrible country where every person, without exception, is driven insane."

The positive opinions were extremely positive, and the negative opinions were extremely negative. The only thing every account had in common was each person's astonishment and insistence that they had "never visited such a country before in their life."

Was the place heaven on earth or a living hell? I wasn't sure which stories to believe. But either way, it seemed to be a unique place.

So then, just where exactly is this country?

Every time I heard someone talk about it, I asked that question.

And whenever I did, the speaker would smile suspiciously, almost as if they had been waiting for those very words. Then they would give me a vague answer like "Hmm, I wonder" and follow right up with "By the way, the booklet I just showed you is one of many. I have lots more of them. Do you want them? They might provide you with more detailed information." Then they would flash me a whole bunch of little booklets.

"Oh really?" I would say, narrowing my eyes. And every time, without fail, they would tell me about yet another story from yet another source, without ever going into any actual details.

"Really! As a matter of fact, a friend of a friend of mine used what they learned from these booklets and went to the Country of Stories—"

And then, after flipping through the first booklet a little more, I would answer,

“Well, all right then,” and buy the rest.

For the past month, I had been buying these booklets each time I went to a new place.

I’ve been reading these things for a month, and I still have no idea where this place is...

No matter how many I bought or how many times I read them, none of the booklets ever revealed a single specific detail. They just said, *Anyway, it was an amazing experience!* or *Anyway, it was a horrible experience!* I’d never be able to determine the country’s location from just that.

“Ha-ha-ha, but, Madam Witch, the Country of Stories truly does exist. This friend of my friend is the ultimate proof.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I nodded along as I munched on some bread. I had been eating a lot of it in the past month. By now, I must have had my fill at nearly all of the Travelers’ Restaurant’s many locations. But no matter where I ate it, the bread tasted just the same.

“I’ve had enough. I’m even getting sick of the taste of this bread...”

I suppose even a peerless bread lover can get tired of the stuff if she visits the same buffet over and over for a whole month.

I sighed, and the man sitting across from me said, “Oh, if you’re bored, I know of a good restaurant,” and clapped his hands together. “The country to the south of here also has a Travelers’ Restaurant, but—it’s the original establishment, and the food is especially tasty there.”

“Oh really?”

Well, well.

“Yes, and the bread is top-notch, too.”

“Oh?!”

Goodness me. That’s the most useful bit of information I’ve heard in a while.

“Thank you kindly,” I said, then skipped out of the restaurant, a song in my

heart.



“Heh-heh-heh...”

As he watched the ashen-haired witch leaving the restaurant, the man chuckled coldly.

“The Country of Stories, eh? As if such a thing actually exists!”

Travelers often visit the Travelers’ Restaurant. It’s a place for people from faraway places to gather and exchange valuable information. But at the same time, it’s also fertile ground for swindlers looking to palm off rubbish to easy marks for a high price.

They approach travelers moving from country to country with stories about “a place of great interest” or “a dangerous destination.” Travelers who show interest in this land—the mysterious Country of Stories, its whereabouts unknown—buy the booklets. Unable to find it, they wind up going to another Travelers’ Restaurant in another country and buying more booklets. Sooner or later, they realize it’s nothing but a scam. However, by that time, they’ve shelled out a fair amount of money on a bunch of booklets full of vague nonsense.

A certain ring of fraudsters operating through the Travelers’ Restaurants was using this method to rake in the dough.

“But wow, that witch really was an easy mark, just like the rumors said.”

Information passed quickly among this circle of ne’er-do-wells. Once they found an easy mark, they shared their intel with the others so that the unsuspecting victim could be targeted for fraud in other locations as well.

Among their targets, a certain ashen-haired witch who had arrived in the area about a month before was particularly famous within their group.

She was known to be a foolish traveler who would buy their booklets no matter how much they inflated the price, so long as they had a tale ready about the Country of Stories.

“Apparently, that witch has been spreading rumors about the Country of Stories everywhere she goes, and now even more foolish travelers are coming

to the Travelers' Restaurants specifically to hear about it."

The witch was truly one of their best customers—she even brought in more easy marks for them to prey on.

The man sipped his drink with a smile, thinking it would be nice if the witch continued to hang around the area for a long while.

A woman took a seat across from him. She was a fellow fraudster. "...But I wonder if she isn't almost done with the Travelers' Restaurants?" she said.

After organizing all the information she had gathered from their other colleagues, the woman had worked out that, with the exception of the location in the country directly to the south, the witch had visited all the other Travelers' Restaurants and had been met with the same scam in every one of them. The woman could hardly endure the idea of someone so utterly dense.

"Seems like the next scam will be the last," she concluded.

"In that case, we should take her for all she's worth!" The man laughed loudly. "Our leader is there, after all! I'm sure he'll snatch away all her money and leave that witch's wallet as empty as her brain. Ha-ha-ha!"

Annoyed by her companion's loudness, the woman looked out the window and spied the ashen-haired witch walking toward the city gates.

She pitied the witch. If she hadn't made herself a target, she might have a little more money to spare.

The woman stared after the figure, feeling sorry for her. Maybe the witch felt her gaze, because just once, as she was leaving the gates, she turned back toward them.

".....?"

The woman cocked her head.

The witch was smiling suspiciously—a smile just like their own.



Exactly as the man had said, when I flew my broom a short distance southward, I found a country there.

It was very small.

Once I entered the gates, I headed straight for the Travelers' Restaurant. It was just what I expected from the original location. If I was being positive, I might say the interior had an old-fashioned charm. If I wanted to be a little meaner, I'd say the place was falling apart.

According to the information I'd picked up at the last Travelers' Restaurant, however, the bread here was supposed to be exquisite.

"Hmm. As promised."

I immediately snatched up several glossy croissants shaped like beautiful crescent moons and found a seat. When I bit into one, there was a *crunch*, and the aroma of butter spread through my mouth.

Well, these are pretty tasty, aren't they?

Then, as I was blissfully crunching and munching on the croissants, a man sat down in the seat across from me.

"I haven't seen your face around these parts. Are you a rookie traveler?"

In Travelers' Restaurants, it was common for people to share tables with strangers and exchange information. But recently, someone had immediately come over to talk to me every single time.

"I'm not a rookie, but—did you need something?" I asked with feigned ignorance.

The man said, "Do you know the rules of the Travelers' Restaurant?"

The man wore a proud expression on his face, and despite the fact that I hadn't asked, he went on at length about the rules I already knew quite well. He told me this was a place where travelers exchanged information and that people were free to sit wherever they liked, and so on.

Then, after the man had explained everything to me, he said, "By the way, there's a place I'd really love to tell you about—" and pulled out a little booklet.

Over the past month, I'd seen more than my fair share of these things.

"The Country of Stories, right?"

I set out all the booklets I had bought so far on the table. In total, there were

about twenty. I had gone to the Travelers' Restaurant in every city I had visited and purchased several booklets at each one, so I had accumulated quite a few by then.

"...Oh-hoh, so you already know about the Country of Stories. That's exactly the one I mean. That country is a very mysterious place, you know—"

"Ah, sorry, but if you're trying to sell me more booklets, I'm not interested."

Yeah, no thanks. I'm not listening to any more of that.

I plugged up my ears and shook my head.

In fact...

"I came to this restaurant today in order to talk with you. I didn't come to hear about the Country of Stories."

"Huh? With me...?"

The man seemed a little confused. I put on the biggest smile I could muster and looked him right in the eye.

"Yes. You're the leader of the group of fraudsters operating within the Travelers' Restaurants, right?"

"...!" The man looked surprised for a moment, then immediately averted his eyes. "F-fraud...? Whatever do you mean...?"

"Spare me your excuses. By continuing to visit the Travelers' Restaurants, I've pretty much figured out that your group is making money pushing sales of these booklets about the fictional Country of Stories."

The Country of Stories was a made-up land that existed only to draw the listener's interest with tales of a place more amazing than anywhere else, or more awful than anywhere else. In other words, it was a fictional country that could exist only in stories.

In the end, the only thing that really existed was a Country of Lies, huh?

The group attracted interest using vague stories with no real substance and then used that interest to sell their wares. They demanded more money from people who sought more information and extorted them until they reached the

point of no return. This was a common trick among fraudsters.

“...Humph. So, you finally figured it out.” The man’s attitude suddenly changed. “By the way, I’ll go ahead and tell you now—if you came to ask me to give back the money you’ve paid out so far, I won’t be doing that. I don’t even know exactly how much you’ve paid, and anyway, it’s your own fault for letting yourself get tricked.”

I nodded. “That’s right. It’s my fault for being deceived by your lies and my fault for giving you the opening, so I’m not even considering trying to get my money back.”

“Then what is it? What do you think you’re going to discuss with me?”

“About that...” I put my index finger to my lips. It smelled of croissants. Then, still wearing a smile, I said, “This place, it’s a Travelers’ Restaurant, right? I wonder what might happen if I went around spreading information about your group’s activities? In fact, I’ve drawn pictures of all your colleagues’ faces, and I wonder what might happen if I were to distribute those to other patrons? If your supply of gullible, foolish travelers were to dry up, you would stop making money, wouldn’t you? You’d be in quite a bind, huh?”

To get right down to it—

The man’s expression grew even more grim. “...You’re after hush money, is that it?” he asked.

“I’m glad you’re so quick to catch on.”

“Ugh...” The man made a very, very bitter face. If he left me to do as I had threatened, he would no longer be able to make money ripping off foolish travelers. For the man and his colleagues, that would be a very serious loss.

After thinking for a little while, the man glared at me and said, “...And I suppose I can trust you’ll keep quiet?”

“Rest assured, I’m very good at keeping secrets. If you give me the money, I promise you my silence.”

“Hmm... So then, how much to keep you quiet?”

“About this much, I guess.”

I quickly wrote down an amount on a piece of paper and held it out to him. It was about twice as much money as I had paid out so far.

“Wha...?! H-hey! There’s no way we took that much from you!”

“I believe I said earlier that I didn’t come to you to discuss getting my money back.”

I intend to squeeze much, much more out of you.

“Uuuugh... You devil...!”

“I’m not a devil, I’m a witch. So how about it? Will you pay or not?” I pressed the man for a decision.

After all, it was his fault for leaving himself vulnerable.

Eventually, the man said, “Ah, jeez, I’ll pay! I just have to fork over the dough, and you’ll shut up, right?!”

Desperate, he paid me the money.

“Oh, and while we’re here, there’s one more thing,” I added.

“Oh, come on, there’s more?! *Now* what do you want?!”

“If you don’t mind, can I have your booklets on the Country of Stories?”

I had realized while making the rounds of the Travelers’ Restaurants that the booklets were numbered, and I was trying to complete a full set by adding the ones from this location. While overpriced, as reading material, they were surprisingly enjoyable. They’d sparked something like a collector’s hunger in me, and if possible, I’d have liked to get a hold of the last ones.

“Here ya go! Take ‘em, you cheat!” the man cried out in desperation, handing me the booklets.

“I’m of the opinion that you and your group are the cheats,” I insisted.

Regardless, now my collection is complete.

“By the way, who wrote all of these?” I asked.

“No idea,” the man answered. “Some amateur probably wrote them a long time ago. My parents bought them on clearance at a bazaar.”

“Then you used them in your scheme without your folks’ permission, did you?”

“How rude. I’ll have you know I *did* get permission.”

“What kind of parent would allow their child to use something they bought for fraud...?”

“They were the original fraudsters.”

“So like parent, like child, huh...?”

According to the man, his parents had also visited the Travelers’ Restaurants, spreading dubious information to other patrons and charging them for the service. Apparently, they’d made their living that way. I realized that while these restaurants had been around for some time, the conversations taking place there must not have changed much over the decades.

Time doesn’t always make things better, it seems. Well, nevertheless—

“Since I’ve gotten my money as well, I believe I’ll go ahead and take my leave.” I collected my booklets and stashed them in my bag, then stood up from my seat.

I walked out with an easygoing stride.

The leader of the fraudsters, on the other hand, seemed to be feeling some lingering indignation. He stood up, pointed at me, and raised his voice.

“We’ve got an agreement now, you hear?! Don’t you go telling a soul! If you interfere with our business going forward, I’ll make you pay!”

Just as I’d said earlier, as long as I got my money, I wasn’t going to spread any more rumors.

So I turned around and answered with a nod. “Of course. I will keep my promise.”

Starting now.



“Damn...she got me.”

After the ashen-haired witch left, the man gulped down the rest of his drink.

He had heard she was an easy mark, but she'd turned into an unexpected liability.

However—

“But, well... So long as she stays quiet, we shouldn't have any more problems...”

The witch had been spreading rumors about the Country of Stories all over the place for a while now. Their customer count had been increasing in leaps and bounds. It probably wouldn't even take them a whole day to recover the money their leader had just given away.

Considering all that, there was no need to worry about the fee he'd paid for the witch's silence.

“Tch... She could have ripped us off for way more.”

In fact, they had gotten off so easy that he pitied the witch, who had only demanded as much money as they could make in a single day.

“Stupid woman,” the man mumbled to himself. He sat back and elegantly lifted a cup of the restaurant's black tea to his lips, when suddenly—

“Leader! Leader! There's trouble!”

—one of the junior members of their group, with a wild look on his face, crashed through the door of the Travelers' Restaurant. The underling spotted his leader, and in a terrible panic, he rushed over to his table.

“What is it?” the leader demanded. “You're making a racket.”

When he looked up, the underling continued, his breath ragged, “Sh-she got us! That witch did us in!”

“Did us in...?”

“She spilled the beans on everything we've been doing!”

A certain witch with ash-colored hair had become the topic of much gossip within their group. She was known as an easy mark who would always buy booklets about the Country of Stories. She was also famous for being a particularly good customer who spread rumors about the Country of Stories

everywhere she went, bringing them plenty of new targets to rip off.

And these rumors she had been spreading here and there—what on earth had they been about?

“It can’t be...,” said the leader.

The underling nodded. “She really got us! Recently, every single one of our new customers has demanded hush money!”



CHAPTER 3

Sena the Judge

Elaina's mornings started early.

"Good morning. Lovely weather again today, isn't it? Oh? What's the matter? Somehow, you don't seem very lively. Hmm? You don't want to go to work...? Well, that's awful! Seems like your daily commute has exhausted you. But don't worry—it just so happens that I am a traveling saleswoman, and I journey far and wide selling products that are just perfect for someone like you who just doesn't feel like going to work."

Early one morning, as people were going this way and that on their daily commutes, a young woman was urging passersby to purchase cookies in the shape of closed seashells. As it happened, that young woman was none other than Elaina.

She was not simply passing out ordinary cookies either. Inside those tightly closed clamshells, she had placed strips of paper on which she had written that day's fortunes. In other words, by buying one of these cookies, a person would know their fortunes for the day.

"How about trying your luck with a cookie?"

"Try my luck...? What do you mean...?"

"Despite how I look, my predictions are very accurate. So how about it?"

"But I don't really believe in that kind of stuff..."

"That's too bad... Well then, why don't you forget about the fortune and just enjoy the cookie? As a matter of fact, the cookies themselves contain some special ingredients, and just by eating one, you'll feel much better. So how about it? Treat yourself!"

"I don't know... What kind of effects are we even talking about, specifically?"

"Oh, well...you'll start to feel very light and buoyant."

"Just by eating a cookie?"

“Just by eating one.”

“Sounds like there might be some suspicious ingredients in there.”

“Heh-heh-heh.”

“So there *are*...”

The young woman who’d been walking around by the side of the road selling dangerous items was known as Elaina, the Ashen Witch.

You might be thinking she sounds like quite a crook, so let me make a slight amendment to my account. On that day, she was not dressed at all like a witch, but rather she wore a hood pulled down low over her head and a cloth over her mouth, hiding her face. Now and then, she’d let out a low chuckle, like some greedy knave. Yes, she was indeed an awful crook.

“As the fee for the cookie, all I ask is one piece of gold. How about it?”

.....

I would like to believe nobody would stoop so low just to make a little money. But the fact of the matter is, when one is traveling, money is an absolute necessity. Now and then, one is forced to raise funds in the field. There is simply nothing else for it.

“Grrraaaaaahhh!”

But just then, a scream reverberated down the avenue, cutting through the crowd.

When everyone turned to look, they saw a young girl running toward Elaina, the suspicious saleswoman, from the other side of the street.

The girl was wearing a long blue uniform that looked like a robe or maybe a long coat, and she appeared to be about eighteen years old. Her golden hair was done up in a ponytail, and her blue eyes were glaring at Elaina.

“You again!” the girl shouted, fuming mad.

She was a member of the Judgment Squad, the organization responsible for maintaining public order in the city.

“Hello, Miss Sena,” said Elaina, bowing amicably. “Thank you for your hard

work.”

“How many times do I have to tell you before you get it into your head?! Selling things on the street is prohibited here! Isn’t that what I said before?!”

Elaina and Sena, the woman currently screaming at her, had known each other, in a sense, for about five days.

The two first met just after Elaina entered the city. She had been walking around selling her suspicious cookies, just like she was now, and just like now, Sena had come to rebuke her. More or less the same back-and-forth that had just taken place, then, had happened five days earlier, too. The only difference was the amount of fire in Sena’s delivery. To put it another way, the suspicious saleswoman had turned out to be a real dummy who hadn’t learned a single thing in five days. How lamentable.

“Ahhh, come on! How many times do you plan on making me warn you...?” With a sigh, Sena held out her hand to Elaina.

“Eh-heh-heh. Sorry.” With a chuckle, Elaina dropped a gold coin into Sena’s hand.

In this city, there was a law allowing members of the Judgment Squad to levy appropriate fines on offenders. When Sena put out her hand, Elaina produced her coin with reflexive speed. She was like a well-trained dog, with Sena as her master.

Although Elaina meekly paid her fine, she was still a shady merchant running scams daily. Sena was extremely fed up with her. Was Elaina obedient or defiant? She couldn’t tell.

“Really, give it a rest already, won’t you?” said Sena. “How many times do I have to warn you about the same thing? You’ve seriously done nothing but interfere with my work since you got here...”

Consequently, even after getting her money, Sena continued to lecture Elaina.

However, Elaina was an awful human being, and even as Sena scolded her, she wondered aloud, “Oh? Is it possible that one gold piece isn’t enough?” She slid over and leaned in close to Sena. “Now, now,” she continued, clapping a hand down on the other woman’s shoulder.

“I mean it. Give it a res—”

“Have this.” The suspicious saleswoman put her index finger to her lips and thrust a little bundle into Sena’s pocket.

“Hey, wait... Stop!”

It was unacceptable for a member of the Judgment Squad—elite guardians with the power to judge the guilty—to turn a blind eye to a criminal right in front of them, much less to commit a crime themselves at the same time. Accepting a bribe was out of the question.

“I can’t accept your money—”

Even as Sena spoke, a part of her felt a little hopeful as she wondered how much was in the bundle—an unfortunate but very natural response. Sena pulled the item out of her pocket.

“.....”

Inside, she found one of the suspicious cookies Elaina had just been selling.

“Open it up and look inside,” Elaina urged her, her tone playful yet ominous. “My predictions are very accurate, you know.” She looked proud of herself.

There was a single slip of paper stuffed inside the cookie.

Good things happen when you accept bribes.

That was all the paper said.

“.....”

Sena was at a loss.

“Heh-heh-heh. I’ll give you one more, as a bonus. It’ll be our little secret, all right?”

Then, right on the heels of the first one, the suspicious saleswoman produced another cookie. She wore an expression of great delight and satisfaction, as if to say, “*See? Something good already happened.*”

“This woman isn’t remorseful at all...!”

End scene.

This extremely questionable morning routine had repeated itself for the past several days.

The suspicious saleswoman's true identity was that of a witch and a traveler. When a traveler stays in one place for as long as five days, they're bound to make one or two acquaintances in the area. But here, in this city, Elaina had made just one friend—someone she liked so much that she went out to dinner with her almost every night.

"Ah, I love you," said the other girl. "Keep stroking my hair; it's so nice. Want to get married?"

"....."

The friend in question was sitting across from Elaina at a slightly pricey restaurant, her eyes half-lidded. "You're so cute," she continued. "Really cute. I could just eat you up." On second thought, perhaps she was gazing at Elaina like a beast looks at its prey.

Elaina seemed unconcerned. She stared off into the distance as she ate her meal, avoiding eye contact with the dangerous other girl.

"....."

Though perhaps there was another reason why she couldn't meet the other girl's eyes.

"Hey, hey, listen, Elaina. Today, I worked super hard at my job again," the young woman told her happily. "Once again, that same weird woman was loitering around town, right? And so I told her off like I've been doing. And then, listen—"

To summarize her clumsy words, the girl had spent another day working hard at her horrible job and wanted Elaina to praise her.

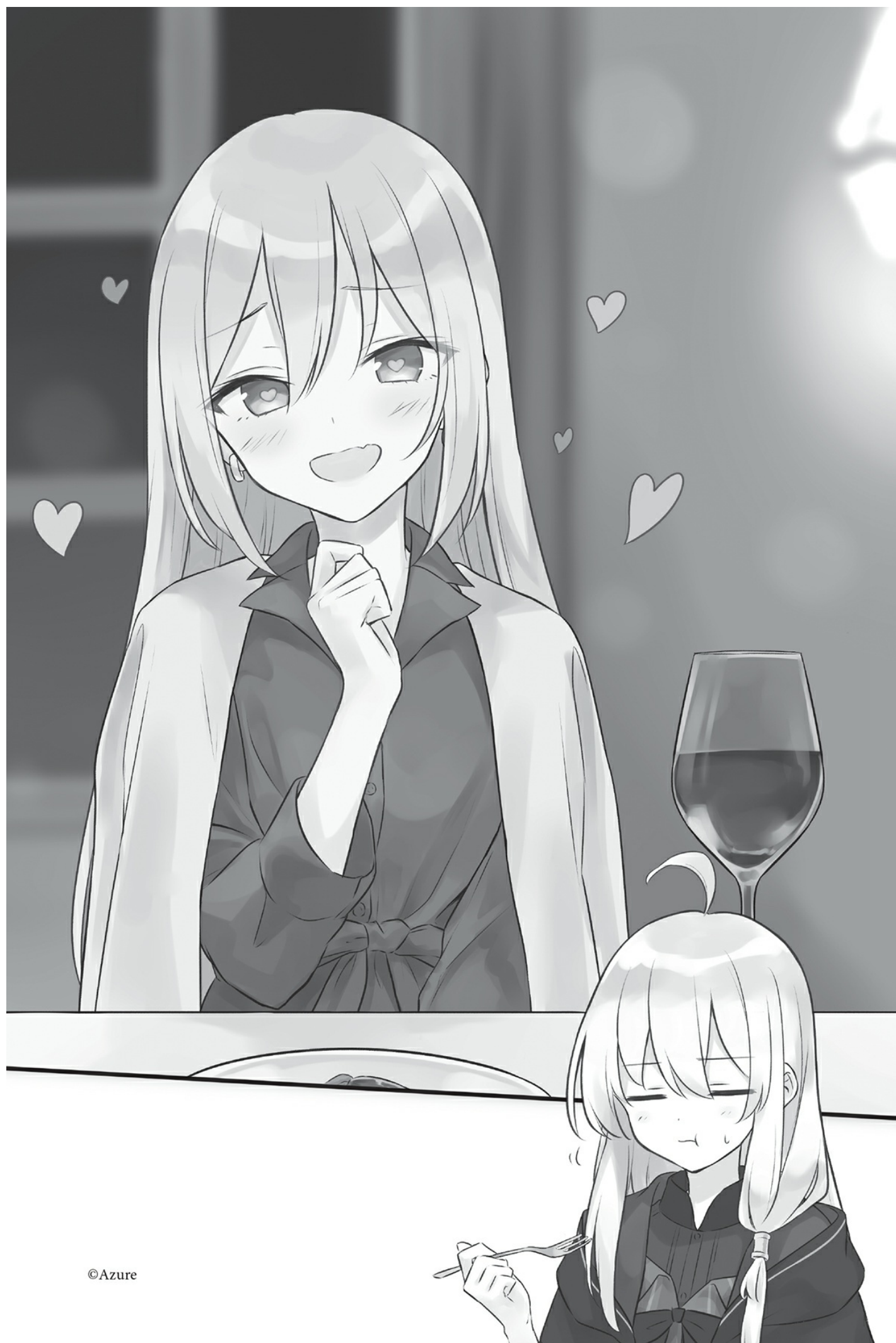
And so Elaina offered some half-hearted praise. "Is that so? You worked hard, didn't you? That's great; good job."

"Eh-heh-heh-heh." The woman looked delighted and put on a wide smile.

"....."

Elaina looked conflicted and once again averted her eyes from the other

young woman.



The reason for her discomfiture was because this woman, whom she had met here in this city and with whom she was currently eating dinner, was a member of the Judgment Squad, and because her name was Sena.

“Eh-heh-heh. Keep patting me, please.”

And because the version of her that Elaina saw during the day was practically a different person from the version she saw at night.

“.....”

Just like Sena, Elaina, too, acted like a completely different person at night. But just who was this Elaina woman?

I don’t even need to tell you, do I?

That’s right, she’s me.



Jumping back to five days ago—

In the midst of my journey, I arrived at a place called Baska, the City of Balance, and knocked on the gates.

“Lady Witch, I wonder if you know about our organization—the organization known as the Judgment Squad?”

Immediately after I finished the immigration check and passed through the city gates, a man dressed in a blue uniform appeared before me suddenly. “May I speak to you for a moment?” he asked, beckoning me over.

The man identified himself as the director of the Judgment Squad, an organization unique to that particular city.

Without really thinking, I went with him, and I was shown into the reception room of a building with the words JUDGMENT SQUAD written on it. There, I learned all about this special job unique to Baska.

“More than twenty years ago, regrettably, our city was terribly unsafe. Theft, fraud, intimidation, violence, and all sorts of other offenses were rampant. In those days, the whole city was overflowing with crime. It was so bad that our people even hesitated to walk around alone outside.”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded along, my eyes glued to the donuts and tea sitting on the table. “That sounds terrible...”

Come to think of it, I haven't eaten anything since this morning.

“In order to improve public safety—and so that the people in town could safely walk down the streets—we had to crack down on crime. Oh, please have a donut and some tea if you'd like.”

“Ah, much obliged. Thank you.” I immediately bit into a donut. “So in order to improve public safety, you created this Judgment Squad?”

“Yes, indeed.”

The members of the Judgment Squad, all of whom were mages, were singularly entrusted with managing crime in the city. That included doling out punishment, and at their hands, many criminals were publicly penalized. One criminal after another was convicted, until eventually their very existence became a deterrent. Each day, fewer and fewer criminals walked the main avenue of the city. Now, twenty years later, the city had supposedly eliminated crime entirely.

“So now you have no crime? That's a pretty amazing achievement,” I said, raising my donut in acknowledgment.

Through its perfectly round hole, the director frowned and nodded. “Yes it is...” Even though all the criminals had disappeared, just as they'd wanted, his expression was gloomy. “But eliminating crime completely has caused another problem...,” he continued. “We were happy to have a reduction in crime, but doing away with it completely was not quite so welcome.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the Judgment Squad was only founded because of all the crime. As things stand, the reason for our organization's very existence is in question.”

“...Ah.”

I understood what he was saying.

The Judgment Squad was, after all, created to crack down on criminals. So if all the criminals disappeared, there was no more work for them to do. Criminals

were absolutely essential to their job.

Though the group was formed to eliminate crime and ensure peace in the city, paradoxically, if things became *too* peaceful, they'd be out of the job. A strange consequence indeed.

"Recently, people are saying that we, the Judgment Squad, are becoming a problem."

"Mm-hmm." I nodded.

I understood the situation perfectly well. Basically, he was trying to tell me that this land had known peace for too long and its people were growing complacent.

"So then, what exactly am I supposed to do about it?" I asked.

Why would you summon a traveler like me as soon as I walked through the gates?

I had my head cocked questioningly.

The director nodded slightly and said, "Right. For now, I was hoping that you, Lady Witch, might commit some crimes."

"Hmm?"

I tilted my head in the other direction. *I must have misheard him. My ears aren't working right. I'll have him repeat what he said.*

"I'm sorry, what?"

"For now—"

"Yes?"

"I was hoping that you—"

"Yes, yes."

"—might commit some crimes."

"Whaaat?"

At this point, I tilted my head back again, sure this was some big joke. But evidently, he wasn't kidding.

“Please use this money to pay the fines. As long as you commit minor offenses, you won’t be arrested or anything. I would like it if you could commit as many crimes as possible while here, Madam Witch.”

“Okay...” *So basically, he’s asking me to do as many bad things as I can during my stay in this city.* “I’d like to avoid getting a bad reputation for committing all these crimes, though...”

“If you’re worried about that, how about wearing a disguise? I can lend you some things to help conceal your identity,” the director answered without hesitation. “On the off chance a resident figures out who you are, we’ll hush things up so that information doesn’t spread. Don’t worry about that.”

“Hush things up?”

Isn’t that what a bad guy would do? I thought with exasperation as I bit into my donut. I wondered if this director guy was exactly the type of person meant to be punished by the Judgment Squad.

I held up the now-broken ring of my donut and gazed through it at the director’s wicked face.

“Lady Witch, you must understand. Not being acknowledged is the same as not existing at all.”

After sitting through that brazenly underhanded exchange, I officially made my way into the city. But I’ve already told you about what happened when I did.

“Step right up! Who wants one of these cookies? They’re cheap!”

Heh-heh-heh, I chuckled, selling my suspicious wares.

“Excuse me. It’s prohibited to sell items in the street.”

While I was selling cookies—or rather, while I was in the middle of my suspicious business—a member of the Judgment Squad called out to me. It was Sena.

She sighed and said, “You’re a traveler, right? First time here? Listen, here in our city, we used to have a lot of people selling questionable merchandise on the streets, so it’s now prohibited to sell anything along the main avenue like this—” She started by explaining why what I was doing wasn’t allowed, then

demanded I pay the associated fine.

“By the way, you’re also committing fraud, aren’t you? I’ll overlook it this time, but please refrain from such activities in the future.”

In principle, she could have added the fine for fraud and demanded a whole gold piece, but since it was my first offense, she let me off lightly. If I had really been a criminal, I probably would have been quite touched by her kindness.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“Well, be careful, okay?” Sena clapped a hand down on my shoulder and left.

It was the Judgment Squad’s job to monitor the city. They were supposed to catch bad people in the act and levy fines on them right then and there, just as Sena had done with me. But the Judgment Squad would cease to exist if there were no bad people for them to catch. And so, to that end—

“Good afternoon! How would you like one of my cookies? Heh-heh-heh-heh!”

After Sena let me go, I once again began to ply my shady trade. Well, I didn’t have much of a choice, since the director of her organization had requested I go out and do bad things.

“Hmm? What? Hang on, you there. Seriously, what are you doing?”

Several minutes later, Sena returned. She looked at me like I was out of my mind. But I paid her the money again, and she told me, in a stronger tone than before, “Don’t do it again, you hear? Now hurry up and get out of here!”

“Okay!”

But the director asked me to commit crimes, so...

After that, I changed locations several times and continued selling my suspicious cookies. Sometimes I stood on the main road, sometimes in front of a café, sometimes in a back alley. In all sorts of places around town, I asked people if they would like a cookie. Then someone from the Judgment Squad would find me, ask “What are you doing?” and demand a fine. By my own count, I encountered the Judgment Squad about twenty times during that first day.

That’s a pretty decent number, huh?

“Hey, you! Seriously, give it a rest alreadyyyyyyyyyyy!”

Incidentally, I must have encountered Sena about 70 percent of the time. The second time I encountered her, she was pretty angry. The third time, she just sighed. And the fourth time, she glared at me and said, “What, I— Are you serious...?” From the fifth time to about the eighth time she found me, her train of thought went off in a strange direction, and she began to wonder aloud about her own sanity. “Huh...that’s strange... Maybe I’m hallucinating?” After the ninth time, she came back to her senses and began yelling at me again, like now.

“I really respect your hard work,” I said.

“Oh, shut up!”

“Here, take this.”

Already used to this back-and-forth, I placed a gold coin in her hand with a fluid motion.

“Thanks!” Sena said frankly, accepting yet another fine from me that day. I’d already lost count of how many I’d paid. “I guess you’re a lost cause, huh? I know you’re going to offend again.”

“Heh-heh-heh.”

“Don’t try to laugh this off!” she said, raising her voice. She was fuming. “Come on, enough already! Just don’t do it again!” She turned and left.

Despite her spirited voice, Sena’s gait was unsteady, and she looked exhausted.

And that was more or less how I passed my first day in the city. I did as the director asked and committed a number of minor crimes in order to provide plenty of work for the Judgment Squad.

Perhaps because I’d spent the whole day facing off with them across town, by the time evening came, I was incredibly hungry. I checked into a nearby inn, left my belongings in my room, changed into a more mage-like outfit, then made my way to a restaurant.

Maybe because it was around dinner time, the restaurant was fairly crowded

inside. I was shown to a counter seat, where I selected the safest choice—a pasta dish at the very top of the menu—and ate every bite. It was quite yummy. The employees were attentive, and I was pleased enough to want to come again during my stay.

If I had one single complaint, it's that I couldn't get into the bathroom.

"I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to..."

There was a young woman standing just outside the bathroom door, both hands resting on its surface, banging her head against it over and over again and grumbling to herself. The life had gone from her eyes, and when I called out to her, trying to get her attention, she didn't even turn to look at me. Instead, she just kept repeating "I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job" over and over.

My, my. You're a strange one, aren't you?

"Excuse me. What's the matter?" I asked, placing a hand on the woman's shoulder.

If possible, I'd like you to move aside, please.

"I want to quit, I want to quit. I want to quit my job. I can't do it anymore. I can't do it..."

She just kept mumbling to herself and banging her head against the door. It was like my voice was passing right in one ear and out the other. Even when I tapped her on the shoulder a couple times, or waved my hand in front of her face, or put my hand on her forehead to prevent her from banging it against the door, she paid me no mind and kept grumbling, "I want to quit, I want to quit."

I had absolutely no idea what had happened to her or who on earth this woman was, but somehow, I got the feeling I shouldn't leave her alone. She was, after all, blocking the way into the bathroom—all the more reason I couldn't ignore her.

"Um, for now," I said, "you're in the way of the other customers, so how about we move aside?"

And most importantly, you're in my way.

"I want to quit my job, I want to quit my job, I want to— Ah, oh, I have work tomorrow, too... I have to go home..."

The young woman lifted her head as if she had suddenly woken up from a dream. How ironic that despite her odd behavior coming from an intense desire to quit her job, it was her sense of obligation to that very same job that brought her back to her senses.

She opened the door.

"I'm home!"

"That's the bathroom."

She hasn't come back to her senses at all, has she?

"Ah, I can relax now... Smells like home."

"I think you're smelling the air freshener."

"I've got to do my best at work tomorrow... I have to bear with it...bear with it..." She started mumbling the same words over and over again.

"Um... Are you all right?" I asked her.

"Bear with it...bear with it— Ugh, bleeEEEEEEEEEEHHH!"

As soon as I spoke, she threw up.

She vomited violently in the direction of the toilet. She must have been under a tremendous amount of stress. Perhaps she was in a situation where she wasn't allowed to vent her complaints. Holding the toilet bowl, she cried and groaned in a pitiful voice that sounded more like a child's than an adult woman's.

"A-are you all right?" I asked.

As flustered as I was by this sudden development, for the moment, I stroked her back.

This young woman, sobbing as she retched—this woman with her blond hair pulled back into a single ponytail—I knew her.

Her name was Sena, and she was a member of the Judgment Squad tasked with maintaining law and order in this city.

“Waaaaaaaahhh... Weeeehhh... *Sniffle.*”

The same petite woman was sitting in the seat across from me, crying big tears like a little girl as she stuffed her face with pasta.

Trying to calm her down after her perplexing behavior in the bathroom, I had taken her by the hand and gotten her to take a seat. Circumstances aside, I couldn't very well leave her alone as she was.

I figured my first order of business was to get the woman in front of me to eat, drink, and settle down.

“Ugh, weeehhh... This is really good. Really, really good...” The woman busily moved her hands as she brought her fork to her mouth, wiped her tears, then picked up her glass.

“No need to rush; there's plenty more where that came from,” I said. The woman was eating restlessly, as if it was her first meal in several days. “Go on, please. It's my treat, so eat up.”

“It's been a long time since I've eaten such delicious food...”

“In that case, what were you doing at this restaurant earlier...?”

“I don't remember...”

“Well, that's not good.”

“I don't have any memories from after I finished work... I wonder why I came here...?”

“This is sounding worse and worse.”

According to her, she was standing in front of the restaurant's bathroom when she came to. Apparently, whenever she exhausted herself completely, her memories flowed right out of her brain.

As far as I could guess, she had come into the restaurant but never ordered anything, instead simply banging her head against the bathroom door the whole time.

“With what I earn, I can’t even afford to eat my fill at a place like this...,” she said, wiping her teary eyes as she stuffed her face with pasta.

Her job is to maintain law and order in the city, but she barely gets paid for it? What’s that about?

“My job is so exhausting, and the pay is so low...”

Perhaps because she had finally gotten some nourishment, Sena was gradually regaining the ability form whole sentences.

“Recently, the crime rate has gone down, and the citizens are saying we’re a waste of tax money and calling us a burden on the city. That would be bad enough, but all my coworkers and superior officers are bad people who don’t do their jobs, and because nearly the whole organization is made up of people like that, the citizens only look down on us more and more...”

Most of the sentences she managed to form were just complaints, however.

The more she ate, the more she talked, and soon she was sharing very interesting tidbits, indeed.

“Today, there was this really strange woman who wouldn’t stop selling her strange cookies on the street, no matter how many times I warned her...,” Sena said with a big sigh. “Everyone, and I mean *everyone*, only ever thinks of themselves. I’m so sick of it all. I’m so tired...”

“.....” I looked away and nodded. “Seems like you’re having a really tough time...”

“Yeah... But I feel a little better now that I’ve met someone like you, Miss Witch.”

“Oh? Is that so?”

“You make me think there are still people in this city who care about others.”

“Oh, but I’m a traveler.”

“How sad...” Sena slumped in her seat.

“My name is Elaina, and I’m a traveling witch. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

I felt guilty about getting her hopes up, though I suspected I wasn't that different from any of the other people in this city. I had only spoken to Sena because I wanted to go to the bathroom, after all.

"By the way, I just arrived in your city today. If you have time, would you tell me all about it?" And even now, I was proposing something that was for my own benefit alone. "I want you to tell me everything about your job on the Judgment Squad. Of course, you can leave out anything secret or classified. I only ask that you tell me what you're allowed to share," I said, adding that if she was willing to talk to me, she would be able to eat like this every day.

I figured that, despite the director's request, there wouldn't be any harm in befriending Sena. And from her point of view, my proposal shouldn't have any drawbacks.

After chowing down on her pasta for a while, Sena finally regained some of the vitality she'd had when we met earlier that day. At last, she nodded.

"As long as you agree to listen to my complaints as well."



Just as Sena had said, her job at the Judgment Squad was exhausting, and just as she and the director had told me, their reputation had recently been declining all across the city.

Once I had been there for five days, I had a pretty good picture of the situation in Baska.

"Hey, you. You over there. Stop!"

One day, as I was passing a peaceful afternoon on a park bench, two guys obviously up to no good called out to some young women walking their dogs.

"...What?" The two women looked at them with annoyance.

Both the men were dressed in blue Judgment Squad uniforms and were holding bags that were giving off an awful stench.

"We don't mind if you walk your dogs in this park, but if you don't pick up their poop, we have a problem." The vulgar men tossed the foul-smelling bags at the women's feet. "We have to ask you to pay the fine for leaving dog poop behind and spoiling the scenery."

The women seemed quite surprised by the man's words.

"Huh? But I never left any—"

"If you're going to talk back, we'll raise the fine to include interfering with our activities." Both men smirked.

There was no evidence that the two women had left the excrement behind, and the two men appeared to be framing them. Nevertheless, the women were forced to pay the fine, and they left the park.

I had spotted people wearing Judgment Squad uniforms everywhere around town, even when I wasn't going out of my way to repeatedly commit crimes.

Uh-oh... What's this guy up to?

I could see a Judgment Squad member standing in front of a certain cake shop on a street corner in town. Rows of colorful cakes had been set out at the front of the shop. The Judgment Squad member called the proprietor over and said to him, while pointing to the various cakes, "Mister, this is an indisputable breach of the rules here."

What kind of problem could there be with a bunch of cakes? I thought.

"Having something so colorful lined up in front of your store spoils the scenery, don't you think? And that calls for a fine."

From what I could see, the cakes didn't look overly colorful. But ultimately, the Judgment Squad were the ones who set the rules in this city, and even the seriousness of each crime was up to their mercurial whims.

"Tsk, tsk. You there. Show me the bag you just bought from that store."

A young woman on the Judgment Squad called out to stop a young man exiting a bookstore. She snatched the bag out of his hands and began interrogating him.

"Oh? And here I was sure you left without buying anything. So I wonder why there are books that were for sale in this bag? What's more, you're a minor, aren't you? I'm going to have to ask your parents about this situation..."

For once, I had spotted a member of the Judgment Squad other than Sena taking her job seriously.

“I-I’m sorry...!” cried the boy. “It was just a sudden impulse...! Please don’t tell my parents! Anything but that...! I beg you...!”

“Hmm? You want me to keep quiet? Well...you know what to do, then, right? Right?”

The woman scooted closer to the young man and stealthily initiated an exchange. I couldn’t see what happened next very well, but she must have extorted an absurd amount of money from the youth in exchange for her silence.

.....

Is Sena the only honest member of the Judgment Squad?

“Young lady, selling in the street is prohibited. Did you know that?”

One day, when I was conducting my shady business around town, as requested by the Judgment Squad’s director, someone from his organization called out to me. I was disappointed that the man wasn’t shouting and raving at me like Sena usually did. But I supposed I *had* been giving them a lot more chances to do some honest work these days.

Sena usually demands one gold piece, if I’m not mistaken...

“As a penalty, I think I’ll take three gold pieces.”

But for some reason, this Judgment Squad member demanded three times what Sena had been asking.

My, my. That doesn’t sound right.

“Don’t you have the amount wrong?” I asked.

“What’s that, back talk? I can raise the fine even more, you know? ...Or would you like to be arrested?”

The man looked at me, then opened his jacket a ways so I could see his magic wand and a bundle of rope he kept there.

In this country, the Judgment Squad was the law. In other words, if one of its members said you were guilty, then you were guilty. Opposing them could get you thrown into prison. According to Sena, the man’s rope was a special kind

only given to members of the Judgment Squad. No matter who they were arresting, even if that person was a witch, the special rope had the power to restrain and incapacitate up to ten individuals...or at least that's what she'd been told. I couldn't say if any of it was true.

"Okay, okay. I just have to pay you, right?"

With a sigh, I complied and handed the man three gold coins. The people of this city didn't disobey the Judgment Squad because they could all too easily imagine what would happen if they did. Put simply, they didn't want to get arrested.

"With such a powerful magic rope, won't the Judgment Squad wind up acting like tyrants?"

Later that evening, I puzzled over this question, indirectly telling my companion about the man's misdeeds.

"I saw the weird woman you're always complaining about getting fined three gold coins today by a man from the Judgment Squad," I said. "It seems like she got her just deserts. Serves her right, doesn't it? Humph!"

Isn't the balance of power unfairly weighted toward the Judgment Squad?

"Back when our organization was first established," said Sena, "its leaders believed it was necessary to be somewhat oppressive if we wanted to actually reduce crime in the city, you see. There was a time when, in order to punish the bad guys, we needed to be a little heavy-handed."

"So you're saying they're still using the same tools as back then?"

"Exactly. That rope isn't very suited to the current environment, and I almost never have to touch it. Unfortunately, I do know of coworkers who use it for no good..."

"What an awful thought," I replied. *Can't they just get rid of such things?* "But I thought there weren't any criminals left in this city?"

The current situation completely contradicted the story I'd been told when I first arrived.

I was certain the director had said all the criminals were gone. Crime was

supposed to have disappeared from the city completely. However, from what I could see, the members of the Judgment Squad spent their days going around finding fault with various residents. During my several days in the city, I'd also seen residents committing obvious crimes, like shoplifting.

How can the director say there are zero criminals in spite of all of that?

"That's an easy one," Sena said without hesitation. "Most of the people on the Judgment Squad don't report the crimes they stop people for each day."

"But you're reporting them, aren't you, Sena? When I entered this city, I was told there was zero crime."

"Heh-heh-heh." Sena laughed weakly. "I know... If they actually counted all the criminals I catch, they couldn't say that. But, well, you know..."

"Ah..."

It didn't stop with her coworkers. There were probably countless people within the organization fudging the numbers. As a result, by the time the reports reached the director's desk, the city had been transformed into a utopia, free of crime.

"That's why they find someone like me, who's going around cracking down on minor crimes, to be such a nuisance..."

"And if your coworkers can just change the number to zero, they can pocket the fine money, right?"

"Yeah..." Sena sniffled.

"That's really tough..."

"Oh, stop it... Don't be so nice to me... I'm going to cry..."

"There, there."

"Waaah!"

I stroked her head, and she immediately started crying.

When I was dressed up as the shady saleswoman, two out of three times, it was Sena who stopped me. It was obvious that she was the main person keeping order throughout the city.

“Hey! You over there! Smoking on the street is a finable offense! Stop immediately!”

For example, when she found a man puffing out billowing clouds of smoke by the roadside, she immediately ran up to him, snatched the cigarette out of his hand, and extinguished it. Then she snatched the appropriate fine from him, too.

“Heeey! You guys over there! Yeah, the ones who threw out your drinks! You have to properly dispose of the leftover liquid! In fact, if you can’t finish a drink, don’t buy it!”

For example, when she spotted some girls purchasing picture-perfect colorful drinks from a roadside stall and making a fuss over how cute they were, only to toss them into the garbage almost immediately, Sena pounced and quickly fined them.

“There are rules to be followed when demonstrating in the street! You must refrain from any activities that might inconvenience people using the road for its intended purpose! In fact, if you have a complaint, you should bring it to us directly rather than making a pointless racket in a place like this!”

As another example, when she spotted demonstrators marching in the street, she swiftly forced them to stop and made the group disperse as she collected fines from each participant.

Sena was very passionate about her job. Though I had only spent a few days in the city, I had heard her angry roars echoing in every neighborhood.

But despite her enthusiasm, people did not think very favorably of the Judgment Squad.

“You people are always such a nuisance.” The smoker had cursed at her bitterly. “Greedy wench.”

The girls who had thrown away their drinks had talked loudly about Sena after she’d departed.

“There are plenty of people doing way worse things than us!”

“She must have loads of free time if she’s going out of her way to show up

here.”

And the people participating in the demonstration had whispered and grumbled about Sena, too.

“I suppose people given authority by the state can never understand the struggles of the common people.”

“She’s nothing but a stooge.”

“Our government is corrupt because of people like her.”

“.....”

Even when she heard their various complaints, Sena didn’t pay any mind to the people’s discontent. She just kept on matter-of-factly collecting fines from them. After all, doing a job like this, she was used to being showered with criticism. Either that, or her heart was as cold as ice and made of steel. If not, I was sure she would have quit long ago. None of the criticism ever seemed to have any effect on her.

“Uuuuuugh... I can’t do it anymooore...!”

Or so I had thought. In truth, it seemed to have wounded her quite deeply. Every night, I met up with Sena to eat dinner at the same restaurant, and as soon as she saw my face, she would always collapse onto the table in anguish.

“I can’t do it...,” she would say, looking up at me from the table. Then she would whine and make the same single request. “Comfort me, please...”

“There, there.”

“Ah... I love you...”

“.....”

They seem to be working her to the bone. I’m sure anyone would want to complain.

“I wonder how I can get my work done without everyone in town hating me...?”

Just because I didn’t answer back right away, that didn’t mean I didn’t care, and it didn’t mean I wasn’t listening. I knew Sena was just an ordinary girl

shouldering a heavy burden and a difficult responsibility.

As I roughly stroked the hair of the young woman across the table from me, I finally gave her my answer.

“What if you tried changing how you think about your job on the Judgment Squad?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if you get on friendly terms with the bad guys, it might make your life a little easier.”

The reason everyone in town shunned the members of the Judgment Squad was because, compared to how it had been in the past, they no longer seemed necessary. And most of them, aside from Sena, no longer did any honest work.

Most of the organization’s current members could probably, in all honesty, be called bad guys. Considering the present situation, Sena was the odd one out.

If most people weren’t honest, then in a way, dishonesty could be considered normal.

“I can’t do that,” she replied. “It would go against my principles.”

“Is that so...? But isn’t it difficult, spending every day like this?”

“Hmm? I could spend all day with you stroking my hair. Actually, this is my favorite time of the day.”

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about...”

“.....” Looking up at me as she always did, from a completely relaxed position, she said, “There’s no way one person can clean up the whole Judgment Squad. I don’t have that kind of power by myself.” A pause, then: “So I’m waiting. If I wait patiently enough, I’m sure times will change.”

Currently, the residents of the city were shunning the Judgment Squad, and many of its members weren’t doing their jobs properly. But just as the city, which had once been full of criminals, had seen a drastic decrease in their number with the passage of time, so time was sure to resolve the present situation as well.

“I have the patience to wait until then,” Sena said, full of hopes and dreams for the future.

“I wonder about that,” I said. “Seems to me like the corruption will only get worse the more time goes by.”

“Don’t shoot me down like that.” From across the table, Sena looked up at me and puffed out her cheeks.

I’m really at a loss for what to do here. The more I got to know Sena, the worse I felt about carrying out the director’s request.

“Heeeeeeeeyyy! You just won’t learn your lesson, will you?! How many times do I have to tell you before you get it?!”

The following morning, as always, I was dressed in my disguise as the shady saleswoman when Sena stormed up to yell at me. I was already used to this exchange, which we kept repeating day after day.

Once again, Sena lectured me at length. “You’re always out here making a public nuisance of yourself. Really, how many times do I have to tell you—?” And again, I laughed it off with a smile. After she’d been at it for a while, she sighed and said, “Be more careful next time.” And with that, our latest exchange was finished. Once she’d delivered the familiar closing line, she patted me on the shoulder as always.

However, as it turned out, she wasn’t done.

“Also, here.” As if she had just remembered, Sena pulled two gold coins out of her pocket and pressed them into my hand. “I believe you had three gold coins taken from you the other day by my coworker. I’m returning the difference to you.”

I asked her about it, and she told me that after I had tattled on her coworker the other day, she had tracked down the Judgment Squad member in question and taken the money back from him.

“Of course, you were still the one in the wrong for committing fraud. But fining you three gold pieces was too much.”

“.....”

I stared down at the two gold pieces now in my hand. They were only a tiny portion of the heap of gold coins the director had given me to hand over to the Judgment Squad.

She really went out of her way to give the money back. How incredibly conscientious of her.

“Thank you very much,” I said.

What a pickle I’m in. I feel terrible deceiving such a good person.

And so I scooted up close to her and leaned in. “Here, take this,” I said, sticking a small bundle into her pocket.

“You really never learn, do you...?” Sena replied, exasperated.

But I placed an index finger to my lips and said, “Our little secret, okay?”



Not long after that, I went back to my room, gathered my things, and prepared to leave the city.

From the beginning, I hadn’t planned on staying long, and I must have done more than enough misdeeds in that time. Even the director had to be satisfied.

If I could have, I would have liked to share one final meal with Sena. But it wasn’t like I had any particular obligation to do so, and I figured it would be all right to just leave.

Still dressed like a shady saleswoman, I followed the road I’d used to enter the city all those days ago and once again met with the director of the Judgment Squad.

“Oh...and you are?”

Uh-oh, maybe he doesn’t know who I am, since I’m still in my saleswoman getup.

I removed my hood and greeted him with a bow. “I’m the traveling witch.”

“Oh, Lady Witch! I’ve been waiting for you.”

Despite showing up unannounced, without an appointment, several days after entering the city, I’d still been able to see the director in person without

any trouble.

He must not be very busy.

“Excuse me for interrupting your busy schedule,” I said.

“No, no, I don’t mind at all. Come on in, please.” The director urged me toward a table set up in the reception room. When I sat down, I saw tea and donuts laid out just as before.

But unlike my previous visit, I didn’t feel like partaking. This time, I intended to engage him in a serious conversation.

“I’ve been staying in this city for several days now,” I said, “and I’ve witnessed a variety of things.” I’d been out committing crimes at the director’s request, of course. “When I first arrived here, I was told there was no crime. But in the last few days, I’ve seen countless people carrying out innumerable misdeeds—city residents and Judgment Squad members alike.”

“Oh really? No reports have made it to me, though...”

“Do you get out of the office much?”

“Well, as director, my job is mainly desk work.”

“...Is that so?”

Well then, I have no other choice.

I nodded, then proceeded to explain to him everything that had come to light in the course of my conversations with Sena.

I told him how the Judgment Squad had lost the people’s confidence—how there were scoundrels within the organization extracting as much money as they could from the citizens and not making any reports. I told him how the existence of these bad actors was affecting those who actually took their duties seriously and how, even among the higher-ups, there were people covering up reports of crimes sent to them by hard workers lower down the chain.

I then explained how, as a result of all this, by the time reports reached him—the director—the number of crimes had been arbitrarily reduced to zero.

“It seems to me that corruption within the Judgment Squad is a bigger issue

than the apparent lack of petty crimes,” I said. “If you leave things as they are, vice will run rampant in the city.”

“Hmm...” The director considered my words. He nodded once solemnly, then asked, “By the way, Miss Witch, what became of my request that you commit petty crimes? And of the gold coins I gave you to pay the resulting fines?”

My goodness, is he ignoring everything I’ve just pointed out? Well, I suppose it doesn’t really matter to me...

“Just as you requested,” I said, “I went out and committed crimes until I used up the money I got from you. It’s all gone now. Unfortunately, I don’t have any left that I can return to you.”

“Well, that *is* strange.” The director spoke clearly, shutting me down.

Uh-oh. Could he have found out that I secretly pocketed the two gold coins Sena returned to me?

I felt a chill run down my spine as I considered this, but the director’s next words caught me by surprise.

“*No such reports have made it up to me,*” he said. “Are you sure you didn’t just pocket the money I gave you?”

Well, now. What on earth is this man trying to imply?

His words were beyond baffling, and I tilted my head in confusion. Suddenly, the door to the reception room burst open, and several members of the Judgment Squad marched in, holding their wands and rope.

Strangely enough, they were the same ones I’d seen finding fault with people around town and extorting money from them.

They surrounded me and, using their wands to control the ropes with magic, quickly tied me up. They restrained my arms and legs, and they were careful to hold my hands open so that my fingers couldn’t grip my wand. It was as if they had already decided I was some common criminal and were treating me as such.

“...What exactly is going on here?” I said as I glared at my captors. “This is no way to treat someone like me, who went out of my way to do bad things I

didn't even want to do, all at your request."

"It's come to this because you didn't do the job I requested of you, Lady Witch," the director said. "Even after you came to this city, the crime rate in town stayed exactly the same—nonexistent. None of the city's residents are out there committing crimes." He asserted that the only plausible explanation was that I had pocketed the money.

Did you listen to anything I said?

"I told you, that's because these people surrounding me have all been neglecting their reports." *In fact...* "Isn't that what I just said? Your whole organization is made up of nothing but dishonest employees like these guys, so by the time the reports reach your desk, the numbers have been artificially reduced to zero."

There was no way the entire city had no crime at all. All the crime was merely being covered up.

"What are you talking about, Lady Witch? Most of my subordinates are doing their jobs perfectly. They're sending the numbers they receive up to me, exactly as they should."

"But if that were true, you'd know crime hasn't been eliminated."

"Indeed—and that's where I come in." At this point, the director casually made his confession. "I'm the one who's been covering things up."

"Not being acknowledged is the same as not existing at all."

I see. It seems corruption within the Judgment Squad has progressed much further than I thought.



"Our organization, the Judgment Squad, was formed to eliminate crime from the city. And once all the criminals were gone, tourists started showing up in droves." As soon as I was tied up and basically defenseless, the director started calmly explaining the situation, a smug look on his face. "However, once criminals were no longer running rampant throughout the city, we were no longer able to *earn any extra money on the side*. And that created a problem."

"....."

There had probably always been a certain number of people in the Judgment Squad inclined to use their authority in wicked ways.

While their honest compatriots punished wrongdoers in the correct way, they had lurked in the shadows, using underhanded methods to line their pockets.

“So,” I said, “because you’ve been unable to turn a profit recently, you’ve started making it your business to entrap travelers. Is that it?”

“Well now, I certainly wouldn’t call it a business. All I’ve done is have my colleagues arrest a traveler who stole money from me.”

“But you asked me to go out and commit crimes.”

“Do you have any proof to back up that preposterous story?”

“.....”

“I don’t suppose you do. In this country, the Judgment Squad is the law. The law has now caught and restrained you, and you will have to answer for your crimes.”

“I see.”

Now, this is a problem.

It seemed I had underestimated the amount of authority wielded by the Judgment Squad. In this city, if they said someone was guilty, they were guilty, and people had no way to fight back.

That said, using four people to restrain me is clearly overdoing it, right?

“I thought I heard that the average mage could restrain about ten people at once with one of these ropes.” And yet they were binding me from four different directions. “Could it be that these four aren’t very skilled in magic?”

I glanced around at the faces of the four Judgment Squad members surrounding me. They were frowning at my cheap provocation, but they remained silent.

“It’s because they’re up against a witch,” the director answered for them. “They’re being extra careful, you see. They have no way of knowing what you might do to them if you get violent.”

“They don’t have to worry. With both of my hands incapacitated, I can’t use magic anyway. I have no way to fight back.” I sighed. “So what happens now?”

The director sneered. “Let me see. You’ve committed a serious theft, Lady Witch. You’ll definitely need to repay all of the money you *stole* from me, on top of the fine for your crime, of course—and we’ll have to investigate your other crimes, so you’ll be the subject of an inquiry.”

“Other crimes?”

“I’ve heard rumors that you were conducting some kind of shady business in town. When a person has committed a lot of crimes, or particularly serious ones, they are restrained so they can be investigated.”

“You mean serious criminals are put in jail, I suppose?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“And how long do your investigations usually take?”

“Well, now... They can drag on for quite a long time if someone gives false testimony or stubbornly refuses to confess. Oh, and we have to question any victims, so we’ll need enough time to do that as well.”

“And when there are a lot of people involved, I suppose that can take a pretty long time, right?”

“Naturally, yes.”

Hmm.

“Well now, that puts me in a real fix,” I said, imitating him. Then, sighing, I asked, “So while I’m under arrest, I won’t be able to leave the city, I suppose?”

“.....Hmm?”

The director had just cocked his head and looked at me as if to say, “*What on earth is this woman talking about?*” when something wrapped itself around his body like a long snake, binding him hand and foot.

By the time the director realized it was the exact same kind of rope restraining me, it had already begun winding itself around his four colleagues.

They shrieked in surprise as the rope slithered like a living creature. While

they panicked and waved their wands around, the rope restraining me gently untied itself. The first thing I did once my arms and legs were free was to relieve the others of their wands.

Once I was done, the rope cinched tight around them, as if it had been waiting for its chance. The whole thing was over in a flash.

“Looks like the bad guys got caught after all, huh?”

Thank goodness, I thought, nodding in satisfaction.

In the blink of an eye, the members of the Judgment Squad who had been abusing their authority had been arrested themselves.

This might even be enough to dispel some of the people’s misunderstandings about their organization. What a relief.

Though I hadn’t done anything myself, the situation had reached something of a conclusion. So I put on a satisfied expression as if I’d just finished a bit of hard work.

A moment later, the door to the reception room opened.

“...What exactly is going on here?”

Wearing a very, very puzzled expression, Sena stared at me intently, brandishing her wand.



I’d had my doubts as soon as I entered the city.

Unlike what the director had told me, there seemed to be an ordinary number of criminals hanging around, and other people besides me were being stopped by the Judgment Squad.

If no one was committing crimes, it should have been so peaceful that I didn’t even notice the Judgment Squad’s presence. But the state of affairs in this city was no different than anywhere else.

Criminals existed, as always, and the Judgment Squad was doing their job, as such organizations usually did. Yet the director was claiming there was no crime in the city.

I had immediately intuited that there was more to the situation than he had

let on.

My question was how the numbers were being reduced to zero. I needed some time to ascertain just how corrupt the Judgment Squad really was.

The more I listened to what Sena had to say, the more I learned about the Judgment Squad's corruption. And the more she talked, the more suspicious I became of what I had been asked to do.

Perhaps the director is planning to trick me and extract a fine?

By the time I thought of this, I had already been forced to pay fines several times for my suspicious activities. At that point, I probably should have feigned ignorance and run away, but the Judgment Squad members had those weird ropes, and if I got caught, it would all be over. And so early that morning, right before I left the city, I ran into Sena and tucked a slip of paper into her pocket.

The brief note had read, Good things will happen if you follow me in secret.

Though I was still dressed as the shady saleswoman, she had done as I asked.

"...You really are unkind, you know that?" Sena said, puffing out her cheeks and sulking.

She balled up the paper and tossed it aside. There had been an addendum to the little fortune I'd written on that slip of paper:

From the witch who has been comforting you every night.

I had figured that would be more than enough to clue her in to my real identity.

"W-wait...!" pleaded the director. Still tied up with the magic rope, he sounded desperate. "Y-you're Sena, right? Stop this nonsense at once. You've been deceived by that witch!"

But Sena only shook her head and said, "I'm very sorry, but I overheard the whole conversation. I'm afraid I'll have to investigate the details of the situation in the course of my inquiry."

She yanked her wand upward, and the rope tightened even more. Then she dragged all five of her colleagues away. The director continued to plead with her even as she hauled him out the door. He just didn't know when to give up.

“How much? How much do you want? A promotion, maybe? I’ll put in a good word for you!” He went on and on, showering her with his dubious, pathetic pleas.

“Wait, please, Sena. Listen to what I have to say, listen—” The director desperately searched for the right words to make her stop.

“I’m terribly sorry, but—” Sena smiled pleasantly, as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she turned around. “—I’m tired of waiting.”



I later heard the director and his corrupt colleagues were officially punished by the Judgment Squad’s headquarters not long after Sena arrested them.

In the investigation that followed, it was established that they had been using fraudulent means to rip off townspeople and travelers for quite some time. The more headquarters investigated, the bleaker the picture became, and eventually the townsfolk were saying that the Judgment Squad’s vices were even worse than those of the criminals who used to run rampant in the city back when the streets were unsafe.



Sena, who had exposed the misdeeds of the director and the others, received a commendation from the government.

“It sounds like they’re going to make some changes to the Judgment Squad after this.” The young woman was sitting across from me at the restaurant as usual. “In time, I’m sure this city will get better,” she said, her tone matter-of-fact.

“You think so?” I said, mostly to let her know I was listening. Something about her demeanor felt off to me. “Not going to lie down on the table today?”

Sena’s expression that day was more like the one she wore when out patrolling the city.

“Lying on the table? There’s no way I would do anything so unseemly.” She huffed and turned away. She didn’t seem to like this particular topic.

My, my.

“So you can’t act like that in front of a shady saleswoman? Is that it?”

“That’s not the issue.” Sena shook her head, then turned to look at me. “I don’t know who might be watching. I was just publicly commended, after all. I can’t very well do something unseemly.”

I see, I see.

“I guess not.” I nodded.

In this life, it is quite difficult to go unnoticed. Your actions are certain to make an impression on others. That applies to everything—the good *and* the bad. And of course, the things that are just a little embarrassing, too.

“But there is always someone watching you, you know,” I said as I touched her head, stroking it along the direction of her hair.

Sena’s eyes went wide with surprise. “Hmm? What are you doing?”

“There, there.”

“Why are you stroking my head right now?”

“There, there.”

“Did you hear anything I just said? Hey!”

“It’s our little secret, okay?”

“Heh-heh-heh”, I chuckled as I teased her.

“Good grief...” Sena looked exasperated as she rested her chin in her hands and covered her mouth. Underneath, she grinned slightly. Somehow, even as she cursed at me, I knew she wasn’t displeased.

I was certain that, just as she’d said, the city would improve. But until then, honest people like Sena would need to do a lot of hard work—a fact that mustn’t be forgotten.

That wasn’t why I was here, though. In place of parting words, I stroked her head again.

“You might convince me to stop, if you’re willing to pay,” I said.

“You really feel no remorse at all, do you?”



CHAPTER 4

The Actors' Story

Two brooms were flying side by side across the plains.

A chilly breeze blew between me and my teacher. It gusted through the bright spring sunshine and dove between the flowers, rustling through the grass noisily.

My goodness, this is wonderful. I wish times like these could go on forever, I thought as I gazed at my teacher.

"I see. So you wish times like this, when we're flying on our brooms across the plains, could go on forever, don't you? Well, well. Do you feel anything else, Fran? How do you picture our next destination? What does my face look like to you, I wonder?"

With her ash-colored hair fluttering in the wind, my teacher turned to look at me. She smiled faintly as she ran her pen across some paper.

I was at a loss for how to answer her. *Can I just say she looks as pretty as she always does?*

"Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh. If you think I look as pretty as I always do, that means you think I'm always pretty...? I'm blushing..."

My teacher, who was as moody as the spring breeze, had a tendency to make sudden whimsical proposals I didn't entirely understand. That day, she had asked me, "How are you feeling right now? Tell me, please."

So I had been telling her my impressions as they came to me. However—

"I don't think the spring breeze is particularly moody. The expression you used just now wasn't quite right."

"....."

—even though she was the one who asked me to tell her how I felt, she constantly interrupted me with her criticism. It was very typical of her.

My teacher is so coldhearted... She's as cold as the spring breeze.

My teacher sighed dramatically. “Come now, I’m just telling the truth...”

“What are you after anyway...?” I followed her lead and sighed as well. “I don’t understand what you want from me, Miss.”

If I could get her to tell me what kind of words she wanted me to say, I might be able to think of something. But without any guidance, how was I supposed to give her the right impressions?

She shook her head at me. “There wouldn’t be any point to that. What I want are your candid impressions of this moment.”

“Why do you want that?”

“.....” My teacher hesitated, then said, “Right now, I’m working on a novel, but I haven’t been able to capture the feelings one has at the beginning of a journey.”

A novel?

“Please let me read it,” I said.

“Oh, no. It’s not finished yet.”

“Then you’ll let me read it when you’re done?”

“Yes. So help me out, please.” My teacher smiled, narrowing her eyes. “Now, what kind of things are you thinking at this very moment?”

“Let me see. I’m thinking I want to read the story my teacher is writing as soon as possible.”

“Do people often tell you that you’re not very accommodating?”

“But what do you need to ask me for, when you’re a traveler yourself, Miss? Can’t you just think back on how you felt when you were younger and you’d just started traveling?”

My teacher shrugged in exasperation. “Fran. To us travelers, the word *travel* encompasses an entire lifestyle. From moments like these when we’re on the move to the time we spend eating at our destination, or when we’re asleep or zoning out at an inn—every little thing about our lives is all *travel*.”

“But according to the dictionary, *travel* is moving from one place to another

or going on a trip.”

“Do people often tell you that you’re not very accommodating?”

“No, no one’s ever said anything like that to me before.”

“What a surprise that on top of everything else, you’ve got a poor memory, too.”

“So, Miss, what do you need me for, if your whole life is about traveling?”

“Well, since I’ve been traveling for a long time now, I’ve forgotten the fresh feeling one has at the beginning of their journey.”

I see.

“In other words,” I said, “I’m not the only one with a poor memory...?”

“It’s been a lot longer for me, okay...?” my teacher answered, sounding fed up.

At any rate, that was apparently why she was interviewing me. “So then, what are you thinking now?” my teacher asked me again.

“I’m thinking I’d like to get to our next destination soon. I’m in pretty high spirits.”

After I’d spoken, my teacher repeated, “Wants to get to the next destination quickly, and in high spirits...” She ran her pen over the page, muttering to herself, “Come to think of it, when I first started traveling, I also...”

Instead of watching my teacher, who was focused on her writing, I fixed my gaze on the end of my broom.

Across the plain, I could see a group of buildings so small that it seemed like I would lose sight of them if I looked away for even a single second. They had an awfully forlorn air about them. I got the feeling they weren’t part of a city, but rather a village.

“...We’ll be there soon.”

I hadn’t been lying to my teacher. I was, in fact, in high spirits as I gazed at the silhouette of the settlement up ahead.

Our destination had both an official name as well as a more widely known

colloquial name. I thought the latter must be in greater use among travelers and merchants. It was a little over-the-top and sounded kind of dubious. But the colloquial name was sure to draw any traveler's interest.

Keeping my eyes focused on what lay ahead, so as not to lose sight of our destination, I mumbled its name.

Rekion, Land of Actors.

Also known as the Country of Stories.



My teacher told me she had learned of this place some time ago.

"Hey, missy, there's an interesting country not far from here. Are you curious? It's called Rekion, Land of Actors."

Once, when my teacher was eating alone in a restaurant, some ne'er-do-well told her all about it.

"This Country of Stories—well, lemme tell you, it's a real neat place. Even the guards' greeting at the gate is unbelievable."

As the man told her this and other things, he pushed a map with the place's location marked into my teacher's hands, then demanded a fee.

However, my teacher had never gone to find the place marked on the map. She completely forgot about paying for the map and headed to a different destination entirely.

It seemed odd for my teacher to immediately forget about a place that promised to be so interesting, but it appeared her memory of the interaction in the restaurant had long since faded.

And then, the other day—

"Hey, ladies, there's a strange country not far from here..."

—my teacher and I were having a meal when yet another strange man came over and spoke to us. At that point, my teacher recalled that she had purchased the map long ago. And so, several years after first learning of it, she finally turned her broom toward the Country of Stories.

Well, well. I wonder what kind of place this Rekion, Land of Actors—this

Country of Stories—could be?

“Welcome to Rekion, Land of Actors! In this Country of Stories, our residents are all stars, supporting actors, and members of the audience! We welcome your visit from the bottom of our hearts!”

Right.

As one might imagine from the self-proclaimed Country of Stories, even the immigration check was unconventional.

First, as soon as we arrived at the gates, one of the guards there took a knee before us and began describing his home in enthusiastic song. The man was excessively energetic, despite the early hour. We, on the other hand, kept straight faces throughout. I immediately sensed a difference in our enthusiasm so profound that it made my head spin.

“Pardon the delay,” he said at length. “I am the enthusiastic gate guard, and I will be responsible for your immigration check.”

Then we answered the guard’s simple questions, giving our names, the intended length of our stay, our purpose for visiting, and so on and so forth. My teacher answered first, telling him that we planned to stay for about two nights and three days in order to satisfy our curiosity.

“My name is Fran,” I said. “My intended length of stay and the purpose for my visit are the same as hers.”

The guard said, “Excellent!” and nodded vigorously. He then ushered us through the gate and handed us a pair of round golden badges with the day’s date written on them. “Now then, if both of you ladies would please put these someplace that others can easily see them.”

My teacher cocked her head, clearly wondering what they were.

Answering her unspoken question, the guard said, “We call those guest badges. We ask that you wear them to distinguish yourselves from the actors who live here.”

As the gate guard had told us at the beginning, everyone who lived there was a star, a supporting actor, and a member of the audience. However, it would be

unfair to assign these roles to tourists. Thus, they handed out badges so everyone could see that we were simply visitors.

With no reason to refuse, we readily agreed and pinned the badges to our lapels.

“You should also be aware,” said the guard, “that our country has a number of rules, and should you break any, you will be subject to fines. So please be careful.”

Because everyone in the country was an actor, it was probably natural to have a strictly enforced set of rules. They had to protect the actors, after all. The gate guard informed us of the rules we had to obey as spectators, such as “Don’t demand actors’ autographs” and “Don’t make absurd requests of the actors.”

And—

“Once you’ve entered, your stay mustn’t exceed the number of days that you initially declared.” We were told this was a rule by which all tourists must abide.

I had tensed up when I heard that fines were involved, but all the rules presented to us seemed like ordinary common sense. And so both my teacher and I readily agreed to comply.

“Excellent!”

And with that, we managed to enter the Country of Stories.



We walked down the broad main avenue paved with rugged cobblestones.

According to the stories we had heard, this country had long ago fallen to ruin and been abandoned, only to be repopulated by actors from the surrounding lands who turned it into a place to practice their skills.

But the history of the region itself went back much, much further than Rekion. Perhaps for that reason, everything in town looked weathered and old, and from the street, we could see many ancient buildings covered in moss.

I suppose you could say the place had the staid atmosphere of a museum.

“.....”

However, the people populating the city were anything but staid.

“Why, you! Waaait!”

“You idiot! As if anyone would actually wait just because you said so!”

Along the main avenue, two fully grown adults were zooming around atop brooms, making a racket like a couple of kids. One of them, wearing a sign on his back that read, *THE FUGITIVE*, collided forcefully with a roadside stall displaying neat rows of fruits before fleeing into the crowd.

“Aaagh! My shop!”

The proprietor of the roadside stall screamed. The road was awash in reds and oranges and yellows.

“Are you all right, miss?!” As soon as the first man was gone, another young fellow appeared out of nowhere and joined the stall’s proprietor in gathering up the fruits.

THE BEGINNINGS OF LOVE, read another signboard placed next to them. As I watched, wondering what was going on, their hands met over a piece of fruit, and they both blushed bright red.

“Ah, s-sorry...!”

“N-no, it’s my fault!”

I averted my gaze from this dramatic series of developments, but there again, some other story was unfolding. And when I looked in a different direction, I found yet another.

Stories were taking place everywhere throughout town.

“So this is the Country of Stories...!”

I felt my spirits lift at the spectacle.

“Now I get it,” mumbled my teacher. In contrast to me, she sounded rather indifferent as she scribbled in her notebook. “I suppose they did say everyone was a star, a supporting actor, and a member of the audience.”

When I tilted my head inquisitively, my teacher pointed down the road with her pen. “It seems the actors here are like street performers. They earn money a little at a time by performing all over town.”

Down the road from us, I saw a man and a woman embracing openly and passionately without a care for what others might think. I wanted to turn away from the awkward scene, but looking closer, I spotted a sign beside the two of them reading TWO PEOPLE IN LOVE with a small can sitting right below it.

Passersby would stop to watch and, if they judged it a good performance, would toss a few coins into the can.

“The people here seem to be helping each other improve their acting abilities by offering praise for each other’s performances.”

That must be what they mean by “everyone is a star, a supporting actor, and a member of the audience.”

To the people here, performing was just a part of life.

“Ahh! What a wonderful day it is! Welcome, all!”

Right.

We decided to head to a café next, and a waitress showed us to our seats while dancing around in circles, as if the whole world was overflowing with wonder.

On the waitress’s chest hung a board with the mysterious words SHELTERED SHOP GIRL and a little can hanging off the board.

Then another customer called out to the waitress and tossed a coin into the can.

“What a great performance! All right, next I want to see a Gloomy Shop Girl!”

At that, the woman who had been laughing and dancing around like a broken toy quickly rewrote the words on her sign. Suddenly, her shoulders drooped, and she hung her head dramatically. Now she looked broken in a very different way. “.....Why, oh why am I working in a place like this...? I just want to die...,” she muttered and sighed.

This quieted down the restaurant somewhat, and my teacher and I raised our hands to summon the waitress and ordered our meals.

“Two orders of this pasta here.”

My teacher pointed to the pasta dish at the very top of the menu. She and I both understood that, in a place like this, you couldn't go wrong as long as you stuck to the recommended dishes.

The waitress, whose personality was completely different than when we'd arrived, peered down at the menu and wrote herself a note, then cocked her head slightly.

"Is that all...?" she asked, gazing gloomily down at us.

"That's all..."

"I'm not really all that hungry," my teacher explained.

"You won't regret it...? You're sure...?"

"I don't think we will..."

"Very well... That's too bad... Too, too bad... Heh-heh-heh-heh..."

After trying a strange sales tactic on my teacher, the waitress sighed deeply and left our table.

As I wondered what on earth I had just witnessed, I looked down at the menu again. Not only did it list a selection of food and drinks, but when I took a closer look, I saw a column in one corner listing ENTERTAINMENTS.

"...I wonder if she wanted us to order some of this as well?"

In addition to the SHELTERED SHOP GIRL and GLOOMY SHOP GIRL we had already seen, there were also HOT-TEMPERED SHOP GIRL and SHOP GIRL WHO DOESN'T HAVE A SHRED OF MOTIVATION, as well as SHOP GIRL TRYING AS HARD AS SHE CAN TO PLEASE EVERYONE, SHOP GIRL WITH SUCH A SOUR DISPOSITION YOU CAN'T HELP BUT THINK SHE LOOKS DOWN ON THE REST OF THE WORLD, and LONG-SUFFERING SHOP GIRL WHO IS STARVED FOR AFFECTION DESPITE BEING A PEOPLE PLEASER WHO IS PLEASANT TO ANYONE AND EVERYONE, along with other options with surprisingly rich variety. Not only were there plenty of choices, they were also all very specific. It was enough to make me wonder if this café was really about food at all.

Ultimately, we ate our pasta while watching the waitress, who kept amusingly changing personalities every time another customer called her over.

"Nothing special about the taste, is there?" my teacher said, following the

waitress with her eyes as she chewed.

“Nothing special about the price either,” I agreed, counting the money left in my wallet.

Once our bellies were full, we went for a walk around town, and once again we spotted people holding up signs.

A MAGNIFICENT MAN, read one sign next to a man holding a pose.

If I had seen him anywhere else, I would have assumed he was just a run-of-the-mill kook, but here, among countless similar scenes, it seemed perfectly normal.

“I’ve already gotten used to this,” said my teacher.

“I know what you mean,” I agreed. “By the way, what do you think is so magnificent about that man?”

“Maybe it’s his face?”

Exchanging idle chatter, we walked right past the Magnificent Man or whatever he was.

But immediately after we passed—

“Are you really callin’ yourself a ‘magnificent man’ just ‘cause your face is a little above average?!”

“What’s that expression anyway? Are you supposed to be clever or cool? Pick one and be clear about it!”

“You better rethink your whole act!”

—loud voices rang out behind us.

When we turned back around, the man who had been standing next to the sign reading A MAGNIFICENT MAN was being pelted with fruits, vegetables, little stones, and anything and everything else in reach.

After politely dropping their money into the man’s can, people would angrily shout things like “Quit messing around!” Their behavior seemed to indicate that as long as they paid their money, they felt like they could treat him any way they pleased.

In response to the people's fierce attacks, the man let out a very unattractive groan that did not suit his handsome face at all and collapsed to the ground.

So this is a "Magnificent Man," hmm?

"What do you suppose is so magnificent about him?" I asked again.

"Goodness, you can't tell, Fran?"

"Do you know, Miss?"

"It's his face."

Immediately after she answered me, a pie hit the man, covering his features.

"What's so magnificent about it?"

"....." After staying silent for a few moments, my teacher cleared her throat. "Are you listening, Fran? The man keeps standing there, perfectly calm, even as he receives all sorts of abuse from the people around him, right? What do you think we can deduce from this situation?"

"I can't deduce anything."

"Oh-hoh. You've still got a long way to go." My teacher put on a smug expression and proceeded to act like our whole conversation hadn't happened. "Look at that man. He's not fighting back at all. He must be a true philanthropist. No matter what anyone does to him, he never responds in kind. His willpower alone makes him 'magnificent.'"

"That doesn't seem right to me."

I think he's just receiving normal criticism...

As I grew exasperated with my teacher, an old woman I'd never seen before showed up out of nowhere and interrupted us.

"Hee-hee-hee," she laughed, a know-it-all look on her face. "In this town, those who can't fulfill their duties all suffer the same treatment."

"You seem to know a lot, ma'am."

"Oh-hoh, are you curious, young lady?"

I nodded, and the old woman said, "Hee-hee-hee. Well then, let me tell you."

Sounding incredibly shady, she began to explain, “This is a land of actors, you see. We praise skillful performances and heckle lousy ones. By doing so, our wonderful actors encourage each other to improve around the clock. That’s how we started polishing our craft.”

According to the old woman, who had appeared out of nowhere and seemed to enjoy explaining things, this was a wonderful place where everyone worked together to refine their acting skills. At the same time, it was a place where terrible actors were thoroughly abused.

Everyone who lived here was an actor, and their job was to entertain the audience. Everyone seemed to believe that if an actor couldn’t do their job, it was only natural to heckle them.

“I see, I see.” I nodded and turned back to the “Magnificent Man.” “That means the man over there—”

“He’s just being bashed, that’s all.”

“You hear that, Miss?”

“.....” My teacher puffed out her cheeks childishly. “Well, I guess that’s one way of looking at it,” she said before abruptly turning away.

She’s pouting...

“Remember this well,” said the old woman. “This is the Country of Stories. We’re an unsparing bunch, and people who can’t fulfill their roles are quickly weeded out.”

“Seems that way,” I said, turning back to look at the once-handsome man.

“Dammit...,” the man grumbled as he took money out of his wallet. He reached out and handed it to someone dressed exactly like the guard who had conducted our immigration check. I hadn’t even noticed him arrive.

“Confirmed, I have accepted the penalty fee,” the guard announced indifferently.

Hmmmm?

“What’s going on there?” I asked the old woman who liked explaining things.

This must have been a fairly common sight. Without the least bit of surprise, the old woman nodded and said, “It’s exactly as it looks. Those who fail to fulfill their roles must pay a fine.”

Then, almost as an afterthought, the old woman turned a sign toward us that read, OLD LADY WHO LIKES EXPLAINING THINGS. She held it up, along with a can, so we could see it.

.....

At that point, I suddenly had a thought.

If the actors’ role was to entertain the audience, then what on earth was the role of the audience?

“Excuse me, you two. Could I have a moment of your time?”

Hands clapped down on my and my teacher’s shoulders. We turned around and saw a man in uniform.

Looking at us coldly, he asked, “We’ve gotten some complaints from the residents. Have the two of you paid any money to the actors? *Have you been fulfilling your role as audience members?*”



From the moment we entered the country’s gates up until the present, we had seen a lot of performances from a lot of actors, but neither my teacher nor I had paid out a single cent.

We had decided all on our own that the cans were a way of asking for tips—something we had often seen street performers do in other cities. But here, when an actor put on a performance, it was mandatory to pay them, and those who didn’t were penalized.

That’s unreasonable.

It was beyond unreasonable. But as they say, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” The moment those hands came down on our shoulders, we had no other choice but to pay.

“We’ve been had...,” I muttered.

The people of this country probably had no problem paying anyone who put

on a performance in the street. After all, since everyone who lived there was an actor, they could make money quickly simply by putting up a signboard.

But tourists like us had no means of making money. In other words, the longer we stayed, the more money we'd be flushing down the drain.

"Fran, we're leaving immediately."

"You're right, Miss. This place is no good; it's a country of fraudsters."

My teacher and I realized we had been tricked and were ready to leave. Paying out coin after coin to the people putting on performances along the main avenue, we walked back out the way we had come.

But we weren't able to leave.

"Wait a moment, please! You applied to stay two nights and three days, so I can't permit you to go just yet!"

A gate guard stopped us, blowing his shrill little whistle.

When we'd first entered, we had promised to stay a certain number of days, as that was one of the rules tourists had to follow.

According to the guard, we weren't allowed to be there for too short or too long a time.

"We've really been had...", said my teacher.

"In other words, this whole thing's been a trap, from the moment we walked through the gates...?"

Apparently, this was a terrible place for travelers, merchants, and other tourists. As long as you were there, they kept taking your money, and they wouldn't even allow you to leave.

For the remaining two nights and three days of our visit, my teacher and I were surrounded by performances from morning till night. To keep our expenses as low as possible, we decided not to leave our hotel room except at mealtimes, but even so, there were performances taking place all across town.

"Now that it's come to this, in order to get our money's worth, we're watching to the very end, Fran."

My teacher began to stubbornly watch every performance with intense concentration, her pen running over the pages of her notebook. It seemed that, since we were stuck paying for it, she wanted to preserve every detail in her records.

“Are you sure you’re not enjoying yourself, Miss?”

“Certainly not,” she answered, sighing.

Shortly after that, my teacher had a flash of inspiration. “If I cover my eyes, I won’t be able to watch their performances, will I...?”

Her idea was nothing short of genius, and she immediately covered both her eyes with a strip of cloth. “Heh-heh-heh... Now no one will be able to charge me a cent.”

However, not long after that, a woman came up to us and began reciting, “Long, long ago, in a place not so far from here—”

My teacher’s genius idea was easily defeated by a simple vocal performance.

“Well, she got me there...”

“Are you *sure* you’re not enjoying this, Miss?”

“Certainly not.”

At any rate, we survived our remaining two nights and three days in the Country of Stories, and then we departed.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh...”

My teacher turned to look back at the place as it faded into the distance and smiled atop her broom, seeming very, very pleased.

Her grin looked positively wicked.



Now, allow me to take a moment and turn back to something that happened before we made our way to the Country of Stories.

“Hey there, ladies. Let me tell you about a strange place not too far from here —”

While my teacher and I were eating, a strange man approached us.

He identified himself as a traveler and told us about a strange, awful country in the region that was full of fraudsters—a place called Rekion, Land of Actors.

According to him, it was a hellish place filled with traps from the moment you entered. No matter what kind of traveler or merchant you were, he said, your purse would be emptied before you could leave.

“Rekion, Land of Actors...? Oh!”

In the middle of the man’s story, my teacher clapped her hands as if she’d just remembered something. “Come to think of it...” Apparently, she had purchased a map to Rekion a long time ago.

“You bought a map but never visited?” I asked.

“It sounded kind of dubious.” Continuing to listen to the man’s story, she added, “Seems like I made the right choice not to go.”

The man kept going on about how his money had been stolen. “Do what you can to spread this tale to countries far and wide!” he pleaded earnestly. “So that there won’t be more victims like me!”

My teacher cocked her head. “By the way, how was your money taken in Rekion, Land of Actors? Could you elaborate?”

“I fell victim to an awful scam—”

“What kind of scam?”

“Huh? A scam is a scam. Nothing more and nothing less. Anyway, if you two could please distribute these maps to restaurants and hotels nearby. I want to make sure that no one goes to Rekion, Land of Actors...”

When my teacher asked him for details, the man avoided her questions. Instead, he handed us a bundle of maps with the exact location of Rekion, Land of Actors marked on them. Then he went to another table where other travelers were in the middle of their meals and launched into his story about the terrible place known as Rekion, Land of Actors all over again.

Watching the man’s back as he left, my teacher said, “Sounds kind of suspicious, huh?”

This man was obviously an associate of the shady individual my teacher had

met all those years earlier. Back then, it made sense that she'd been on guard and decided not to visit the place.



But the following day, pen and notebook in hand, my teacher suggested that we head for the very place the man had been talking about.

“You want to go, even though the man said it was awful?”

At this, my teacher nodded, as if the answer was obvious.

“I want to see for myself just how awful it is.”

How pathetic we humans are. The more criticism something receives, the more our interest grows. The more people tell us to look away, the faster we turn our heads to see.

“Besides,” my teacher said, wearing a bold smile, “if they’re still in the same business, they must be making a fair amount of money.”



“Then Niche compiled everything she had seen and heard about the Country of Stories into little booklets and distributed them far and wide. In one place, she passed out booklets that sang the praises of the Country of Stories, while in another, she went around selling ones that disparaged it, claiming they provided useful information. The people who read Niche’s booklets wanted to know where the Country of Stories was, but she never told anyone the location.”

“Huh? Why not?”

I remember peering at the book spread out in my mother’s hands, blocking her view as she recited the tale to me.

The Adventures of Niche.

I’d loved this book ever since I was small.

“Why didn’t she tell the people where it was?” I asked.

When I was young, I had absolutely no understanding of Niche’s true motives.

My mother answered me with a smile. “People would be interested in it, whether it was a good place or a bad place, don’t you think? So Niche decided to make people believe the Country of Stories didn’t even exist.”

Frankly speaking, the stories in the booklets Niche distributed were far more

dubious than even the information the suspicious men gave out along with their maps.

The more Niche distributed her writings, the more rumors spread of her suspicious activities. Before she knew it, those rumors transformed into a story about a witch trying to make money by selling books about a country that didn't exist.

"And then? What happened then?" I pressed, full of excitement and eager to hear the next part of the story.

My mother smiled fondly at her impatient little daughter and said, "The people from the Land of Actors didn't like that she was spreading such rumors, you see, and they made a tearful appeal to Niche."

If people didn't come from the outside world to the Land of Actors, their scam wouldn't make any money. It was already a small, obscure little country. If people started to believe that it didn't even exist, its residents would be in real trouble.

At the time, I was a good, purehearted little girl, and I was indignant that they would make such a proposal.

"But the people of the Land of Actors were bad people, right?" I insisted. "They were so selfish!"

"They were—but Niche decided to accept their proposal."

"Huh? Why?!"

At the time, I had been very, very disappointed that Niche would agree to help such bad people! Back then, I was still pure, and I found this twist quite shocking.

As my mother stroked my head to calm me down, she said, "Don't worry, now. You see, by the time the people from the Land of Actors made their proposal to Niche, everyone had long been convinced that the country wasn't real."

"So then," Niche answered them," my mother said with a slightly wicked expression, "if you give me money, I'll keep quiet about it."

Starting now...



CHAPTER 5

Their Own Private World

“It’s so sad.”

The man was utterly powerless before the tragedy that had befallen him.

His lover had been killed by a mage. Every bone in her body had been broken, and her corpse had been torn to shreds.

It was supposed to be prohibited for mages to enter the small city of Astikitos. Regardless, a murderer had somehow appeared in town one day and committed the terrible crime. The culprit had cut down a young woman as if in sport, as if testing the sharpness of a new knife, and then just as suddenly, they had disappeared.

After the woman’s cold-blooded murder, hatred toward mages in the small city of Astikitos grew. The Security Corps were held responsible for letting the culprit get away, and the authorities began to crack down even more on mages trying to enter the city.

But none of that was going to bring back the man’s lover. What he had lost could never be restored.

“It’s so sad,” he mumbled again.

Why did she have to die?

“.....”

Creta stood alone behind him, staring at his back.

She couldn’t find the right words to say to him as he stood, motionless, before his beloved’s grave.

What could she possibly say to the colleague she admired, in the face of his grief? Creta had known him and his beloved well.

The two of them had talked about getting married after graduating from school. They had always been together. Creta knew the depth of their bond, and thinking about it made her chest hurt.

She had always watched over them from a distance. And so she knew that no matter what she said, it would only cause the man more pain.

All she could do now was make a vow upon his grief—a vow to never let such sorrow come into the world again.



Outside the window, rain poured down incessantly.

That day, a third victim had surfaced in the small city of Astikitos.

Just like the previous two, the victim was a city official, and the same methods had been used in the crime. It was like someone was copying the earlier murders, or perhaps the perpetrator was merely mocking the Security Corps that had been assigned to investigate.

From the state of the body, it was obvious that magic had been used. The victim had been tucked into bed, *and then the bed had been folded entirely in half*. There were also countless stab wounds covering the body and evidence that the killer had repeatedly tortured their victim.

No one had heard any screams or other noises. This particular incident only came to light when the housekeeper went to wake up the victim in the morning and discovered their corpse.

The night before had been quiet, considering the victim had been tortured, and there was clearly too little blood staining the bedsheets. The authorities surmised that the official had been tortured someplace else, then brought back to the bedroom and folded up in the broken bed.

“Eugh...”

A new recruit with the Security Corps clapped both hands over her mouth, trying to hold down an uncomfortable feeling forcing its way up her throat.

She looked around as tears welled up in her eyes and met the gaze of one of her senior officers.

Over the past month, there had been two other murders, committed in the same way. Creta had thrown up at both those crime scenes.

“You can go ahead and puke.” With a sigh, her senior officer pushed her back,

urging her to leave the area.

“Sorry...!”

Creta quickly headed away from the corpse while trying not to disturb anything and made it to the bathroom in time to throw up. No matter how many times she visited the scene of a brutal murder, she never got used to it.

“Not again...not again...” Discomfort swirled in the pit of her stomach. Her body wouldn’t stop trembling. “Not another murder caused by a mage...”

She wasn’t sure whether she was reacting to the sight of the crime scene or to the fear and anger she felt toward the mage who did it.

She simply wasn’t sure.



“Here in our home of Astikitos, as a general rule, mages are prohibited.”

In the course of my travels, I had been to several places that refused to admit mages. In most cases, someone like me—dressed in a black robe and pointed hat, sporting the star-shaped brooch that proved I was a witch, and generally looking undeniably witchy—would be turned away at the gate.

However, for some reason, when I arrived at the city gates of Astikitos, they let me in. They first explained their policy of prohibiting mages, then asked me to wait a moment. After a little while, they showed me through.

“It must have been quite an ordeal traveling through this rain. Ordinarily, we wouldn’t permit you to enter, but this is a special case. Please come this way.”

In my opinion, it had been more of an ordeal to be left waiting in the rain for reasons unknown than to travel through it. But I kept that thought to myself.

And so, with a gloomy feeling in my heart to match the weather, I followed my guide into a reception room.

“You’re the traveling witch, are you?” asked an old man. “Please come in. You’re younger than I expected.”

Though he said he was surprised, no emotion showed on the man’s face. He introduced himself as the director general of the Security Corps and welcomed me with donuts and tea.

Donuts and tea... I've been seeing these a lot lately...

"Thank you very much," I said. With gratitude, I sat down in front of the director general and made myself abundantly clear. "I'd like to go ahead and get something out of the way. If you're only letting me into your city to commit crimes, I'm going to have to decline."

"Surely there's no government official anywhere who would request something like that," the director general replied, dismissing my words with a smile.

You'd be surprised how recently one did just that.

"So then, what business do you have with me?" I tilted my head and urged him to continue.

"Take a look at this," the director general said, setting a pile of documents down on the table, many with photographs attached.

"....."

The documents were files concerning a number of ghastly incidents. The pictures showed men in the prime of their lives lying dead, folded up inside their beds. According to the documents, all the victims were city officials who had been murdered in the last month.

They had died with their faces so twisted up in fear that they bore little resemblance to their portraits taken while alive. I could tell from the wounds carved all over their bodies that they hadn't merely been crushed but had also been carved up by a sharp blade.

"These are..."

What in the world?

When I looked up from the files, the director general began to explain, his tone matter-of fact. "Mages are strictly prohibited from entering our city. As you might imagine, there isn't a single mage living in town. The presence of a mage who can so easily commit murder is a threat to our entire city."

And yet it was obvious from the materials I had been handed that a magic user had committed these acts.

“Apparently, this threat has been lurking in our city for the past month. We have no idea where they might have come from or if they have simply been keeping themselves hidden until now, but...that doesn’t change the fact that they are a threat. And I’m ashamed to admit this, but we don’t have the strength to face a mage and emerge unscathed.”

“...If a mage committed these crimes, then why not ask for help from an organization that specializes in such things?”

“Do you mean the United Magic Association?” The director general frowned. “We can’t afford to put ourselves in their debt.”

“So you thought you would use an unknown traveling mage as a disposable weapon?”

“Now, I didn’t say that...”

But the implication was there.

If they got an outsider to confront this violent murderer, then their Security Corps wouldn’t have to face the mage head-on, and fewer people were likely to get hurt. I was no fool, so I could infer their intentions from the circumstances.

Only slightly apologetic, the director general continued his explanation. “All I would ask of you, Lady Witch, is to subdue the offending mage should they grow violent. We will handle everything else ourselves, from the investigation to the arrest.”

“In other words, I will be your secret weapon, when push comes to shove?”

“How about it?” the director general asked.

I gazed out the window. The downpour didn’t seem likely to stop anytime soon.

Would I rather wander around outside in the heavy rain or stay in this city for a while?

Which is the right choice, I wonder?

After thinking it over for a little while, I gave my answer.

“All right then, I’ll do it.”

“Thank you very much.” The director general nodded, though he didn’t look particularly happy. “Well then, I’ll bring in the officer who will be working with you, Lady Witch. Before I get back, please change into ordinary clothes that don’t identify you as a mage.”

Despite my agreeing to help them solve a murder case, they weren’t going to let me forget this was a special exception. It seemed there would be an officer of the Security Corps by my side at all times, shadowing me for the duration of my stay.

I’m being treated like a criminal, even though I haven’t done anything wrong.

Just as he was about to leave the office, the director general seemed to remember something and turned around. “Also, I must ask that you keep these incidents strictly confidential unless otherwise instructed. No matter who you meet in town, please don’t say a word to them about these murders.”

I tilted my head questioningly.

“Have you not made any public announcements about the killings?” I asked.

“Of course not,” the director general quickly replied. *“If people knew there was a mage prowling around town, the city would fall into a panic.”*



By the time I had changed into some simple garments, the officer assigned to follow me had arrived.

“My name is Creta, and I’m an officer in the Security Corps. I am supposed to stay with you from now on. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

Creta appeared to be around my age, and according to her, she was a new recruit. Her shoulder-length hair was black, but on the underside, where no light hit it, it appeared to be the same dark green as her eyes. She wore a black uniform, and a rifle hung from her shoulder. Her expression was stiff as she gave me a formal salute. She looked nervous and wary.

“I’m sure you’ve already heard all this from the director general, but basically, you are to remain with me at all times, Lady Witch. You mustn’t leave my side, no matter what.”

“Well, I don’t think I could even if I wanted to.”

Bracelets had been fitted around one of my wrists and one of hers, connecting the two of us with a chain. Judging by its length, I didn't think I could get any farther than about three long strides away from her.

"Be careful to avoid doing anything that might make us look suspicious," she said.

I'm certain these bracelets already make us look plenty suspicious.

I suspected the director was telling the truth about there being no other mages in the city. Although the bracelets kept me tied to Creta, I could still use my fingers freely. If I wanted to use magic, I could do so at any time. It seemed they knew very little about how mages worked.

"I'll be on my best behavior," I said, nodding casually. "At any rate, it's nice to be working with you." I took one step closer to her.

"Eep...!"

She drew back immediately and assumed a defensive posture. It appeared she had moved on reflex, as if she'd just seen a black bug scuttle out from under something.

.....

"Be careful to avoid doing anything that might make us look suspicious yourself," I said.

I'm beginning to worry about where this is going.

Come to think of it, I wonder why mages are forbidden from entering this city?

When we left the office and stepped outside, Creta put up an umbrella and walked off without even making eye contact with me.

"For now," she said, "I'm going to show you to my house, so please come with me."

Under the pouring rain, I was greeted by rows of houses built from worn, old bricks.

"What a lovely town," I remarked as I tried to keep up with Creta.

It would be even better if the sun was shining, though.

Without even looking at me, Creta spoke into the rain. “In the history of our city, only mages have ever committed such serious crimes. Their offenses will never be forgotten. You see, before I was even born, when my parents were still children, mages from a foreign land invaded our city and attacked many innocent people.”

She said the mages had attacked countless homes, killed those who stood up to them, looted anything of monetary value, and finally, they’d attacked and abducted *anyone who seemed useful* and stolen them away from the city.

Apparently, the world had been a more dangerous place in those days, and there had been a band of mages going from country to country, doing everything they could to fulfill their own selfish desires.

Fortunately, through an alliance of neighboring states, the band of mages was eventually defeated. But in the small city of Astikitos, a deep fear of mages had been indelibly etched into the public consciousness.

All the mages living in the city in those days had been ostracized due to the acts of their peers and eventually decided to move away. Soon after, the last mage left the city.

“That’s why, since long, long ago, we have strictly forbidden mages from entering our city.” Still with her back to me, Creta mumbled her words as if she was talking to herself. “Both the director general and I were opposed to allowing a mage into our city. Because mages are not human.”

“.....”

“The reason we decided to turn to a mage for help—and allowed you entry into the city—was an order from high up in the government. This is the second time in our history that a mage has snuck into our city. The first time was four years ago. And this is the second time. This time, without fail, we will not let the mage get away. We will take them down,” Creta continued muttering. “Four years ago, we failed to catch the culprit... It’s just like a mage to worm their way in, even though we banned them a long time ago.”



“You’re talking like we’re some sort of noxious pest...”

“Listen, we allowed you to enter as a special exception. It was either you, or let the United Magic Association dispatch a different mage. The Security Corps only had two options.”

“So you’re saying the better option was to let me into the city? I see.” I nodded. “Your city’s top brass seem to be more flexible than you folks on the ground.”

Pitting mage against mage. A very logical decision, I think.

“They just want proof that something is being done. They’re far away from the danger and can say whatever they want.”

“.....”

So at the end of the day, you’re saying: “I don’t have any intention of making friends with a noxious pest like you.” How unfriendly!

“We will supply you with the necessary food and housing. But you are not to meddle under any circumstances.”

“Got it.”

If that’s what you want, that’s what I’ll do. In short, I’m just here to hang out, is that it? Well, that works out great for me. Slacking off is my specialty, you know?

“Hmm? Oh, if it isn’t Creta! What are you doing in a place like this?”

Right after our gloomy exchange had convinced me to mind my own business, a man approached us from across the street. Lifting up his umbrella, he eyed us curiously.

He looked to be in his early twenties—fairly tall, with a slim build. Perhaps due to the dampness in the air, his hair was a wild swirl of curls, twisting this way and that. He was dressed casually, but I couldn’t see a single crease or speck of dirt in his shirt or slacks, and his suspenders stretched straight up over his shoulders. All this gave me the impression that he was very meticulous.

“Long time no see. I heard you’re working at the Security Corps these days.”

That said, the man had a friendly face, and there was a gentleness and warmth in his smile as he beamed at Creta.

“Oh yes. It *has* been a while, Tyros...!” Creta still had her back turned to me, but I could see her ears flushing bright red.

“Yeah, it really has... Who’s that?” The young man called Tyros turned his gaze on me.

“Ah, this— This is, um...” A beat later, Creta looked at me in a panic. Her face was so red that it seemed like steam might rise off her skin at any moment. “Um, well...” The flustered, panicking girl looked back and forth between me and Tyros and croaked out a reply that was nothing if not suspicious. “W-well, who do *you* think she is?”

“Ummm...” Tyros’s gaze wandered down from my face, stopping at my hands. “She looks like someone with whom you have a very...unusual connection.”

“H-how did you know that...?!” Creta opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

I mean, it’s only natural that he would suspect something, when we’re merrily walking around in the middle of the day wearing bracelets that link us together with a chain.

“.....” *What a mess.*

I’m really, really worried about where this is going.

I let out a big sigh. “I should have said this earlier—my name is Elaina.” As I put my arm around Creta’s shoulders, I introduced myself to Tyros. “I’m her buddy.”

“Buddy?” Tyros cocked his head.

I nodded. “At the Security Corps, new recruits work together in pairs. In order to strengthen the unity of each team, we have to stay together around the clock, from ‘good morning’ until ‘good night.’”

“Oh! Is that what’s going on? So then, what’s with the bracelets?”

“They’re to strengthen the unity of our team, of course. Right, Creta? *That’s right, isn’t it? Hey?*” I pressed Creta for an answer.

She stiffened up and nodded several times, “Y-yeah, r-right!”

“I see...” Tyros seemed to buy my slapdash explanation. “Anyway, it really *has* been a while, Creta. I wonder when we last saw each other...”

After that, the focus of his interest returned to Creta, and a conversation unfolded between the two of them that consisted of roughly equal parts catching up and polite chitchat.

“I know,” he said. “Since we’ve run into each other again, would you like to grab a bite to eat sometime soon?”

“Y-yes!”

“You would? Great! Then we’ll have to pick a restaurant... Oh, come to think of it, a good place opened up just recently along the main street. How about there?”

“Y-yes!”

“What day is good for you? How about tomorrow?”

“Y-yes!”

“Okay. Let’s meet there tomorrow, then. I’m looking forward to it!”

“Y-yes!”

Incidentally, Creta was so nervous, she could only answer “Y-yes!” so the polite chitchat was rather limited.

At any rate, after they made plans to meet up for food, Tyros waved and said, “See you then,” before disappearing down the street into the pouring rain.

“.....”

“.....”

The only people left on the rainy avenue were me and Creta, who, despite telling me not to get involved or do anything suspicious, had done nothing but behave in an exceptionally suspicious manner the entire time.

“I’m really worried where this is going,” I said with a sigh.

“Ugh...” Turning her still-flushed face away from me, Creta said, “...I never

would have expected to run into him in a place like this. I didn't stand a chance."

Looking at Creta's face, it wasn't difficult to imagine what Tyros meant to her. It seemed quite obvious she adored him.

However...

"Let me tell you one thing, Creta."

There were plenty of things I wanted to tell her and to ask her, but I figured it would be some time before I'd have the chance to speak with her openly, face-to-face. And so I stood next to her and, without making eye contact, settled on one of them.

It doesn't bother me that you treat mages like noxious pests, but...

"Even noxious pests have their benefits, depending on how you make use of them."

"....." Beside me, Creta made a puzzled expression. "...What does that mean?"

I don't know how to explain it. I meant exactly what I said.

"The two of us are in the same boat here. We should try to get along, even if it's only for show...buddy."



On top of being tied to someone with a chain, I also wasn't allowed to stay at an inn. My movements were extremely restricted.

After walking through the rain for a little while, we arrived at the house where Creta lived. She had one room in a shared house facing the street. There wasn't a single speck of dust inside, but it seemed more empty than tidy.

"Do you live alone?" I asked.

No one welcomed her home, and my voice echoed through the lonesome space.

"This job puts me in a lot of danger, so I live separately from my family," she said as she set her rifle down and started to take off her uniform. "The Security Corps deals with criminals who have no regard for people's lives and dangerous

offenders like this mage who snuck into our city unnoticed. I don't want to put my loved ones in harm's way."

"I see." I nodded, then turned my gaze to one corner of the room.

There were several photographs displayed on a shelf—photos she had taken with her parents; a picture of a dog; a photo of Creta, smiling with her friends; photos of beautiful scenery; and a picture of Creta blushing and looking at the ground next to the object of her adoration, whom we had run into earlier.

The photographs really stood out in her room, which otherwise had very little in the way of furnishings.

"Everyone who lives in this city, no matter who they are, has people who are important to them," she said, following my gaze. "And we need people who are prepared to shoulder the burden of protecting them, so that everyone can live their lives smiling, just like the people in those photos."

"And you are shouldering that burden?"

"Not just me." Creta shook her head slowly. "Me and my colleagues at the Security Corps work together to protect everyone."

"....."

She seemed a bit too young to bear the burden of such an incredibly weighty responsibility. As she gazed at the photos, Creta suddenly seemed very small.

"It's a good thing that I live apart from my family. My parents hate mages even more than I do, so I'm sure they wouldn't be able to stand the thought of sleeping under the same roof as one. Even if we are bound together by a chain."

"Oh really? Speaking of this chain, couldn't we take it off for a little while?"

"Were you listening to anything I just said?" Creta looked at me like she was looking at a piece of garbage. "As I told you at the start, it's my duty to keep an eye on you. We won't be taking it off."

"Oh really?"

"Really."

“By the way, how do you intend to wash the clothes you just took off?”

I pointed to the ground by her feet. Her uniform hung like the shed skin of some animal from the jangling chain. As long as one of her hands was bound, she couldn't get her jacket completely off, no matter how she struggled.

“.....”

“.....”

There was a brief silence. Then, with extreme reluctance, Creta spoke.

“...All right, listen up. I'll take it off only when we need to change clothes, but don't you dare get any funny ideas...!”

Glaring at me like a feral cat raring for a fight, Creta pulled a key from her breast pocket, unlocked the chain, and removed her discarded clothes from between us.

“I more or less sensed this the moment we met, but you can be a little bit absent-minded, can't you, Creta?”

“That's none of your concern,” she said, abruptly turning away. “So long as we can solve the murders, nothing else matters.”

“Speaking of which, do you have any suspects?” I tilted my head questioningly.

Something had been bothering me ever since I first entered the city. The man from the Security Corps, and Creta, too, had been talking as if I would be leaving in only a few days. They seemed to think everything would all be over quite soon, in fact.

Creta nodded. “We pretty much know what they look like, thanks to eyewitness testimony.”



“Oh, this is awful, just awful!”

A woman wailed in the faint moonlight streaming into the basement room.

She was wearing a red dress. Her long purplish-red hair swayed as she gazed up into the moonlight with eyes as red as blood. Grasping the day's newspaper, the woman sobbed and moaned.

“I’ve worked so hard, and yet the city still refuses to acknowledge the presence of mages.” She let out a deep sigh.

The woman had begun her activities three years ago, though she’d only gone public in the last month. Despite being born in a city without mages, she maintained a deep interest in them.

Mages—they could fly through the sky on their brooms, and with a flick of their wands, they could control fire, water, and even lightning. Mages could make anything at all happen with the flick of their hand. The woman was consumed with fascination for them, though she had only ever seen them in books.

Any book about the history of the city of Astikitos could explain why there were no magic users there.

“Before I was born, when my parents were still children, mages slaughtered innocents, and the people of Astikitos drove them out. For that reason, the city has been without mages ever since.”

So it was written in the city’s history books.

“But that history is a lie.”

The woman gathered magical energy into the tip of her wand. “Mages didn’t disappear from this city at all. The truth is, most of us have just been convinced we can’t use magic.”

She waved her wand and manipulated her magic.

Stab, stab. Grind, grind. Crunch, crunch. Crush, crush.

Red droplets sprayed everywhere, and the woman’s breathing grew ragged.

“If the streets were filled with mages, who can do anything, the city’s power structures could be toppled at any moment. That was why we needed to come up with a reason to exclude them, right? Because it was more convenient to get rid of them.” She waved her wand. “The story that mages carried out a massacre long ago has always been a lie, hasn’t it? This city’s whole history, start to finish, is nothing but lies. All you did was disarm any citizens who had the power to oppose your rules.

“The fact that I can use magic is the best proof of all,” she said, resting the tip of her wand against her lip. “This is fate. I was chosen to liberate the mages from your false history.”

I have to put an end to the conspiracy within this city. I have to take back freedom for the mages.

The more the Security Corps covered up her work, the hotter her sense of purpose burned.

“Right? Don’t you think so, too?”

Wonderful, just wonderful.

She mumbled to herself, smiling as she gazed at the spreading pool of blood.



The fourth victim was a city official, just like the other three before him.

His corpse had been mangled unnaturally inside a bed that had itself been folded in half. The spectacle was no different from what I had seen in the other photographs.

Security Corps personnel had rushed to the crime scene, Creta included, and all of them were clearly frustrated by the increasing frequency of the crimes.

“We’ve had another eyewitness account of the woman in the red dress.”

“Why can’t we catch her?”

“I still think it would be best to make our information about the culprit and her crimes public—”

“Ugh... Bleeehhh...”

I was looking at the corpse from a distance.

He had probably been killed slowly, over a long period of time, as someone tried out various magic spells on him. Several of his nails were peeled off, and his fingers were bent in impossible directions. A section of his skin was burned, and there was evidence that he had been cut into using blades of different shapes and beaten with blunt weapons. Though this was the fourth murder, the perpetrator apparently had yet to decide on their preferred method of torture.

Just by looking at the marks left behind, I could tell what type of magic had been used to inflict each wound. I got the impression that the perpetrator used quite an excessive amount of magical power to cast each spell.

But there was one aspect of the crime that stood out as different from all the previous incidents.

I gazed at the wall on the other side of the bed.

Silence is a sin.

That single phrase was written there in dried blood.

It was clear that the words were directed at the members of the Security Corps investigating the murders. I hadn't seen anything like it in the files on the first three incidents.

Each time, the killer would abduct the victim, kill him someplace private, then carry him back to his house and fold him into his bed.

These crimes were obviously meant to make a statement, and it seemed the culprit was becoming frustrated that they weren't attracting more attention.

"...You're not going to make any public announcements?"

I raised the same question with Creta that I had asked right after entering the city.

".....!" Holding a hand over her mouth, her eyes watering, Creta shook her head. "As soon as we let you into the city, Elaina, we abandoned that possibility."

"What do you mean?"

"If it got out that the Security Corps was relying on the cooperation of another mage, we would lose the confidence of the citizenry. As soon as the top brass decided to ask a magic user for help...we had no choice but to deal with the incidents in...secret, euuugh..."

"...You'll feel better if you just go ahead and puke."

Hesitantly, she gave me one short nod. "Sorry...!"

I accompanied her to the bathroom and rubbed her back. It seemed like my

duty as the person chained to her.

“Bleeehhh... Uuugh...”

She sobbed into the toilet. I couldn't tell whether it was a reaction to vomiting or if she was crying as well.

After that, we interviewed witnesses as part of our investigation. But just as before, although there were many eyewitness accounts of a woman in a red dress, no one could say where she had gone or who she might be.

Time passed, and we still didn't know who might be next or when it would happen.

“Seems like your job is pretty hectic, Creta.”

When evening came, Creta was still depressed.

She was finally sharing a meal with the object of her adoration, and yet she was hanging her head gloomily, her eyes downcast.

“Sorry...”

“No need to apologize. It's just...” Tyros sat opposite her, resting his chin in his hands and looking at us. “Did something happen today?”

“More or less,” I said, nodding.

Tyros hadn't exactly refused the idea of me casually joining the two old friends for their meal, but from the way he was looking at me, I could tell he was wondering what I was doing there and if Creta's “buddy” really had to stay with her, even at a time like this.

But we were bound together by a chain, so there was nothing we could do.

Personally, I had no desire to participate in Creta's private affairs, and I had confronted her before dinner about it. *“That reminds me, you had a meal planned with Tyros today, right? What should we do about the chains? Do you want to take them off during your meal? Or would you prefer to have me sit with you?”*

But in response to my questions, she had answered only “Yes...”

Her head was obviously in the clouds, and her reply was so absent-minded, it

was obvious that her thoughts were far, far away.

“Hmm? Which is it?”

“Yes...”

“Creta?”

“Yes...”

“Will you take off the chain for your dinner date?”

“Yes...”

“Or do you want me to sit with you?”

“Yes...”

“Or maybe you’d rather cancel the dinner entirely?”

“Yes...”

“I see, I see. This won’t do at all.”

Supposedly, Creta became like this after every incident. According to the director general of the Security Corps, she had gotten extremely depressed following each of the previous murders.

I think he’s too easy on her.

According to him, Creta was particularly down in the dumps after the fourth murder—even more so than usual.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t properly introduced myself to you yet, have I, Elaina? I’m Tyros. I’ve known Creta since we were in school together, and now I work in the city government.”

I wonder if Creta has linked Tyros to the string of murders in her mind. The victims have all been government officials, after all. Her sweetheart might well become the next victim.

“Oh, you work in the government, do you?” I opened my eyes wide, trying to look impressed. “Isn’t that a tough job?”

“Parts of it can be, but, well, it’s nothing like what Creta does.” Tyros’s eyes shifted to Creta, then back to me. “I can’t even imagine how heavy a

responsibility a job like hers is, protecting the people of this city. Compared to what she shoulders day after day, my job seems pretty cushy.” Tyros smiled. “Speaking of which, did something happen?” he asked Creta, who was still subdued.

“.....” After a short, hesitant silence, she finally began to speak, though her words came slowly. “Every time I see another unfortunate victim, I become keenly aware of my own powerlessness.”

The three previous incidents, as well as the latest one, were by no means her fault. It wasn’t like those people had died because of something she did.

The fact that she still felt responsible just proved what an incredible burden her job was.

“Every time someone suffers,” she continued, “I wonder whether there wasn’t some way to prevent it—if we could have stopped it at some earlier stage, or something like that.”

She knew she couldn’t change things that had already happened. And yet she couldn’t help but wish for a different outcome.

She was still forbidden from revealing the details of the murders to members of the public, so the words she used to describe the situation were very, very abstract.

Even so, her feelings made it through to Tyros.

“Creta, I’m sure you already know this, but—I was dating a certain girl up until four years ago.” He started telling an old story, his tone detached. “A classmate of mine from our school days. She had an incredible smile and a strong will. She was dependable and never wavered in her convictions. Even now that she’s gone, I’ve never forgotten the time we spent together.”

“.....” Creta nodded slowly.

“When she passed, she left a huge hole in my life. My anger and sorrow grew and grew, every day. But there was no one for me to take out those feelings on.”

He went on to tell Creta that he understood how she felt, to a painful degree.

“How did you recover?” she asked.

He smiled. “I decided that, rather than worrying about yesterday, I’d live for tomorrow.”

It was a very small, trivial change, he said. “Instead of worrying about what I should have done in the past, I decided to think about what I wanted to do tomorrow—what I wanted to try next—and live that way. That’s it. It isn’t anything so big that I can sit here all self-important and lecture you. But, well—just by accepting that one little change, I’m getting along pretty well these days.”

Basically, he’d changed the way he thought about things.

“So you decided to worry about the future instead of the past. Is that it?” I asked him, simplifying the idea into my own words.

“That’s right,” he said, nodding firmly.

Then he smiled, concluding his painful, heavy tale. Grasping Creta’s hand from across the table, he said, “Dwelling on the possibilities of yesterday will only prolong your suffering. So, Creta, you’ve got to create new possibilities, for tomorrow and beyond.”



That evening, after going back to Creta’s place, we each took a turn in the bath. We passed the time idly, then lay down to sleep. Creta took her own bed, while I collapsed onto the sofa.

“I know your feelings are still raw, but at least there’s a low chance of another incident taking place tonight,” I said. “So for now, I suggest you relax and get some sleep.”

I couldn’t see Creta from the sofa, but from the way she’d been behaving all day, it was obvious that she was extremely exhausted.

“...How can you be so certain?” Her feeble voice came from the other side of the sofa.

There had been a period of about three weeks between the first incident and the second, then a week between the second and the third. But the killer had waited only three days between the third and fourth murders.

I had seen how anxious the whole Security Corps, Creta included, were feeling at this escalation in pace, but...

“This criminal seems compelled to stage elaborate crime scenes, so I believe they will want to wait until the circumstances are right. Besides, they probably want to see how the Security Corps and the public reacts. We’re dealing with someone who likes to show off. I highly doubt they will get impatient and commit another murder tonight,” I told Creta in an attempt to console her.

“...Thank...you,” came the same deflated voice.

“I’m just telling you what I know.”

There’s no need to thank me.

“I’m not just talking about this conversation. I put you through a lot of trouble today.”

I suppose a lot happened. She threw up, then she had to take me on her dinner date, and so on and so forth. Nevertheless...

“Really, none of that was out of the ordinary.”

“.....” She was silent for a little while, then at last, she said, “If nothing else, I treated you rudely right after we first met. And despite all that, you’ve—”

“Don’t worry about yesterday; just live for tomorrow. Isn’t that what the person you adore said?”

“.....”

In this city, young people like Creta had all been raised from the start to hate mages. And in that case, it wasn’t just her who needed to reconsider, but the city itself. There was no need for her to feel responsible.

“Listen, magic users are just normal humans, okay? It’s not like every one of us are the kind of barbarians written about in your history books.”

“...You’re right.”

“But the mage involved in these incidents is definitely a bad person.”

“You’re right.”

“So what will you do tomorrow?” I asked.

Sounding slightly more certain of herself, she said, “I’m going to make sure there isn’t a fifth victim.”

The following day, the Security Corps changed up their strategy and made protecting city officials a priority.

They knew roughly what the culprit looked like, thanks to eyewitness accounts, and it seemed they planned to lie in wait beside the potential targets and pounce the moment the murderer tried to approach their fifth victim.

I didn’t have any idea whether such a plan would succeed, but it was determined that Creta, who was attached by the wrist to some strange traveler, would only get in the way, so she ended up on the sidelines.

“Actually, this suits me fine,” said Creta.

Casting sidelong glances at the Security Corps officers rushing around first thing in the morning to receive their assignments, Creta and I remained sitting in the Security Corps office, going over the previous incidents one more time.

“Let’s think about tomorrow and beyond,” Creta said, spreading a map out on the wall. She picked up a pen. “The first victim’s house is here, and the second is...” Mumbling to herself, she made four marks on the map. “Up to now, our investigation has focused on asking around the immediate area of each crime scene.”

Since the Security Corps wanted to keep the citizens as ignorant of these incidents as they could, they had chosen to limit their investigation to the smallest possible area.

I crossed my arms and stared at the map.

“It’s great that you’ve figured out what the culprit looks like, but it seems you still don’t have any idea who they are. You’ve been investigating, but you’re not allowed to ask around freely, so you haven’t been able to home in on the suspect. That’s the present state of things, right?”

“Yes.” Creta nodded.

“Could I borrow your pen?”

I took her pen and drew a circle around the house of the first victim.

“One thing about magic users is that, no matter who they are, there is an upper limit to the amount of magical energy they can command. And no amount of simulation or practice can prepare you for how things will turn out in the act. This is a culprit who has gone out of their way to make a big scene with the bodies. It’s reasonable to think the first victim’s house isn’t that far from where our killer lives.”

Our culprit abducted their victims, then killed them in an isolated location before returning them to their own homes, staging the crime scene, and leaving. They’d been committing one crime after another using this elaborate, flagrantly attention-seeking method.

I’m sure they’re being as cautious as possible to make sure they don’t run out of magical energy in the middle of their work.

I drew similar circles around the houses of the second, third, and fourth victims. The large circles, crudely drawn on the map, overlapped ever so slightly.

“.....” Creta stared at the map with a complicated expression on her face, then nodded. “So basically, you’re saying this section where the circles overlap is suspicious, right?”

“I think so,” I said, nodding.

Fortunately, we had already established what our culprit looked like. We knew their sex, their hairstyle, and even what clothes they wore.

And so...

“Let’s spend today nailing down what kind of person our culprit is and where they came from.”

Once we narrowed down the area of our search to a particular neighborhood, we began asking around together.

Just what kind of person is our culprit?

As we canvassed the area, we refined our vague criminal profile into something more distinct, using the clues that had come to light so far.

Creta questioned people as we passed.

“Excuse me, we’re searching for someone, and—”

Since the killer was targeting only people in important positions, like city administrators, we had to assume they had developed a distrust in the government or its organization.

The killer’s approximate age, too, was clear from eyewitness accounts.

“She’s probably a little bit older than me and this gray-haired young lady.”

The fact that the suspect was seen wearing a flashy dress, combined with the audacious way she’d committed her crimes, right from the first victim, told us she had great confidence in herself.

The killer had the intelligence to inspect the houses of the victims, investigate their daily routines, and plan each part of their crime. They had also been able to hang around their wealthy victims’ homes without rousing suspicion, which meant they likely belonged to the same class.

And judging by the extremely brutal nature of the murders, it was obvious that they took a certain degree of pleasure in killing.

According to Creta, the majority of those who killed for pleasure treated animals in a similar way before ever laying hands on a human.

“Is it possible that there was a spate of suspicious animal deaths in this neighborhood several years ago?”

Creta was following clues from a variety of directions in an attempt to figure out the killer’s identity.

Mages didn’t exist in this city, but it wasn’t like Astikitos never interacted with the outside world.

“And is there any chance you might have caught sight of someone with a grimoire?”

Such an item would have no meaning to the people of this city, even if they somehow got their hands on one. But to our killer, it would amount to a textbook for murder.

We went around asking people our questions, choosing each interviewee with care. We stopped by a restaurant frequented by the wealthy, then visited a

large bookshop that carried materials related to magic. We made the rounds, keeping a low profile throughout.

“Hmm... I don’t think I’ve ever heard of anyone like that.”

Person after person gave the same response.

“Let me see... I don’t remember anyone like that...”

We went steadily about our canvassing.

“Animal abuse? No, I can’t really think of anyone like that...”

Then, after about three hours, when we expanded the scope of our search—

“If I remember correctly, I think there’s a girl living nearby who fits that description.”

—a wealthy middle-aged man nodded in response to our questions. He told us he had a passing acquaintance with the young woman in question.

“She’s kind of creepy, you know. She’s always going on about how ‘the people of this city are being manipulated by their government.’ I think her name was —”



Ever since she was small, Ekina had lived her life constantly aware that she was different from the people around her.

She ate her meals alone, whether at home or at school.

She spent her days off alone, too.

She hardly ever spoke with other children at school. It had always been that way, ever since she was young. Ever since she was little, she had been able to do everything by herself. Her grades were good. She could even cook.

But being able to do everything by herself was the same as saying that she couldn’t get along with the people around her. Day by day, the gulf between her and other children her age grew deeper and wider.

Why was she so different from them?

Her inquisitive mind eventually settled on the existence of mages—those magic users who had been chased out of the city. The more she researched

them, the more absorbed she became in the world of magic.

She procured a wand on the black market, and the first time she picked it up, she knew it was her destiny.

“I’m happy, so happy.”

The city was abuzz. Ekina’s work had not yet become public knowledge, but that didn’t mean her actions weren’t having any effect. The fact that she now saw people from the Security Corps throughout the city was proof enough of that.

Ekina was sure that if she killed one or two more people, the government would make an official announcement about her crimes. They would *have* to recognize the presence of magic users.

She just had to wait a little while longer. She had made it so far. Soon, her ideal would be realized.

“Perfect. How perfect.”

She wondered who she should choose as her next victim.

She walked along, filled with excitement. And there, down the road, she spotted him—a young man with black hair.

His name was Tyros, and he worked at city hall.



We immediately reported the information we had collected to the director general, who shared it with the rest of the Security Corps.

It was obvious that there would be another victim if we didn’t hurry, and we had already established the whereabouts of the killer.

“I hope I can entrust this job to you, Lady Witch,” he said. Just as we had agreed at the beginning, it was now my turn to act. “You and Creta must go to the killer and render her powerless in a way that will attract as little attention as possible. You must stop her, even if you have to kill her. But if possible, we’d prefer that you keep her alive.”

They wanted me to attract as little attention as possible, though there wasn’t much I could do if the killer decided to make a scene. In short, I was supposed

to engage her in peaceful conversation, avoid giving her any openings to use magic, and quietly get her into handcuffs somehow.

What a stupid expectation. I can tell he doesn't know the first thing about magic.

"Well, I'll do the best I can."

I didn't say I'd be able to pull it off.

Now that we had identified our culprit, there was no longer any reason for Creta and me to stay chained together. But the people in charge of the city still held mages in strikingly low regard and wouldn't give us permission to take the bracelets off. What's more, it seemed like ignorance had given them rather high expectations about what a witch like me could do, and they didn't see how the chain would make it harder for me to capture this bloodthirsty killer.

In the end, Creta and I wound up walking down the street in the wealthy part of town, our hands still connected by the chain.

Members of the Security Corps were already lying in wait around the mage's home. According to their reports, they'd been able to confirm by looking through the windows that the same suspicious woman witnessed at the scene of each murder—Ekina—was inside.

All that remained was for us to attack.

"What do you suppose will happen if we fail?" Creta asked quietly, tightly grasping the sling of her rifle. There was an unexpected quaver in her voice.

"I'm guessing the guys outside are here because they don't trust me, right?"

"....."

If we failed and allowed Ekina to get outside, they would probably open fire on her immediately. I didn't know how they intended to cover that up, but they had probably decided it was preferable to finding a fifth victim.

"Sounds like we better not fail," I said.

Before long, we were standing right in front of Ekina's house.

Knock, knock.

It was a large, impressive building. The door was equipped with a door knocker, and when we knocked twice, a pleasant voice rang out from inside.

“Coming!”

We both fell silent.

Before long, we heard the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Before I could settle my breathing, it was open.

“Who might you be?” asked the woman at the door.

She had long hair in a deep reddish-purple and eyes the color of blood. She looked to be in her mid-twenties and wore a red dress. Her appearance matched the eyewitness accounts perfectly.

“Are you Ekina?” Creta asked.

Though she hadn’t introduced herself, her uniform told the other woman everything she needed to know.

“...You’re from the Security Corps, right? Can I help you with something?” Ekina looked bewildered, but it was all an act.

“Actually, there are a few things we’d like to ask you about. Is now a good time?” Creta stepped forward and put her foot in the doorway so that Ekina couldn’t shut the door and escape.

“What’s going on, Ekina?”

Just then, from farther inside, we heard a man’s gently inquisitive voice. I’d heard that voice before.

“Visitors?”

It was Tyros, smiling softly from the other side of the door.



“The mage probably has someone helping her,” I had said a few days earlier. “It’s difficult to imagine that one young woman committed this whole series of crimes by herself.”

Creta and I were looking at our map, trying to narrow down the culprit’s whereabouts. Creta seemed confused by my sudden remark.

“How can you be so sure?” she asked me.

While I listened to her talk about the crime scenes, I remembered something about the fourth victim’s corpse. Then I thought back on the appearance of the other three bodies.

“Magic is kind of like handwriting,” I said, “in that it shows the individual quirks of each user. For example, imagine a spell that lets you shoot fire. The way you apply your magical energy, the amount of energy you pour into the spell, and how long you hold the spell all determine the size of the blaze you create. These things demonstrate the quirks or unique qualities of each individual user.”

With mages who learned through self-study, the quirks tended to be more exaggerated. For better or worse, a mage who learned at school tended to have less idiosyncrasies in their magic.

“...So you’re saying the spells that left those wounds on the victims were really distinctive?” Creta cocked her head.

I offered her neither confirmation nor denial.

“What I mean is, to be precise, *there are two different signatures here.*”

The Security Corps probably didn’t know enough about magic to notice. I laid out the photos of the first three victims’ corpses and pointed to the wounds on their bodies.

“I don’t think our killers’ magical abilities are very advanced. The victims’ bodies show signs that they were burned by fire, but just taking a quick look at the pictures, you can see that two different techniques were used—one where the fire spread over a wide area, and another where it burned just one small part of the body. It looks like they also froze these guys in ice, used magic to twist parts of their bodies, and did all sorts of other things to them. But like I said, there are signs of two different ways of casting spells—one where they used a huge amount of magical energy to cast all at once, and one where they restrained themselves to a certain extent.”

And the difference between the two hadn’t lessened, even after several incidents.

“I’m just guessing here, but—it seems to me like this collaborator of hers might be the one abducting and carrying off the victims.”

The collaborator had probably been using magic when they abducted the men. They needed to reserve some magical energy to do so and, thus, had to hold back during the torture. The suspicious young woman mentioned by the eyewitnesses didn’t have to worry about carrying the victims and could blast them without holding back.

It seemed reasonable to assume the pair had been working together and sharing responsibilities during the attacks.

“Well, it’s just a guess,” I said.

“.....”

Creta looked down at the floor, heaved a big sigh, and muttered, “That’s horrible...”

“We don’t know for sure. But yeah.”

I could only offer her hollow consolation.

“Our killer, Ekina, apparently lives with a man.”

Once we’d determined our suspect’s identity and the Security Corps had surrounded her house, the director general shared with us what he’d learned. “He’s about the same age as her. Probably her boyfriend or something, though we don’t know whether he’s aware of Ekina’s true nature.”

“The mage probably has someone helping her.”

That conjecture, made while we were still studying the map, now sent my imagination in unpleasant directions.

“Supposing this man knows about her crimes, what should we do with him?” Creta asked the director general.

What if he knows about her crimes? What if, despite knowing everything, he’s still sheltering her? What if he’s working with her to help commit the crimes? What should we do?

In truth, we didn’t need to ask.

Without changing his expression, the director general answered, “You should treat him the same as our killer.” He was very direct as he spoke to Creta, driving his point home. “Under no circumstances are you to treat him like a human.”



“Come to think of it, I haven’t introduced you two yet, have I? This is Ekina, my girlfriend.”

The moment we established that Creta and Tyros knew each other, the couple stopped treating us like Security Corps members who had dropped by unannounced and began acting like we were all regular friends.

Ekina invited us inside, and we sat on the sofa across from her and Tyros.

Creta was staring at Tyros as I watched Ekina.

Steam wafted off the freshly poured tea on the table between us.

The two of them appeared to be a normal, happy-looking couple, and nothing more.

“I got to know her last year, and we opened up to each other right away because of our similar tastes and hobbies,” said Tyros. “I guess it’s been almost six months since we started dating.”

Ekina, who was sitting beside him, smiled happily and nodded. “Yes, that’s right.” Then her gaze fell on Creta. “But this is quite the surprise. I never imagined he had an acquaintance in the Security Corps.”

“.....” Creta was looking at Ekina with a stern expression. “We were in school together, though I was a year younger. So it’s not so much that he knows someone in the Security Corps, but that his school fellow just happened to join up.”

“And the Security Corps protects our city from bad people, right? To think you work at a place like that. It’s wonderful, just wonderful.”

Ekina smiled and placed her hands on her cheeks. From her behavior, I couldn’t tell if all this was an act or if she really meant what she said.

“What sort of work do you do, Ekina?” I asked.

“I work in city hall. The same as him.” She turned to me with a smile so beautiful, it looked fake. “One year ago, personnel got shuffled around, you see, and he wound up in my department. That’s how we got to know each other.”

“Oh.”

I was about to ask her what department she worked in, but she beat me to the punch.

“Though we work in city hall, our department mainly handles odd jobs and other miscellaneous tasks. The two of us manage imports.”

“You mean you manage goods coming into the city?”

“Yes. We inspect them and make sure nothing weird is mixed in and other miscellaneous tasks.”

“What do you mean by ‘weird’?”

“Like drugs that are banned in our city, or suspicious money of uncertain origin, or *magical implements*. You know.”

She told us their job was to prevent such suspicious articles from making it to market in their city. “Although, compared to the work you two do protecting our city, ours is quite an easy job.”

“.....”

Neither Creta nor I had an answer to that.

Silence filled the luxurious room as the aroma of the tea gradually dissipated.

“It’s going cold, you know. Your tea. Aren’t you going to drink it?” asked Ekina.

It wasn’t that I wasn’t thirsty or that I didn’t like tea. But there was no way either of us was going to reach for our cup.

Instead, I raised my head and asked, “Are there often things mixed in?”

“Huh?”

“Weird things, mixed in with the imports. Does it happen often?”

“Hmm? Yes, indeed it does... This is a peaceful city, but I suppose there are

always a certain number of people up to no good. We see them often—drugs, money, magical implements.”

“And what do you do with those things when they come in?”

“Naturally, they’re disposed of.”

“I see.” I nodded, and Tyros tilted his head questioningly.

“By the way, Creta, Elaina. What business brought you all the way out here? I don’t imagine you stopped by just to make small talk with my girlfriend.”

“Well...” Creta hesitated. Trying to escape Tyros’s gaze, she stared down at her hands. “Tyros, how long have you been living with Ekina...?” she asked.

“About six months, I guess.”

“And do you know everything about her? Do you know what she does every day, what sorts of things she likes, how she lives her life...?”

“Hmm.....? I think so.”

“I see...” Creta sighed and lowered her head. The sigh was deep and long. She sounded somehow resigned.

“Come to think of it, Elaina, Creta, could I tell you something?” Raising her voice just a little, Ekina clapped her hands and continued her silly small talk. “At our job, we frequently decide to pretend like the strange things we find never existed in the first place. Doing that makes it much easier to hide troublesome items from the public, you see.”

She slowly lowered her hand, bringing it to rest on top of the sofa.

Then she produced even more *silly small talk*.

“But the job of picking out these strange things is quite difficult, and there’s a lot of labor involved. That’s because, at a glance, a lot of them don’t look any different from normal goods.”

Before I realized it, Ekina and Tyros both had their hands down on top of the sofa. Their palms were resting one on top of the other, their fingers tightly entwined in a lovers’ embrace. It was as if they were checking to make sure the other was still there.

“I’ll ask you again,” said Ekina. “Why did you come here today?”

Locking eyes with Ekina, I gathered energy at my fingertips.

From the other end of the chain binding my wrist, I heard a metallic *kachak*. Creta must have been reaching for her rifle—I could sense the cold hunk of metal that made up the gun moving ever so slightly at the edge of my vision.

Once again, the interior of the luxurious room was engulfed in silence.

“We came to do our job.”

I readied my wand and, at almost the same moment, found two wands pointed back at us.

I couldn’t smell the tea anymore.



“Don’t you think there are probably some magic users living in this city, even now?”

Tyros said those words to Ekina on the day they first met. He’d just joined her department.

“They can fly through the air and do whatever they please,” he continued. “They sound incredible. I can’t believe we drove them all out of the city. I think the people in charge just make everyone believe there aren’t any mages here so that no one will stand up to them.” As he grumbled his complaints to Ekina, Tyros tossed several copies of a grimoire that had been discovered in a shipment of other books into an incinerator.

Ekina looked at him like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing.

Oh, crap. I bet she already thinks I’m a total weirdo.

“Sorry. Forget what I just said.”

Trying to laugh it off as a joke, he went back to work disposing of prohibited books. Flames swallowed up the precious volumes, which no one in the city was allowed to read, and they disappeared forever.

“I won’t forget.”

Standing next to him, Ekina shook her head.

There was someone else in the city who thought the same way as Ekina, and he was now in the same line of work—one that would put him in contact with magical implements.

And he, like her, *had always been special—better than other people. Even their tastes and hobbies matched.*

She thought it was destiny. The two of them were drawn to each other with unrelenting force. For both of them, the other was the only person in the whole world with whom they could share every aspect of themselves.

“I’ll bet you everything that’s written in our history books is a lie,” he said. “Mages have always existed here, and still do, but because they’re so powerful, their existence has been censored all this time.”

The two of them were convinced.

“The people of this city have been led to believe they cannot use magic,” she insisted. “Their magic was stolen from them, and the government is covering it up so that they don’t even realize it’s been taken.”

It was much easier to pretend like troublesome things never existed in the first place.

The couple were convinced that, just like Ekina and her colleagues were supposed to weed out the *bad things* and make them go away, top officials in the city government had been covering up certain inconvenient facts.

“We have to wake up the people of this city.”

And that sense of purpose that brought the two of them together had eventually driven them to commit the series of murders that had started up around one month prior.

“Now it’s time to tell the truth! Exactly who was it who gave the order to write lies in our history books? Under whose guidance were we all made to believe there are no mages in this city?”

Since both of them worked at city hall, they were able to commit their crimes relatively easily. It was no problem for them to look up who the top officials in the city were and where they lived.

It was no trouble at all for the two of them, who had learned some magic, to stalk these city officials on their way home from work, abduct them, and then take them to a basement somewhere and torture them.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Help me, please! Please—”

Their first victim had been a letdown. No matter what they asked him, he just kept apologizing, and they weren’t able to extract any useful information. Disappointed, the two of them used his body to practice their spells.

Their second victim cursed at Ekina and Tyros with every dirty word he could think of. The couple thought he was cursing them because they were right—that he feared just how right they were.

Neither the third nor the fourth victim told them what they were hoping to hear, but each time they killed someone together, their trust in each other grew stronger and deeper.

Despite all the effort they put into beautifully staging the sites where they left the bodies, their actions still hadn’t come to light.

“Even the Security Corps is being controlled by the government,” said Ekina. “The fact that our work hasn’t been reported on is the best proof of that.”

“You’re exactly right. We’ve got to try harder,” Tyros said as he used magic to fold a bed in half.

The two of them divided up their work. Tyros carried the victims while Ekina led the way so that he wouldn’t be spotted, and once they arrived at the designated location, they worked together to torture their captives. When they were finished with each victim, Ekina led Tyros back the same way they had come, and Tyros once again carried the body. Once they arrived at their victim’s bedroom, they worked together to decorate the crime scene, cooperating just like they had during the torture.

“Why are you so worried about being seen?” Ekina asked.

The reason all the eyewitness accounts from the crime scenes were of Ekina was because she led the way so that Tyros could carry his burdens unnoticed.

It wasn’t that Ekina was unhappy with the situation. She was just anxious.

What if, in his heart of hearts, Tyros didn't share Ekina's convictions? Maybe she was the only one who believed they were working together. The feelings of loneliness she'd harbored as a child passed through her mind once again.

But in response, Tyros whispered, "I'm doing this to protect you," and embraced her. "I'm sure those jerks in the government will try to cover up what we're doing. I'll be your shadow so that I can fight to protect you when the time comes."

Tyros gazed proudly around the scene of their fourth murder and accompanied his sweet words with a ring, which he slipped onto her finger.

Everything seemed like destiny.

"Thank you," Ekina said, leaning into him.

She was sure that together, the two of them could meet any challenge. To them, their actions were righteous. The two of them lived in their own private world, into which no outsiders could trespass.

From then on, as long as they stayed together, they could overcome any hardship. Ekina was confident of that.

And then, two days later—

Just as he had promised, Tyros died fighting to protect her.



Ekina was the first to shoot off a spell. From her wand, she hastily produced several poorly formed icicles and flung them through the air. I immediately smashed them to pieces and sent her wand flying out of her hand.

As soon as Ekina realized she couldn't win, she raised both hands and surrendered.

When Tyros saw her, he also tossed his wand away with a defeated expression and put his hands up.

Oh, thank goodness. Looks like it's already over. I'm glad we were able to resolve the matter so easily.

Relieved, I turned to look at Creta and saw that there was a knife sticking into her gut.

Right before tossing his wand aside, Tyros had used magic to send the weapon flying toward Creta's stomach.

And by the time we realized he wasn't done, Tyros was already closing in on Creta. In his hand was another knife.

I turned my wand toward him, intending to stop him in his tracks. By then, however, he was already within arm's reach of her.

But that also meant he was pressed up against the muzzle of her gun.

The sound of a gunshot rang out.

Tyros swung the knife with the last of his strength. It grazed Creta's cheek and fell onto the sofa. Moments later, Tyros's limp, lifeless body fell on top of it.

"...Ah."

There, before Creta, Tyros lay dead.

He didn't move, he didn't breathe, he didn't do anything. A pool of blood spread out gradually from his midsection, staining the area around Creta's feet red.

Creta stared down at him in a daze.

"Ah-ha."

Someone was laughing across from me.

"Ah-ha-ha, ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

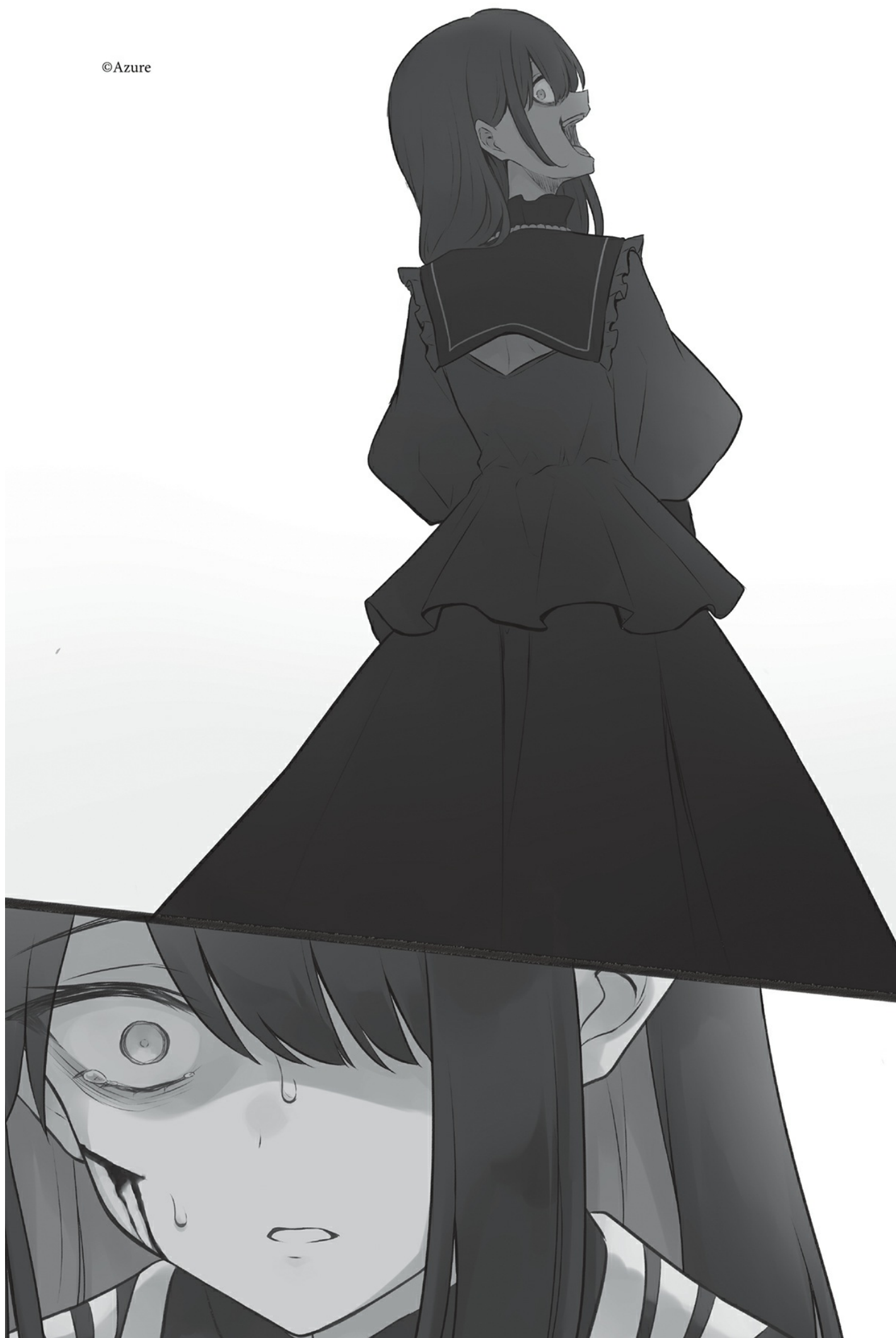
Ekina had sunk to the floor, laughter spilling out from her like a broken toy. She laughed on and on without stopping.

Even after the guards from the Security Corps rushed into the house, drawn by the sound of gunfire, and restrained her, Ekina never stopped laughing.

The other officers carried Tyros's body out of the house and dragged Ekina away. Even as they pulled her along by the arm, she kept on laughing.

And as she brushed past Creta, she spoke.

"You killed a human just now, you know."





And that's how we solved the murders, which were never meant to come to light, without attracting any attention. The people of the city were startled by the sound of a gun suddenly going off in the middle of the day, and there was a lot of speculation. But in the end, the Security Corps claimed it was an accidental discharge and issued a formal written apology. The actual incident was treated as if it had never even happened.

"Lady Witch, we are deeply grateful to you for assisting with our investigation."

Creta received an official commendation from the Security Corps for successfully resolving the incidents. Finding the pair of murderers who had been going around killing city officials and safely apprehending them were huge achievements for her.

"Our city government is also very pleased. We all expect great things from you in the future." The director general of the Security Corps did not hold back his praise.

To me, he said, "In the end, it seems we didn't even need the help of a mage like you. We're very sorry for wasting a few days of your valuable time."

The sarcasm in his voice, as well as his hatred for mages, was obvious.

"....."

I didn't even feel like responding. I just shook my head and left it at that.

Once the case was closed, my business in the city was finished.

I immediately started preparing to leave. We went back to Creta's house, gathered my things, and hurried toward the gates.

Creta and I had to move together, as we were still chained to each other by the wrist. I was still under constant surveillance and would be until I left the city.

Creta was with me all the way to the city gates. And the whole way, she remained silent.

"....."

As soon as I was through the gate, I donned my robe and put on my pointed hat. I was now back in my usual traveling outfit.

Then, just before we parted, Creta took my hand, inserted the key into my bracelet, and released me from the chain.

Her cold hands wrapped around mine, now free once again.

“Creta?” I called her name.

“.....”

She raised her head. She looked very, very frail, like she might disappear at any moment. I wondered what to say to her.

It's just as I thought. There's nothing I can do, is there?

“Elaina?” She spoke in a trembling voice. “Could I get you to lend me your hand?”

“.....?”

I nodded, and she put my hand against her cheek.

“If they saw me being friendly with a mage, I’m sure the people of my city would misunderstand it in the worst way. So please,” she said, “just lend me the sensation of your hand.” Her cheek was cold, and her eyes were gloomy and dull. “It’s exactly as you said, Elaina. Mages are people, too,” she said.

Even magic users live normal lives, no different from other humans.

I remembered saying as much to her.

“But—I didn’t know confronting that reality would be so painful or so difficult.”

A tear rolled down her cheek and warmed my fingertips.

“Creta.” I traced her tear’s path and scooped it up with my fingertip. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t—”

I couldn't do anything.

The scab where the knife had grazed her was still there on her cheek.

“I’m fine.” She noticed me looking at her and smiled. “The pain will go away,

and I'll be fine."

"....."

"Tomorrow, or the next day, or maybe some time after that, I'm sure even the scar will fade away. So I know I'll be fine."

Though her words were hopeful, tears kept flowing endlessly down her cheeks. I kept my hand where it was so that the tears wouldn't touch her wound.

I knew, however, that this was only empty consolation.



"Hey, did you hear? Until recently, a woman named Ekina lived right around here!"

"Hmm? Oh, right," said a woman to her friend seated across from her. "They caught her, though, didn't they? What about it?"

There was plenty of small talk happening at the café that afternoon: advice about work, discussion of hobbies, gossip about other residents, bad-mouthing of people who weren't there, speculations, and conspiracy theories.

"Did you hear? That Ekina woman was actually a mage!" said the woman's friend, looking smug.

She peered back at him, fed up with his exaggerations and groundless rumors. She couldn't stand the way he said such things like they were absolute truth.

"Hey, hey, don't tell me you don't believe me. This time I'm serious! I saw it myself. I watched the guys from the Security Corps taking her away."

"She could have been arrested for anything." The woman had known Ekina during their school days. The girl had kept away from others, always laughing to herself. Everyone thought she was creepy. Even her own classmates used to say that one day she would go too far and be unable to come back. "How do you know magic was involved?"

"People heard a gunshot the day Ekina was arrested, right?"

"Yeah, they did."

"Well, that gun was fired at her, to take her down. But Ekina's still alive, right?"

That's because she's a mage!"

"What kind of logic is that?" she said, brushing him off.

She had lost all interest in talking to him, but the man didn't seem to notice, and he carried on.

"I just know the government is up to something big—something secret. And now they've captured a mage and put her under their control..." It was all part of some massive scheme, he insisted.

"There's no way any of that's true."

The woman couldn't believe how absurd her friend sounded. She sighed and calmly shut him down, but he had already stopped listening to her.

"This city is using mages to tamper with the minds of its citizens. They want to control us all..."

And so the man expounded on his wild delusions as if they were beyond all doubt.



CHAPTER 6

Flowers for Fools

This is a story about something I see often on main streets in the early afternoon.

Do you know what I'm talking about, everyone?

"Oh! Miss Witch! You *are* a witch, right? Please, won't you listen to my request?!"

"....."

That's right, I'm talking about just this sort of weirdo.

Once, when I was visiting a certain country, I encountered a lone woman. Dressed in flashy clothing and making dramatic gestures, she kneeled down in front of me, rubbed her cheek against my hand, and whispered, "Ah, Miss Witch...Miss Witch..."

Wow, she's certainly enthusiastic.

If she and I were well acquainted, the way she was abasing herself in front of me would have inspired something of my sadistic side. But alas, she and I were definitely meeting for the first time. I felt a chill as goose bumps covered my whole body.

"Ah...Miss Witch, Miss Witch, Miss Witch..."

"Um... Could you stop that, please? It's annoying..."

"Miss Witch, Miss Witch, Miss Witch..."

"What is *with* this lady...?"

People are surprisingly helpless in the face of sudden irrational outbursts. I didn't have the slightest clue who this woman was, and yet for some reason I couldn't fathom, she had now involved me in her business.

I was a little taken aback by this abrupt development, but the woman's behavior wasn't the only thing I found shocking. It was early in the afternoon,

and lots of pedestrians were passing us by, watching the mysterious woman's bizarre actions. And yet no one made a move to help me.

"Hey...! Isn't that Marilyn, the really famous actress...?"

"It is! That's Marilyn...! It looks like she's in the middle of some kind of skit."

"Oh, I bet she's playing an overbearing woman courting a witch. Yeah, that's gotta be it."

"She's so amazing... I can feel how overbearing she is from all the way over here..."

Shockingly, it appeared the woman who had suddenly taken my hand was in the acting profession. Moreover, she seemed quite popular.

"Ah, Miss Witch...! I beseech you, won't you please grant my wish?!"

That meant her exaggerated behavior might all be part of a performance.

Smoothly, she brought her face up close to my ear, then whispered a question to me. "Um... Miss Witch, I'm terribly embarrassed to be asking you this kind of question right after meeting you, but, Miss Witch, you are a witch, aren't you...? I mean, one of those people who can send spells whizzing through the air?"

"Uh..."

I was dying to ask her why she seemed more embarrassed about asking me that question than about rubbing her face all over my hand. But for the time being, I just nodded.

"My, my! I thought that might be the case. So if you're able to send spells whizzing through the air, does that mean you can also manipulate people's hearts at will?"

"Manipulate people's hearts at will...?"

"Yes. Specifically, can you stop people from lying, or control their affections, or make them your slaves? Can you use convenient spells like those? Be honest. How about it?"

"What do you think a witch is...?"

"I think a witch is someone who can use spells like those as they please."

I sighed. “If I could freely use such convenient spells at any time, I’d be using one of them right now.”

“My, my! And what do you plan to do to a famous actress like me?” Marilyn reacted with exaggerated surprise, then quickly caught on. “Oh, I get it! You mean to make me tell you in my own words the reason, the purpose behind why I stopped you, yes? Isn’t that right? You think you can make me tell you everything, without keeping any secrets, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t...”

Actually, I don’t think she caught on at all... It seems she understood nothing. In fact, I’d like her to just tell me—like a normal person—why she came up to me, without making me ask.

“However, if you’re going to make such ardent demands...,” she said, “I suppose I have no choice...”

“But I didn’t demand anything.”

“Very well! I shall endeavor to meet your expectations!”

“But I don’t have any expectations.”

“I will tell you now what I would like to request of you. Open up your ears and listen carefully, Miss Witch. Then *you* must live up to *my* expectations, do you hear?”

“Can I go now?”

“Oh! Ohhh, ohhh! Can you? Are you sure? Don’t you know what will happen... if you leave now?”

“What will happen?”

“Heh-heh-heh... Such an honest girl. Now listen up! Hear my story! Yes, it all happened two years ago—”

“Um, so what will happen if I leave?”

“Shush! I’ve just started reminiscing, so be quiet and listen, please! Two years ago... Yes, two years ago, I was a very selfish woman.”

“Well, that hasn’t changed.”

“My, how rude! What could you possibly know about me?”

“Just that you don’t listen to anything anyone else says.”

“Never mind that. Listen to me reminisce, and I’m sure you’ll learn a little more about me.”

“You’re still not listening, are you?”

At any rate, the pushy woman who had approached me on the street ended up dragging me into her story.

According to Marilyn, it was two years earlier that she began to receive attention from the public as a well-known actress. Her performance on the stage was truly brilliant.

“Oh, he’s wonderful...just wonderful...”

And she had eyes for only one man in the whole world.

“Hi there, Marilyn. Your performance was great again today. Especially your gaze as you looked out over the audience from up on stage. It was just like the sweet look you might give a lover, and it set my heart pounding in spite of myself.”

One man, who always had such saccharine reviews ready for her when she finished on stage.

His name was Vincent, and he had been working as an actor longer than she had.

“Oh, Vincent...”

And Marilyn was head over heels for him. She loved him from the bottom of her heart. When she fell for him, she decided to give it her all. Marilyn’s motto was “If pushing doesn’t work, knock them down.” She started making passes at Vincent all day every day. Even now, as he praised her, she was gazing at him passionately, fluttering her eyelids.

“.....?”

But alas, Vincent was kind of a blockhead. Her desperate approaches were in vain. He asked, “What’s the matter? Do you have something in your eye?” and

gently stroked her cheek.

What an annoying personality he had. If he weren't so handsome, he would have been out of the picture long ago.

"Vincent..."

They say love is blind, but in her case, she had already closed her eyes. In fact, she'd closed her eyes and puckered her lips, and she was leaning in, urging him to kiss her.

"Oh, sorry, I've got to get going. See you!"

But it is just at such times that blockheads tend to cause women embarrassment.

"Bye now!" he said, waving a hand as he left. Marilyn, left standing all alone in the chilly autumn wind, watched him go.

"My darling Vincent..."

She stood, clasping her hands in front of her chest, ablaze with unfulfilled passion.

According to Marilyn, she had been pining after him nonstop for about two years with little progress.

"I've loved him continuously for two years, but our relationship hasn't changed one bit... That's why, Miss Witch—that's why I want your help!"

"...Now, when you say 'help'..."

What specifically would I be doing?

"Use a spell to make it so I can't lie, or... Can't you come up with some clever way to do it? To bring us together?" she asked.

I see. In other words, you're leaving all the important bits up to the witch.

"By the way, can I ask one thing?" I said.

"What is it?"

"...What's so good about this guy?"

"It's his face."

“.....”

“His face.”



“Come now, Miss Witch! Cast a spell on me, please! How about starting with something that prevents me from lying?! If I run into him while unable to lie or to evade a question, he’ll surely realize how I feel!”

“Uh...”

Why are you already assuming I’ll do it...?

“Come on, do it now!”

“Uh...”

Why are you already assuming I can do it...? I mean, after all...

“Couldn’t you just confess your feelings to him directly, without any spells?”

“My, my! Did you even listen to what I said?”

“I can’t believe you, of all people, are saying that to me.”

“I’ve tried countless times already! And yet they’ve all hopelessly failed!”

According to Marilyn, she had made dozens of attempts to confess her love to Vincent over the past two years. But unfortunately, the man was a true blockhead, a fact which became quite obvious whenever she tried to tell him her feelings.

For example, one day after a performance, she took him aside in a totally normal way and confessed her love quite plainly. To this, he had responded: “Splendid...! Is that a line from your next play? It’s great! You were awfully convincing!”

He had mistakenly thought she was acting.

I see. Then next time, I’ll make it so that he can’t misunderstand, she thought, and tried writing him a love letter.

“Oh, I get it. This is a prop for your next play, right? That’s great! It really captures the feelings of a girl suffering from unrequited love!”

Once again, he misunderstood her intent.

You'd think that by now, he would have caught on. But turning aside her every confession and assuming she was merely rehearsing for a play appeared to be a facet of his very character.

"Excuse me, but what's so good about a guy like that?"

"His face."

As far as I could tell from listening to her, it seemed everything about him besides his face was awful. At any rate, after being evaded at every turn for two whole years, Marilyn had grown tired of waiting.

Looking a little proud, she said, "He's a really sweet guy, so unless you cast a spell on me so I can't lie, I'll never get a clear answer to my feelings. I've been on edge continuously for two years, and I'm tired of it."

"But if he's been evading you at every turn for two whole years, isn't *that* your answer?"

".....Huh?"

Despair crept into her expression.

Uh-oh. Did I say something I shouldn't have?

"Sorry, that was a joke. I'm sure he's hopelessly in love with you but so dreadfully shy that he simply can't tell you how he feels."

"...Do you really think so?"

Her voice was surprisingly cold, and I saw her eyes had turned dark. It seems I'd pointed out something she hadn't wanted to hear.

All expression vanished from her face, and she said, "As I told you at the beginning, Vincent has been an actor longer than I have. His skills as a performer far exceed my own. When I ask myself if I can believe what he tells me...to be honest, I'm not sure..."

"Uh..."

"He was the one who taught me that actors are always actors. That advice is what helped me grow and develop as an actress... So I don't know... I can't tell

where the actor ends and the real man begins...”

As I stared at the woman before me, now suddenly dark and brooding, I mused that she was indeed quite the actress, able to play both a cheerful and a gloomy woman with ease.

But it seems I’ve really hit on a sore spot for her.

“He’s always calling me cute and touching me gently. He always brings me snacks and drinks after my plays. He tells me lots of fun stories. He always compliments my appearance, my clothes, my hair, and everything else. He’s even told me several times that he wants to go out with me. But I’m anxious... I can’t help wondering if it’s all an act...”

“I’m sorry, but the more I listen to you talk, the more I wonder what exactly is so good about this guy.”

“His face,” she said, hanging her head. “I mean, your face is the only thing you can’t fake...”

Th-that’s kind of heavy...

“That’s why I want you to cast a truth spell! Please, I beg you, Miss Witch!”

“Um...”

I wasn’t quite sure what to do, but I replied, “From what I’ve heard, it sounds like he’s made a few passes at you, too. Don’t you think he’ll understand if you just confess your feelings to him directly?”

He told you several times that he wanted to go out with you, right? Doesn’t that about settle the matter?

“My, my! Did you listen to a single word I’ve said, Miss Witch?”

“I’ve been listening better than you have, at least...”

“He is an actor first and a man second. I would be an absolute fool to take lip service from a guy like that seriously.”

“So? Can’t you just let yourself be a fool?”

What’s the problem here?

I cocked my head. “People don’t tell lies unless it benefits them somehow,

right? Why don't you just let yourself be a fool and take all his words at face value? What's the problem with that?"

At the very least, people usually avoid lies that are likely to cause them problems. And if that's the case, Vincent must not be troubled by her affection. I mean, if he had no interest, he probably would have stopped talking to her long ago. What does she have to gain by dwelling on whether his sweet words might be lies? You might as well become a fool for love.

"Well, if you're going to insist I cast a spell on you to keep you from lying, I'm ready and willing to give you what you want, but—"

"My, really? Then yes, please! The spell! Cast the spell on me, please!"

"But you will have to pay me for my work. Is that all right?"

"I don't care! How much is it? You should know, I'm quite rich! I mean, I'm a major actress!"

Marilyn loosened her purse strings and said pleasantly, "Come now, allow me to pay you a handsome fee for a splendid spell."

After requesting a token fee, I said, "Great. All right then, I'm casting the spell!"

I pulled out my wand.

"Hyah!"

With a shout, I shot a stream of magic toward her.

The next moment, a single flower popped out of the top of Marilyn's head with a cute little noise, blooming gaily.

"What on earth is this?!" she exclaimed, sounding surprised.

With a smug grin, I said to Marilyn, "That's what we call a 'fool's flower,' and as long as it's blooming, you'll be unable to tell any kind of lie or do any acting. In fact, some people call it the 'actor killer.'"

In other words, as long as the flower was in bloom, every word she said would be the truth.

I gave her a push and reminded her that now was her big chance to confess

her love.

“My, my! How wonderful! Thank you, Miss Witch! I feel like as long as I have this flower, I’m sure to succeed!”

Marilyn took my hand and pumped it vigorously up and down. Then she said, “Best strike while the iron is hot!” and stood up to leave. She was probably off to find Vincent, or whoever.

“Oh my. What a restless person...” Shrugging in exasperation, I put my wand away.

It seemed my extended back-and-forth with Marilyn had caught the eye of many a passerby. Once she left, people who had been watching us came up and started talking to me.

“Wow, that was amazing! So witches can do stuff like that, too, huh...?”

One man paused to remark, in a curious tone of voice, that magic capable of preventing someone from acting sounded frightening indeed.

That surprised me.

Well, well. Could it be I’ve got the makings of an actress as well?

“I didn’t cast any such spell on her.”

To begin with, the sort of magic that would prevent someone from lying isn’t something I can just whip up on the spot.

All I had done was shoot magical energy from my wand and make a flower bloom atop her head. What she’d really needed wasn’t a spell to keep her from lying, but a little courage to approach that Vincent fellow and the mental preparation to make a fool of herself.

In other words...

“What you just witnessed was a *little white lie*.”



The following day, I checked out of the inn where I had been staying, had my breakfast at a nearby café, and sat idly reading the newspaper for a little while before deciding it was time to leave the country.

I had been planning to leave all along, of course. I'd already done my sightseeing. And besides, if I stayed on, I might get caught up in some other strange person's affairs.

"I guess it's time to get going."

I looked out the window next to my seat. The city's roads were bathed in sunshine, and the sky was clear and blue. It was a perfect day for traveling.

I set down my newspaper and took a deep breath.

This country must be starved for news.

The front page of the paper was adorned with coverage of the passionate love affair between a certain pair of actors.

According to the paper, the two of them had started dating after exchanging ardent, zealous declarations of love in the middle of the main avenue. Even the newspaper was celebrating this heady romance between a popular actress—one of the biggest stars in the country—and a very, very handsome actor.

However, considering the article's effusive language, the photo of the lovers printed large on the front page lacked the same air of celebration. In fact, the pair looked kind of ridiculous.

A flower bloomed atop each of their heads as they faced each other.

I laughed. After all, I could see there, in the newspaper photo, the genuine surprise on their faces.



"Oh, you're leaving? Thank you very much for visiting us!"

As soon as I made it to the city gates, a guard greeted me with a swift bow.

I bowed back and paid him a compliment of my own. "Oh, no, thank *you* very much for a lovely few days."

"How kind! Thank you so much!" The guard took my words at face value and was very pleased. Then he took out a slip of paper and a pen and said, "By the way, Miss Witch, our country is currently asking our visitors to complete surveys. So if you don't mind, could I ask you to answer a few questions?"

"Huh?"

Well, I'm not in any particular hurry, so I guess I don't mind.

I nodded.

“Thank you so much!”

He asked me about my impressions of the country before my visit and if those impressions had changed. He asked me if I was treated kindly by the locals, what I thought of their public safety measures, and if I'd had any experiences I thought would stick with me. He asked, too, if I had been hassled by any bad characters—all sorts of stuff.

His questions were very detailed. After answering each one honestly, I followed up with one of my own. “Why are you asking me this stuff anyway?”

Looking a little troubled, the guard explained himself.

Apparently, this had originally been a place where actors could live while they polished up their acting skills. As they did their jobs, they would practice acting, and as they practiced acting, they would do their jobs. That was the kind of place it was.

However, even in a country full of aspiring actors, there weren't many people with the potential to achieve real greatness in the craft. Eventually, the unsuccessful actors turned to defrauding travelers and merchants in order to turn a profit, he said.

They must have been looking to make some easy money.

But about ten years earlier, their shameless business practices began to cause problems. Steadily, the number of travelers and merchants visiting the country declined, until finally even the sightseers dried up. It was as if their country no longer existed, the man explained.

“We reflected on our former ways. If no tourists came to see us, we had no hope of being scouted. The longer the world ignored us, the farther we strayed from the spotlight...”

“.....”

Eventually, he told me, the country's people had started putting in real work and polishing their acting skills, even if it meant taking the slower, more

roundabout route.

And that was how they'd become the kind of country they were today—a place that valued the opinions of others.

“Miss Witch, how did you like our country?”

In this country, the past still overshadowed people's lives, and the boundary between lies and truth was still unclear.

I was sure that if I told him my true opinion, he would take my words at face value rather than as simple flattery and understand that I was saying what I really thought.

And so I told him the truth.

“I found your country quite lovely.”

Pop!

The words made a flower bloom on my head.



*

Several months later, I heard a strange story.

I was dining in a restaurant when I overheard another traveler speaking about a strange land where all the inhabitants had flowers growing on their heads.

The traveler pointed at a map and insisted that, while the story might sound like a lie, the country truly existed. In fact, I had visited that very place several months earlier—the land formerly known as the Country of Stories.



CHAPTER 7

The Moonlight City of Eherias

It was a cool evening in early autumn, and everyone in the city was looking up.

Children and adults alike, regardless of social standing or gender—everyone, all at once, was looking at the sky, which was dazzlingly bright and not like the night sky at all.

People walking down the street stopped in their tracks, those inside buildings opened windows, and all of them let out the same sigh of astonishment.

Against the black background of the sky, with the moon hanging in it, little beads of light, golden and sparkling, were softly raining down over the city.

It was a truly fantastical night.

The dark sky was lit with a dazzling light.

So bright, it was impossible to sleep.

So radiant, no one would ever forget it.



“Fwaaah...”

In front of the city gates stood a lone traveler. As she got down from her broom, a pitiful growl came from the depths of her stomach, and a yawn escaped her slack jaw.

Her hair was the color of ash, and her eyes were lapis blue. She was dressed in a black robe and a pointed hat. Upon her breast was pinned a single brooch, shaped like a star.

She was a traveler, and a witch.

“Fwaaaaaah...”

And she was sleepy, because she had stayed up all night traveling from one city to another. She couldn't stop yawning.

“Welcome to the Moonlight City of Eherias.”

“Heya...”

And who in the world was she—this pitiful witch, ready to wave the white flag and surrender to sleepiness?

That’s right, it’s me. And I’m so sleepy...

“Miss Witch, do you know much about our city?”

“Only the name...”

I had heard about it in a restaurant where travelers gathered. But all I’d been told was that if I went there when I was sleepy, something really interesting would happen. I didn’t know any of the details, but I believed the rumors and went out of my way to stay up all night before visiting.

I wonder what interesting things I’ll encounter...? So sleepy...

“Before you enter, there are some things I need to explain, but... Are you all right, Miss Witch?”

“I’m fine... Mmm...”

Well...if something surprising happens, it’ll probably wake me up...

“Well then, first things first, Miss Witch. Could you please leave all the money in your wallet in our custody?”

“Hmm...? Why...?”

“There is no currency in this city.”

“Huh?”

Hmm? What did he just say?

Something just jolted me awake.

“In this city, we exchange time instead of currency.”

The guard proceeded to give me all the details about this place called the Moonlight City of Eherias.

“.....”

As I listened to the unique story of this rather unorthodox place, I took a peek inside the city gates. Inside, I saw a castle with a massive golden crystal at the top.



“Welcome to my shop, miss. How about a piece of bread? Thanks very much. All right, that will be one hour, please.”

Beautiful white buildings stood in rows alongside the tree-lined main avenue, looming over the people as they came and went. Partly because it was lunchtime, there were all sorts of folks moving along the road.

I saw someone shopping and someone else reading at a café. One person was sitting on a bench, resting. Another offered food to people coming and going down the road.

And then there was me, a traveler trying to buy bread at a roadside stall.

“How am I supposed to pay you?” I tilted my head questioningly at the proprietor.

The gate guard had told me there was no currency in this city and instructed me to carry a pocket watch–like device in place of my wallet.

The device was very strange. Digits counting up to the number eight were engraved on its face, and there was only one hand. The case was inlaid with one pale stone and one gold-colored stone, and the whole thing gleamed in my hand.

Apparently, this thing was called a crystal clock, and it was used instead of currency here. I’d been told that the city’s people traded time instead of money.

“I don’t really understand how this thing works...”

It was easy enough to accept the device as I entered the city, but I still didn’t know how to use it. That was probably unavoidable, since I was so sleepy.

“One hour,” said the woman, pointing to my crystal clock. “Wind it back one hour’s time.”

When I did as she asked and turned the hand back, a small orb of energy

floated up from the clock. Then, when the proprietor brought her own crystal clock close to mine, the magical orb swayed and shook before being sucked into her device.

The hand on the woman's crystal clock then advanced by one hour. According to her, our transaction was now complete.

"Ha-ha, what a mysterious item."

As I accepted my bread, I took a closer look at my crystal clock.

Apparently, the reason why only eight hours were engraved on the clock's face was that eight was the daily allotment of credits.

But why in the world are they using these strange objects in place of a local currency? I wondered.

Naturally, I was curious about the origins of this strange practice. The time people exchanged here, *what exactly is it for?* I wondered.

"It all happened one year ago—"

Along the side of the busy main road, some children had gathered and were sitting flat on the ground. When I looked closer and followed their gazes, I saw a man putting on a puppet show.

THE TALE OF THE LAKESIDE WITCH WHO CREATED THE CRYSTAL CLOCKS, read a placard posted above the stage. A puppet modeled after a young woman with blue hair was dancing on its strings.

I'm not really sure what's going on here, but it seems to be a local puppet play. How very interesting.

Casually, I sat down and joined the little kiddies to watch the show.

"The Lakeside Witch, Karoline, had a taste for adventure and invention—and in a certain cave, she found some mysterious crystals."

In the cave, there were two crystals—one golden, and the other pale blue.

The two crystals appeared on stage, glittering brightly.

"Lady Karoline, fascinated by the crystals' beauty, brought both of them back to our city."

At this point, the background of the puppet stage completely transformed into a representation of the city. The puppet holding the two dazzling crystals began to tremble.

“There was extraordinary power in the crystals Lady Karoline had found. The golden crystal had the power to store the magical energy that spilled from trees and flowering plants, and the pale blue crystal could drain away sleepiness from people nearby and change it into energy.”

The puppet on the stage peered at the two glowing crystals. Apparently, the Lakeside Witch had become infatuated with these handy crystals.

“Was it possible to enrich our lives using this ability to drain away sleepiness? That question spurred Lady Karoline to study the two crystals.

“However, as convenient as it was to convert sleepiness into magical energy, there was a catch—the only thing the pale blue crystal took was the *feeling* of sleepiness. It did nothing to relieve one’s physical exhaustion.”

Partway through the play, the Karoline puppet suddenly collapsed on stage as the puppeteer cried out dramatically, “Oh, how terrible! Lady Karoline has collapsed after working for days on end! But she’s unable to sleep! How awful!” The puppeteer continued, “But then Lady Karoline had an idea. If she couldn’t sleep normally, she could just use magic.”

It seemed Karoline had decided to force her body to sleep using a sleeping spell.

One of the little kids stuck her hand up enthusiastically and asked, “Couldn’t she have solved the problem by getting away from those crystals?”

“She could have. But Lady Karoline was an airhead.” The man didn’t even look up as he very politely made this bizarre statement.

“So you’re saying this Lady Karoline was an idiot?” the little girl asked.

Taking a closer look, the man noticed the “little girl” was actually a full-grown woman with hair the color of ash, sitting among the children.

“Ah, yes. That’s correct,” he replied, adopting a more formal tone.

Not long after that, it seemed Karoline’s research wound up producing some

results.

“She knew the pale blue crystal converted sleepiness into magical energy and the gold-colored crystal stored that energy. Combining these properties with her own sleeping spell, Karoline created the first crystal clock.

“When she wanted to sleep for one hour, she wound the clock back one hour’s time, and when she wanted to sleep for eight hours, she used the same method to cast a sleeping spell for that length of time. Then she would fall asleep.

“Once asleep, no matter how much sleepiness the pale blue crystal converted into magical energy, the crystal clock maintained the spell so that Karoline didn’t wake up until the desired hour. And because magical energy was constantly circulating through her body, her exhaustion was miraculously cured. Or was it?”

The man manipulated his puppet on stage as he spun this dubious tale for the children.

“When she presented the completed crystal clock to the king, he was absolutely delighted.”

A bearded puppet slid onto the stage beside Karoline. The puppet with the scraggly beard peered down at the crystal clock in Karoline’s hand, then leaped into the air.

“Soon, the king, too, was captivated by these interesting, if slightly suspicious, crystals. He proposed to Karoline that they use these crystal clocks instead of currency. She agreed to the king’s proposal and set to work improving the device.

“The result of those improvements is the crystal clocks we all now carry.”

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a pocket watch—or something that looked like one, at any rate. He opened the lid, which was inlaid with pale blue and gold-colored crystals, and revealed the clock inside. Inscribed into its face were the numerals one through eight. There was only one hand to keep time, and it was pointed at the top of the clock, unmoving. There was also a small window in the clock face. In most clocks, a window like that

would display the date. But in this crystal clock, the number forty-two was displayed instead.

At first glance, it just looked like a watch that had been broken in a rather novel way. But apparently, this number indicated the remaining days the man was able to sleep.

“In this city, sleep is an important resource that we use instead of currency. It’s all thanks to Lady Karoline that we can live with peace of mind.”

Then the scene changed, and the Karoline puppet lay down in a casket, surrounded by beautiful flowers.

“Creating such an incredible device as the crystal clocks brought Lady Karoline great fortune. After that, she left word that she would wake again when her invention had helped the city flourish and develop into a wonderful, remarkable place. Then she settled in for a long slumber.”

Thus, he said, Lady Karoline slept continuously for one whole year.

.....

Wait, wait, wait.

One of the little children raised her hand again.

“Hey, mister! If you sleep for a whole year, won’t your body start to break down?”

After cautiously raising his head, the man frowned and stared at the adult woman who’d casually joined the group of children.

“This is an old folktale,” he said. “So I’d appreciate it if you stopped heckling me...”

“Isn’t this story a little recent to be an ‘old folktale’?”

“Furthermore, this is a play for children, so I’d appreciate it if any adults would mind their own business...”

“Despite my appearance, I’m still a child.”

“If you’re a child, how come you look like a grown-up?”

“I get plenty of sleep.”

At any rate, I expect he's probably embellishing the story a little for the kids. I don't know what really happened to this Karoline, but I suppose there's a possibility she's already passed away.

"So to make sure we're able to show Lady Karoline a flourishing, prosperous city, our king uses the crystal clocks to rule," the man told the children. "And that's why we all must live honest, upright lives."

Then the children stood up and applauded in unison.

".....?"

After standing and clapping, the children stared vacantly at the stage. Alongside the two crystals, the bearded king puppet was dancing around in front of the backdrop.

I thought of Karoline, who fell into a long sleep immediately after making a device powerful enough to restructure the whole city. Then I thought of the king, now in charge.

I get the feeling there's something shady going on in the background here.

"Lady Karoline has indeed been sleeping for the past year. That's the truth."

Later, at an inn, I told the proprietor about what I had seen, and that was his even reply.

"Really, she has?" I asked.

Isn't the idea of someone sleeping for an entire year kind of ridiculous?

"That's what we've been told anyway."

He didn't look at all like he was joking. Though, with all due respect, it didn't look like there was much going on in his mind at all as he spoke.

This city's residents could make conversation just like anyone else, but all of them had something strange going on with their eyes. Their gazes were vacant and dark and never seemed to settle. It was as though they were all perpetually sleep-deprived.

"....."

The inn's proprietor charged me two days' worth of sleep for one night's stay

and sucked up two big, buoyant orbs from my crystal clock.

“But for the entire year,” he continued, “the king has been convinced she’s coming back. He’s been governing our city well, hoping she will declare it a wonderful place when she returns.”

A fine attitude, but something still bothers me.

“What does Karoline mean to the king, exactly?”

Even if she did invent something incredible enough to change the city, he seems a little too attached to this one witch...

“She’s the first person he ever loved.”

“Oh my.”

I closed my crystal clock’s lid with a *snap* and accepted the key to my room from the innkeeper. He told me to make myself at home, and I headed for the room he’d arranged for me.

“But what a strange feeling this is...”

The moment I arrived, I set down my bags, stretched out on the slightly too-firm bed, and gazed up at the ceiling.

I’d flown all night on my broom, and as expected, I was exhausted. I’d used up all my magical energy. My body was heavy and sluggish, and I sank into the bed. I wanted to stop moving and just lie there.

By all rights, I should be unable to keep my eyes open. I stayed up all night, after all.

“...I’m not sleepy at all.”

But my eyelids refused to go down as I stared up at the ceiling.

When I’d been sightseeing earlier, it had been the same. I’d closed my eyelids a few times as a test and found I was unable to fall asleep. My vision went dark, and that was all.

My body was screaming for rest, but to my mind, sleep remained distant. It felt almost as though my body belonged to someone else.

“I’ll give this a try, I suppose.”

I set my crystal clock back three hours.

Three little round balls rose gently to the surface. I tried shifting them onto my palm, and, still half floating, the orbs drifted over to dance in my hand.

According to the innkeeper, in this city, you could only sleep using the hours taken from your crystal clock. In other words, I would be unable to sleep any more than that. That must mean no one here could use oversleeping as an excuse for being late.

I swallowed the three little orbs.

Immediately, my crystal clock made a metallic *rattle*, and the sweet, sweet scent of flowers wafted through the air. The aroma itself seemed to be the sleeping spell. My body grew steadily heavier, and I sank into the bed.

According to the innkeeper, as long as no outside stimulation disturbed me, such as someone touching my shoulder or calling out to me, I would absolutely not wake up until the set time had elapsed.

I looked at the clock.

Three hours from now, it will be evening. I wonder what kind of world will be waiting for me when I wake up?



I had a dream.

I saw the castle standing in the center of the city, and a chamber underneath it.

A large casket sat in the middle of an underground room filled with flowers.

When I opened the casket, I found a young woman with short blue hair dressed in white robes with her hands pressed together in a gesture of prayer. She was fast asleep. I peered down at her, entranced by her beautiful face.

“I’ve been waiting.”

A moment later, a pair of emerald-green eyes bore into me. I’d been sure the woman was asleep, but now she awoke, sat up, and smiled boldly at me.

“I’ve been waiting for someone just like you.”

Then she placed her forehead against mine.

“.....”

I slept for exactly three hours, and during that time, I had the dream I just described.

When my eyes snapped open and I looked out the window, the city was already shrouded in darkness.

The day was approaching its end, and I was struck by the feeling that I had somehow done something wasteful.

“...Whoa.”

Immediately after I got up, I noticed an abnormal feeling in my body. My limbs felt strangely light. Energy surged through me. I could have cast any kind of spell at all.

Normally, three measly hours of sleep could never have replenished my magical energy and cured my physical exhaustion after a whole night of flying. And yet my body seemed to have forgotten it had ever been tired. My energy level was so high, it was bizarre. I knew it must be an effect of the crystal clock, but I still found it hard to believe.

“This is amazing...”

Using my excess energy, I jumped off the bed with a little shout.

“Heh-heh-heh. It is, isn’t it? That’s the power of my crystal clocks.”

Just then, I saw a woman leaning against the wall beside my bed, looking self-important. She had her arms crossed and a smug smile on her face.

“.....”

I rubbed my eyes.

“Sorry if I surprised you. My name is Karoline. I’m the designer of that crystal clock you’re holding.” The woman introduced herself calmly.

I slapped my cheeks, trying to wake up.

“Hey, hey, are you doubting my existence?” she said, sounding fed up. *“Believe me, I’m a real person who really exists!”* She shrugged in exasperation.

Incidentally, I could see right through her body to the wall behind her.

“What? What’s with the glaring all of a sudden? You wanna fight? Hey!”

Karoline, or whoever she was, unleashed several punches in my direction. Her fists went right through my forehead.

She wasn’t able to touch me, and I couldn’t touch her either. It seemed that, whatever she was, she had no physical substance to her.

“.....” My mind was in turmoil at this sudden development. “...What’s going on? Do you start seeing weird hallucinations or something when you use a crystal clock...?”

“Humph. Good guess. Just as you suspected, whenever someone uses one of my crystal clocks, a variety of strange phenomena occur, both big and small. Most people don’t notice, though. But when someone with strong magical energy like you uses one, they’re able to notice the changes. Also, I’m not a hallucination, so don’t underestimate me. Hyah!”

This time, she slapped my face with her open palm. She failed to make contact, of course. Only a cool autumn breeze tickled my throat.

“If you’re not a hallucination, then what are you...?”

“A dream...maybe?”

Isn’t that just another kind of hallucination? What does this dream Karoline want with me anyway?

“Oh, say. I bet you’ve got some time on your hands. Wanna go on a date?” She jabbed her thumb toward the window.

“.....”

Following her gesture, I looked out the window. Soon, night would fall.

A date? ...I’d rather not, actually.

“Hey, don’t make such a sour face! I’ll send you flying. Hyah!”

She unleashed a series of kicks directed at my knees. As before, all the translucent woman’s attacks passed straight through me.

“.....”

“Hey! Hey, are you ignoring me? If you keep this up, I’ll keep hanging around in front of you forever. Is that what you want, huh?”

That would be a little irritating...

“Incidentally, what happens if I turn you down?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’ll haunt you.”

Maybe my judgment was off since I’d just woken up. Under normal circumstances, I would never agree to an invitation from some strange woman who just appeared in my room and then waltz right out the door with her... Actually...maybe this was pretty in character for me...

Well, whatever. I accepted her invitation with a nod.

“Oh, what’s this? Sounds like you’re finally catching on. I love a nice, agreeable girl. I knew you were just the kind of witch I was looking for.”

To be honest, I was quite interested in the translucent woman myself.

Her short blue hair, the white robes she was wearing, her emerald-green eyes looking straight at me—she was identical to the woman I had seen in my dream.

In fact, she could have been pulled straight from the puppet play I’d watched that afternoon.

The city livened up as the sun began to set.

Hollow-eyed people flooded the main avenue, and when I tentatively entered a nearby restaurant, I saw that it was nearly full. While the employees walked busily to and fro, adults dressed in fashionable attire indulged in food and drink.

“So what in the world are you? Where did you come from? Or maybe I should ask why you decided to contact me? Oh, and why have you been hiding yourself for a year?”

Water and food were placed before me and me alone. Apparently, I was the only one aware of the translucent woman’s existence. To everyone else, I must have looked like some weird lady talking to the empty seat across from her.

But, well, it wasn’t as though I stood out.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

“Ee-hee, hee-hee... S-stop it... If you keep making me laugh, I’ll really lose it!”

Jovial voices were coming from all around the restaurant.

Maybe they had too much to drink, and now everything seems funny.

Bits of conversation and the sound of laughter fluttered around the room. At one table, someone burst into side-splitting laughter just because they dropped their fork. Elsewhere, a group of men were shouting “Wheee!” and making other incomprehensible noises. At yet another table, a man and woman appeared to be completely misunderstanding each other.

“I think I drank too much...,” said the woman.

“Did you, now?” the man replied. “Are you all right? Can you make it home?”

“I don’t feel like going home tonight...”

“Well, I didn’t ask you what you felt like.”

“I want to stay over.”

“I think there are a few inns nearby. Do you want me to drop you off at one?”

“I can’t sleep unless I’m with someone.”

“Is that so? I’m surprised you’ve lived this long with a condition like that.”

No one seemed concerned about what was going on around them, except for the employees tirelessly walking around carrying food.

“What am I, you ask? I told you before. I am like a dream.”

“I’d like something a little more concrete, please.”

“Don’t look for concrete answers from a translucent person.”

“For now, since you’re see-through, can I think of you as a ghost?”

“Calling myself a ghost would be misleading. I’ve got a proper body, but it’s still asleep. So I’m less like a ghost and more like some kind of astral projection —”

“Too complicated. I think I’ll just stick with ghost.”

In such a hectic atmosphere, even a witch carrying on a conversation with a ghost seemed unlikely to draw any attention.

“Hey...! Look over there, at that table!”

“What’s the matter?”

“That witch girl is talking to herself... There’s no one in the seat across from her...”

“Huh? Whoa! She really is...”

“I wish I had the guts to be that cringe in public...”

“For real...”

.....

At least, I’d like to think I wasn’t drawing any attention...

“By the way, I haven’t asked your name yet. What should I call you? ...Hey, isn’t your face a little red? What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing...”

I told her my name and explained that I was a traveler and that I had come to this city after hearing about how unique it was. I explained that I was quite interested in the crystal clocks, devices only found in Eherias.

“Oh? Really? Are they that amazing? Heh-heh-heh... If you say that again, I might blush...”

Karoline, who professed to be the crystal clocks’ original creator, giggled bashfully.

“How did you make these things?” I asked.

“Heh-heh. That’s a secret, of course. If you ask again, I’ll send you flying.”

She’s clearly mad, but she’s still laughing...

“Can you tell me what kind of effects they have? I still don’t understand how I’m able to talk to you.”

I had seen her in my dream, then she had appeared before me after I awoke, though she’d become translucent for some reason. I still wasn’t sure if she was

dead or alive.

Honestly, I don't know what any of this means.

"There are a number of reasons why you and I are able to converse. But to summarize, the main reason is that we're both witches who possess great power."

My, my.

"Me? A powerful witch? You're making me blush. Hee-hee-hee."

"Wow. Suddenly bursting into laughter all by yourself. You look like a creep."
Karoline's face twisted in disgust.

You're right here! I'm talking to you!

"Hey, look over there. That girl is laughing to herself..."

"She really is."

"I wish I had the confidence to be that cringe..."

"I think this goes beyond cringe. She seems like bad news."

"Don't suddenly start talking sense, now."

.....

"You know how party people gravitate toward parties? It's just like that. It was inevitable that I'd find my way to someone like you, who possesses strong magical energy," said Karoline. *"My crystal clocks are quite special, but they don't have the power to let you talk to translucent people. Didn't they teach you about their functions when you arrived in the city?"*

"You can use them to set the hours when you sleep, right?"

"Right. And thanks to that, nights here have become wonderfully exciting."

She looked around the interior of the restaurant. People were making merry, talking, and drinking quietly. All sorts were out enjoying the evening.

Here, no one needed to worry about staying up late. Whether they had work the next day or not, all they had to do was sleep for about three hours. Their fatigue would simply evaporate, and there was no chance they'd oversleep.

“It seems this restaurant has extended its business hours as well. I suppose that’s because the residents are able to stay up later. It seems they now operate right until dawn.”

In other words, Karoline’s crystal clocks had freed up the city’s nights.

I followed her gaze and took another look at our surroundings. Sure enough, everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. It felt like the day before a holiday. To the restaurant’s customers, this city’s evenings must feel like a wonderful dream.

“.....”

However, I couldn’t help focusing in on the waiters dashing busily around through the gaps between customers. As long as there were people able to enjoy their time, other people would have to work to afford them that privilege. The fact that the restaurant had extended its business hours meant the employees now had to work longer.

I began to wonder if freeing up the city’s nights was more of a blessing or a curse.

“Come to think of it, it sounds like you came here expecting to see something interesting, so what do you think of this scene?” Karoline looked at me expectantly.

But I just shook my head and said, “I’d prefer someplace a little quieter.”

The evening wore on.

Nighttime in the Moonlight City of Eherias was incredibly brilliant. Streetlights painted the city in golden light. Their glow enveloped everything, from the rows of buildings facing the street, to the cobblestones, to trees by the roadside—themselves decorated with yet more lights.

Every time the autumn breeze rustled and shook the trees, leaves scattered through the air and disappeared into the night, twinkling dazzlingly as they went, like sparks from a fire.

According to Karoline, all the streetlights illuminating the city got their power from the gold-colored crystals.

“When you woke up this evening, didn’t you feel more energized than usual?” She pointed at something farther down the street as she spoke. Following the line from her finger, I found the king’s castle at the center of the city. A great golden light sparkled above it. *“That bright light over there is the largest crystal in the city. It’s up there casting a veil of magical energy over the whole city, and thanks to it, my crystal clocks are able to function. It even makes it possible for mages like you to manifest more power than usual.”*

According to Karoline, that crystal sitting atop the castle was constantly releasing magical energy, making it possible for mages to use very powerful spells.

“And this incredible bounty of magical energy is what makes the nights here so spectacularly beautiful.”

It wasn’t only mages who received the benefits of the magical energy flooding the city.

I looked around at my surroundings.

“.....”

It seemed like the tree-lined avenue was a popular date spot. When I looked around, I saw many other people quietly enjoying the golden scenery. A pair of lovers held hands among the trees. A married couple sat on a bench, looking up at the sky. A family played among the glittering branches. From time to time, I heard the sound of reserved laughter carried by the breeze. The area was very calm and quiet.

“I guess I don’t stand out as much here as I did earlier.”

“Well, you’re still out of place, but in a different kind of way.”

I threw a punch at her with all my might, but all I struck was air.

“Good thing for you that you’re not corporeal, huh?”

“Hey, are you trying to pick a fight...?”

She scrunched up her face, and I sighed and walked on. The night scenery reminded me of a fairy tale. It was like everything beautiful had been gathered up and put on display.

Wouldn't it be wonderful, I thought, if everyone could enjoy this scenery at their leisure? I wondered just how many of the people living here were able to walk among these trees.

"One year," the woman beside me mumbled. *"Nearly one year has passed since I introduced the crystal clocks."*

"What kind of place was this a year ago?"

"It was a normal city."

People went to work on the weekdays and slept before each day changed over, only to go to work again the next morning. After repeating that routine day after day, they'd let loose all at once on the weekend, all the while worrying about how much time they had left before it all started over again.

It had been that sort of ordinary, unremarkable place, she told me.

"There's no sense of that at all now, is there?"

"That's because this city has undergone a major change. The scenery, the people, and everything else are all different."

Karoline's crystal clocks had released the city's people from the constraints of time.

Their exhaustion vanished after a mere three hours' sleep. They could use their daylight hours freely, and they didn't have to worry at all about staying up late into the night.

"The people here have had their nights set free. And as long as they have the crystals, that will never change."

Karoline looked up at the crystal sparkling brilliantly atop the castle and came to a stop. A moment later, I stopped, too, and turned around.

"....."

She was gazing up at the castle, looking dazzled.

At that point, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

Come to think of it...

"I still haven't asked you why you came to see me."

In my dream, she said, "I've been waiting for someone just like you."

But why? What does she want with me?

"I have two requests to ask of you."

"What are they?"

"I wonder if you'll grant my wishes."

"It depends on what you want."

At that, she drew close to me, and despite the fact that no one else could hear her, she began to whisper, like she was afraid someone might eavesdrop. The castle glittered behind her all the while.

"I've got to wake up now," she said.

She would wake again when her invention had helped the city flourish and develop into a wonderful, remarkable place.

The old folktale I'd heard that afternoon flashed through my mind.

That was when she made her request.

"Please wake me up."

She asked me to wake her up from her year-long slumber.



It was just like in my dream.

Karoline's body had indeed been laid to rest in the basement of the castle. Following her lead, I tiptoed along, doing just as I was told.

"As expected, security is tight, huh...?" I said as I strolled boldly through the front gate.

There had been a security guard standing watch out front, but I'd been able to pass through easily. Once I'd made it through the gate and entered the castle, I took in its ornate interior. There were dazzling chandeliers and a great hall covered in gold. Mage guards patrolled the place on their brooms.

"Wow, amazing..."

I would have liked to go back to the castle and sightsee, if possible. However,

today I was here to trespass, so I didn't have time to leisurely explore.

"Where should I go?" I asked Karoline, looking up at her.

"If you continue to your right, you'll find a staircase. Go down, and you'll end up in the basement."

"Got it."

I started tiptoeing along again. And then—

"Huh.....? Who goes there?!"

—just as I was approaching the staircase, one of the mages on patrol spotted me. Immediately, they came flying over on their broom.

"Meow!"

Hiding myself in the shadows, I casually made a noise like a cat's cry.

"Hmm. Guess it was just a cat..."

After casting a fleeting glance in my direction, the man left.

"....."

I had temporarily taken the shape of a cat with ash-gray fur.

"You want to know if the castle has heavy security? Don't worry about it! Just transform into a cat or something, and you'll get in no problem!"

Karoline, the original proponent of this rather reckless strategy, waited until the mage disappeared from sight and said proudly, *"See? That went well, right?"*

"...Even if I was a cat, I'm still clearly trespassing! Isn't that a little suspicious? Is it all right for them to dismiss me like that?"

Is everything all right with this city?

"Their critical thinking skills are quite low," Karoline told me proudly. *"So as long as you don't look human, you'll have an easy time."*

I proceeded to the castle's basement, as instructed, and snuck around trying to avoid the guards' notice. Then, as if retracing the plot of my dream, I found a room I recognized.

“.....”

Deep underground, I found a room filled with flowers. The large casket at the center, as well as everything else, could have been pulled directly from my dream.

Once there, I lifted the transformation spell and opened the casket.

“Wow. What an amazing beauty. Who could she be? Oh, it’s me.”

I mercilessly slapped the cheek of the young woman sleeping inside the casket.

“Hey, come on. That’s my body! Treat it with care, would ya? What? You wanna fight?” Karoline swung her fist at my face.

“I heard you would wake up immediately with any outside stimulation, but it’s not working, is it?”

Slap, slap, slap, slap.

She’s been sleeping for a whole year; maybe she’s just a little groggy?

“I’ll wake up if you give me a kiss.”

Whap!

I slapped her again, a little harder this time.

“Owww!”

All at once, the translucent figure disappeared. When I looked down at my now warm palm, I saw the woman in the casket open her eyes. Groaning, she squinted against the light.

Looks like we were successful.

“What was that sound just now?!”

But it seemed we had been a little too reckless.

A guard had heard me slapping Karoline’s cheek with all my might and had entered the room with the casket.

He must have been terribly surprised to find a witch, whom he’d never seen before, standing in front of the casket surrounded by flowers, in which another

witch was now sitting up, awake.

“Wha—? You there! Who are...? Huh? Lady Karoline? Have you woken up, Lady Karoline?!”

This guard, who, just as Karoline had said, seemed to be rather bad at critical thinking, was more surprised to see her awake than to find an unfamiliar intruder standing beside her.

“Yes,” she replied, nonchalant. “For the first time in a year.”

With a grunt of exertion, Karoline got up out of the casket and walked over to the guard, holding her cheeks.

“Um, Lady Karoline, what in the world is—?”

The guard seemed very confused by what was happening. Karoline stormed up to him, then stopped and held out her hand.

“Crystal clock,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Crystal clock. You have one, don’t you? Get it out.”

“Huh? Oh, r-right...” Bewildered as he was, the guard pulled his clock out of his pocket.

“Thanks.” Karoline took the device from the guard. As soon as she had it, she pulled out her wand and destroyed the clock with her magic.

Crunch.

“.....Huh?”

Without hesitation, she mercilessly smashed it to bits. The crystals, now ground to dust, fell through her fingers.

“I’ve got to wake up now,” Karoline had said as she told me her two requests. *“Everyone in this city has got to wake up.”*

She’d explained that she, along with every other person living in the Moonlight City of Eherias, needed to wake up. That was the reason for her two requests.

The first request was to wake her up, and the second concerned the crystal atop the castle.

She'd asked me to destroy it.

"Let's go, Elaina." She turned around and flashed me a bold smile.

My goodness. We may both be women, but I must say she looked quite dashing just now.

.....

Her cheek was bright red.

"I'm sorry, is your cheek all right?"

"If you wanna know, it really hurts."



Allow me to rewind the clock, so to speak, and explain the events of a year earlier.

Karoline, who held the rather strange status of adventurer, inventor, and witch, had discovered two crystals while exploring a cave.

One was pale blue and the other golden. The crystals each had their own magical properties—the former could absorb sleepiness and transform it into magical energy, while the latter had the power to store that energy.

Obviously, she took an interest in these crystals and their strange, curious properties.

"This is so freakin' cool!"

"What is cool, Miss Karoline?"

As it happened, Karoline was employed by the kingdom at the time, and she had been assigned to teach the young king about magic as court witch.

"Take a look at this," she said.

"That is...quite beautiful," the king replied, captivated by the brilliant golden crystal.

"Which is prettier, the crystal or me? Hmm?" Karoline teased him.

“W-well, you are, of course, Miss Karoline...”

“Hey, what’s wrong with you? Don’t be so embarrassing!” Karoline slapped the king mercilessly.

“S-sorry...” The king blushed.

The young king admired the witch Karoline greatly. She was his good friend.

Karoline, then, had even more titles. Not only was she an adventurer, an inventor, and a witch, but she was also a member of the court and a confidante to the king. It seemed harder and harder to pin her down.

“By the way,” she said, “my shoulders have gotten a little stiff from all this adventuring. Massage them.”

She was also the only person in the world who could order around the king.

I wonder if her shoulders were stiff from carrying the burden of so many different roles? But I suppose we should leave that aside for now.

Karoline took the mysterious crystals back with her and began to study them.

As a test, she tried casting a sleeping spell nearby and was able to sleep. But when she awoke, her body was filled with much more magical energy than usual.

“To summarize, by using a clock installed with one of each of these two crystals, people will be able to shorten the time they spend sleeping.”

Utilizing the pale blue crystal’s ability to absorb sleepiness and the golden crystal’s ability to store and release magical energy, Karoline created the first crystal clock and showed it to the king.

It wasn’t as though she considered sleep a bad thing. She merely thought that by using the crystal clocks, people would be able to use their time more freely.

That was what she believed anyway.

“What an amazing invention! Let’s distribute them immediately!” The king was very pleased with her crystal clock.

At first, he distributed them only to the uppermost echelons of society. These wealthy citizens were delighted by the devices, which allowed them free use of

time they would otherwise have spent sleeping.

However, the crystal clocks weren't perfect.

"The fact that they reset each day is something we might improve on..."

The crystal clocks functioned by using magical energy and produced sleeping spells in the form of white orbs. But even with the power of both crystals, they could only perform this function for the span of one day. Once that time had elapsed, the user had to allow the pale blue crystal to absorb their sleepiness once again in order to store up magical energy inside the golden crystal. As a result, the clocks couldn't be used again for several days.

In other words, they were simply short on magical energy.

This problem, however, was easily resolved with the king's help.

"Take a look at this, Miss Karoline! I've unearthed an enormous crystal!"

The king made full use of his wealth to install this giant crystal, which would provide a permanent supply of magical energy, atop the castle.

"Seriously? Good going."

And so with the clocks receiving additional power from this enormous crystal, it became possible to use them all the time.

Once Karoline and the king had solved the clocks' energy problem, they embarked on a project to mass-produce them. Under the king's instruction, guards unearthed more crystals from the cave, and Karoline made more crystal clocks. Then the king would have more crystals unearthed, and so on and so forth.

They continued, day after day.

Karoline was very satisfied spending her days like that. She truly believed that if everyone in the country could freely determine how to use every hour of their lives, the future would be amazing.

And so her crystal clocks spread throughout the country. Now that everyone had one, the people of the Moonlight City of Eherias ought to have been living richer lives than ever before.

However...

“I have a report.”

Around the time the crystal clocks had spread through the general population, Karoline and the king discovered they had a serious defect.

A retainer came and outlined the facts for them dispassionately.

“Someone has tried to utilize a crystal clock to commit murder. Thankfully, the attempt failed.”

At the time, the crystal clocks were not yet being used as currency, and everyone had access to unlimited hours of sleep. Under these circumstances, a villain had appeared who tried to use the crystal clock’s abilities to make someone sleep for hundreds of hours at once in an attempt to kill them.

Throughout history, there have always been people who try to misuse convenient tools for their own nefarious purposes.

“...What a fool.”

Karoline was incredibly hurt and angered that someone would use her invention for evil.

But that wasn’t all that had happened.

“What was strange about this incident, Your Majesty, was the condition of the victim,” the retainer continued without emotion. “Though the victim in this case slept continuously for an entire week, when struck on the shoulder, they awakened easily.”

The victim hadn’t died. In fact, according to the retainer, after waking up, the victim’s body had been the picture of perfect health. If anything, they were overly energetic.

This should have been impossible for a normal person. It was as if the victim’s body had gained superhuman powers.

After hearing this strange report, Karoline examined her crystal clocks again.

“What could have happened...?” she wondered.

Her crystal clocks now contained much, much more magical energy than they

had when she'd created them.

By bringing large quantities of the golden crystals into the city, they'd made it possible for the crystals to store up an overabundance of magical energy, which was then absorbed into people's bodies. As a result, the clocks had begun to manifest bizarre effects, greater than anything Karoline had imagined.

"....."

Karoline decided the crystals needed to go.

The crystal clock was a useful invention. But people weren't ready for such a thing. And so, as the first step, she decided to destroy the golden crystal on top of the castle.

However, immediately after she got on her broom—

"Miss Karoline? Where are you going?"

—her body began shaking violently, and she fell to the ground. Unsure of what had happened, she looked around and saw the king looking down at her, along with all his retainers.

Then an unceasing rain of white orbs came down upon her body.

Her consciousness faded, and she lost her grip on her wand.

Just like Karoline, the king had been doing his own investigations after hearing that strange report from his retainer. And he had realized that the crystal clocks hid the potential to grant great longevity.

How could he give up a monopoly on something so useful?

"Thank you so much for this wonderful invention, Miss Karoline." The king grinned broadly.

His eyes were no longer those of the young man in the cave who had called Karoline's crystals beautiful. Now they were empty and dark.

Karoline's crystal clocks now contained much more energy than they had when she'd created them, and the wealthy citizens of the kingdom—the king included—had already become entranced by their power.

Their faces, seen through her increasingly blurry vision, looked strange and

unfamiliar—these were no longer the people she knew.

It was almost as if the crystal clocks were now controlling them.

“...You fools,” she managed to whisper just before her consciousness faded. But her words fell on deaf ears.

After that, she slept continuously.

Just as the old folktales said, her body was sealed up beneath the castle, and there she lay, still alive, sleeping in her casket.

Ironically, she had received the greatest share of the crystal clocks’ out-of-control power.

“This abnormal supply of magical energy ruined everything about our city. Starting with the elites who first used the crystal clocks, everyone lost their former powers of judgment and reason. The mages gained strange powers. And I, during the course of my long slumber, acquired this body that isn’t really there.”

The overabundance of magical energy had led to changes beyond all her expectations.

According to her, the citizens had grown stranger and stranger under the influence of this unusual magical energy. They could still converse, and nothing had changed about their outward appearance. But something about them was clearly abnormal.

“The crystal clocks didn’t just take the people’s sleepiness. They also stole their ability to think clearly. Now everyone is like a puppet, hanging by invisible strings.”

They had no distinct will of their own and were simply being made to dance upon the stage. Now captives of their crystal clocks, they couldn’t live without them. According to Karoline, the city was now flooded with strange phenomena.

It’s hard to disagree, seeing as I’m currently speaking to a translucent woman.

“And that’s why I want your help waking up my people from their long slumber.”

I was to rouse her sleeping body, then go around the city, destroying the crystals and returning things to how they used to be.

“.....”

Before responding, I asked her a question, just to be sure.

“What happens if I refuse?”

She smiled boldly. “Isn’t it obvious? I’ll haunt you.”

○

“L-Lady Karoline? Um, what are you—?”

Crunch.

“What are you doing, Lady Karoline?! You just broke my crystal clock!”

Crunch.

“Hey! Are you really Lady Karoline? Why would you break my—?”

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

“This lady’s definitely an imposter! Everyone! Get her— Aaaaahhh, my crystal clock!”

Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch.

Karoline and I snatched away the crystal clocks of any guards who approached us, using magic to smash them to pieces as we headed for the center of the castle.

“The people of this city are enthralled by the crystals.”

Karoline had reached two conclusions just before the king put her to sleep.

The first was that the crystals were both poisonous and addictive. The second was that the huge crystal placed atop the castle was greatly amplifying the effects, keeping everyone under the sway of the crystal clocks for a long, long time.

“Go around and break every last crystal clock. Once the clocks are destroyed, the guards will be incapacitated for a short while.”

Karoline snatched the crystal clock from an approaching guard and destroyed

it without the slightest hesitation. Golden and pale blue light scattered from her hands.

The guards who had had their crystal clocks broken collapsed one after another, like puppets with their strings cut.

As strange as it was, I got the feeling they'd finally been set free from time.

"I see now," I said.

Following her lead, I began snatching the guards' clocks and breaking them.

"Yah!" I dodged an incoming spear and broke a clock in passing.

"Hyah!" I broke another as I avoided a sword swinging down at me.

"Grah!" Following the path of an arrow speeding toward me, I found another clock and destroyed it with a spell.

But the guards kept attacking us.

"Are you confused, Lady Karoline?!"

"I bet you put some kind of nonsense in Lady Karoline's head!"

"What is she thinking, breaking our crystal clocks?!"

Even though she was the clocks' original inventor, the guards acted like anyone trying to steal their clocks was an enemy. It didn't matter why she wanted to take them or why she wanted to destroy them.

It didn't matter who tried to snatch their precious clocks away. They couldn't allow it.

The mages patrolling the castle were the same. They appeared suddenly from all directions and swooped in to attack us.

".....!"

Witches though we were, we flinched in the face of this onslaught.

When we flew up to avoid the guards' weapons, mages showered us with spells before we could even catch our breath. Fire, water, wind, arrows, swords, axes, lightning bolts—every kind of attack imaginable came at us from all directions like pouring rain.

“Let’s work together to bring down that witch!”

“Justice is on our side!”

“Take down the traitor and the gray-haired witch!”

Pathetically, I was stuck defending. Never mind destroying the crystal clocks—I couldn’t even manage to point my wand at our attackers. I was just swinging it around and steering my broom, flying up and down between the marble-covered floor and the chandelier. Not only was I unable to get out any attacks, but—

“I can see you hesitating.”

Clatter.

My broom tumbled to the floor.

Before I knew it, I had fallen off, and Karoline was holding me by the shoulders. Apparently, she had forced me to a stop while I was flying around trying to escape. My broom, having suddenly lost its owner, lay still on the marble below.

Karoline swept away all the spells the mages cast at me.

“I don’t know what you’re hesitating for, but you don’t need to hold back! They’re all being manipulated by the crystal clocks I made, and by the big crystal on the castle.”

When I tilted my gaze upward, a pair of emerald-green eyes were staring back at me. Karoline was treating me like a weak little girl. She had no hesitation at all.

When I turned to look at our surroundings, I saw numerous guards and mages lying unconscious all over the place.

“Tch...! Everyone! Don’t give up! Take them down, no matter what!”

The surviving guards shouted indignantly at their fallen comrades.

Karoline looked out coldly over the scene.

“

Finally, she took her hands off my shoulders and walked calmly into the midst

of the guards still shouting their threats.

As she moved, she grumbled, “The most pitiful thing in the world is always believing you are right.”

I wondered who those words were meant for.

She swung her wand, shattering the guards’ crystal clocks one by one. Bits of both types of crystal scattered like little fireworks.

“And the saddest thing is never getting the opportunity to atone.”

It seemed like she regretted what she’d done and what she’d created. She was determined to correct her error, even if that wasn’t what her people now wanted.

“.....”

What Karoline and I were trying to do must have seemed like a terrible idea to the people of this city. It was something very harsh—something that would set back this place’s technology, which was so far beyond anything I’d ever seen before.

I was certain that, from the perspective of those around us, we were unforgivable villains. At that moment, we must have been the most wrongheaded pair in the city.

I trotted over to pick up my broom and knocked the dust off it, then followed Karoline.

“Sorry. I got kind of absorbed in my own thoughts.”

“You must be quite relaxed to be able to daydream at a time like this. Come on, now.” Karoline nudged me with her elbow. “You’re over it, right?” she asked.

I waved my hand in lieu of an answer and fired off some magical power at nearby clocks. Fragments of crystals rained down around us.

After that, we pushed onward toward the center of the castle.

As we headed for the dazzling golden crystal at the top of the castle, we faced off against more mages and guards who seemed to pour out from around every

corner.

They shouted constant abuse at me, calling me an evil witch, and scolded Karoline, labeling her a traitor. Even so, we never stopped, leaving a trail of broken crystal clocks behind us.

“Where the heck is this crystal?” I asked, brushing away bits of the clocks that had clung to me when I broke them.

It seemed to be true that these crystals all had the power to store magical energy or absorb sleepiness. Currently, not only was I wide awake, but I also had plenty of magical energy. There was no chance I’d run out. No matter how much I waved my wand or how many spells I cast, energy surged inside me.

“This way,” said Karoline.

Her unwavering steps finally led us to the crystal at the very top of the castle. She opened a door to reveal a strikingly bright, dazzlingly beautiful golden light.

“Isn’t this a bit extreme, Miss Karoline?”

In the room stood a man with a tasteful beard.

Wand in hand, he stood in our way, as if protecting the crystal. His eyes were sad and downcast, and his face was familiar. I’d seen it immediately after I arrived in the city. He was the scruffy, bearded character who had been made to dance on stage during the puppet play.

It was the king.

“That beard doesn’t suit you.” Karoline snorted at him.

It had been a year since their last meeting, but since she had been asleep the whole time, events that happened a year earlier must seem relatively recent to her. She stared at the king without a hint of sentimentality.

“Why are you breaking the crystal clocks that you yourself created?” he asked. “Do you intend to destroy this crystal, too?”

The king was lit from behind, and I saw no trace of our reflection in his eyes. He spoke without emotion, like a puppet rather than a human.

“Isn’t this a bit extreme, Miss Karoline?” Like a broken record, he repeated

the same words.

“Don’t you understand why I’m trying to destroy it?”

“I don’t.”

“Figures.” Karoline sighed and took a step forward.

The crystal clocks didn’t just take the people’s sleepiness. They also stole their ability to think clearly. Now everyone is like a puppet, hanging by invisible strings.

After living so long directly under this enormous crystal, the city’s people appeared as though they were living in a dream.

Though they could converse, they lacked the ability to think and consider. They spoke and moved as if on instinct alone.

However, when it came to the king, his instincts and drive were a real pain in the butt.

“Hyah!”

As a test, I stealthily launched a fireball at him mid-conversation.

“Please, stop it already, Miss Karoline! I don’t want to fight with you!”

But he smoothly deflected my spell off into the night with a flick of his wand and continued to speak, his words even hotter than the fire.

Huh? That was a pretty strong spell...

As I puzzled over this, I tried again—a lightning spell this time.

“If you had just stayed asleep, we could have been together forever!”

As he spoke, he repelled my lightning attack and sent it crackling into the night sky. Karoline and I were shocked by the king’s actions, of course, and by the rather disturbing line of thought he’d just voiced.

In the end, our surprise wound up giving him an opening for a counterattack.

“Watch this, Miss Karoline! Thanks to you, I’ve gotten really good at magic!”

He waved his wand and shot off a ceaseless stream of orbs of magical energy. Their dazzling light swooped in on us from all directions. Carefully dodging each

one, and sometimes negating them with my magic, I waited for my chance to strike back. As he showered me with spells, I wasn't able to spare the energy to go for his clock. Every time I defended against or dodged one of his attacks, it gouged a hole in the ground by my feet or smashed a wall, and the sound of explosions shook the room. If I'd been hit, I wouldn't have stood a chance.

In a spare moment between the king's relentless attacks, I glanced over to see how Karoline was doing and saw that, just like me, she was avoiding the attacks one by one.

"He's turned into an impressive spellcaster since I last saw him...", she said thoughtfully.

"Is this really the time to be impressed?" I shot back.

What are you doing? We're so busy dodging, we can't even attack!

"He's probably absorbing magical energy from the big crystal behind him. He must have an inexhaustible supply of magical power right now."

"Seems that way."

The king's attacks were ceaselessly gouging into the floor beneath my feet. If the castle collapsed, we might end up in a midair battle, and there would likely be casualties among the guards we had previously defeated.

It would be best to end this as quickly as possible.

"....."

In that case, we had to put a stop to his attacks, even if it meant being a little reckless and possibly injuring the king.

There was a good chance that Karoline had reached the same conclusion I had.

"Grah!"

The moment she waved her wand, countless debris from the destroyed walls went flying at the king. The onslaught, which included chips as small as pebbles as well as boulder-sized chunks, threw him off balance.

It was now or never.

Using the opening we'd just created, I destroyed his crystal clock with magic. When it broke into pieces, the king collapsed on the spot, once again like a puppet with his strings cut.

He was now lying on the floor amid the rubble. And just before he lost consciousness, he mumbled, "Isn't this a bit extreme, Miss Karoline?" He gazed up at her with vacant eyes.

"It sure is." She nodded and walked over to him. Crouching down, she gently stroked his hair, a sentimental look on her face.

Then, as pebbles fell from between her fingers, she whispered to the unconscious king, "That's why I came back to redeem myself."

In order to put an end to the evil that Karoline had started, I used my magic to levitate the big crystal.

No sooner had I waved my wand and made it float up into the air than an extraordinary amount of magical energy poured into me. It was like the crystal itself was pleading for its life.

For a split second, I was struck by a feeling of omnipotence, like I could have done anything at all.

If I could only master the use of this stone, what a brilliant future would await me! It seems a waste to destroy it here.

Such thoughts momentarily passed through my brain.

But such temptations were useless and unnecessary for a traveler like me. After all, I can only carry so much with me.

"Hyah!"

So I waved my wand and sent the crystal flying into the night sky above the city.

I packed all the magical energy I had just received into my wand, then fired it all off at once. As if following the shining golden crystal rotating in the air, a bluish-white light climbed up into the sky.

Then the two lights overlapped and exploded. When my magical energy struck the crystal, it shattered into pieces in midair, and fragments of it flew off

in all directions.

Like snowflakes, golden bits of light rained slowly down over the whole city.

The crystal had kept the people locked inside a dreamlike state, and now it showed them a final vision—a fantastical scene in the night sky.

I squinted at the city now flooded in light.



The dark sky was lit with a dazzling light.

So bright, it was impossible to sleep.

So radiant, no one would ever forget it.

“It’s so beautiful...,” I mumbled.

Then from behind me, I heard someone else mutter the exact same words.

When I turned around, I saw the king gazing in fascination up at the night sky and the rain of crystal fragments. He must have *woken up* without either of us noticing. His eyes twinkled like those of an innocent child.

His gaze was fixed on Karoline, beside me.

It was their first time meeting in a year.

Smiling lightheartedly, she said to him, “Which is prettier, the crystal or me?”



Several days later, the destruction of the big crystal atop the castle caused the magical energy in everyone’s crystal clocks to run out. They were once again simple devices that stopped functioning after a single day of use, just as they had been when Karoline first invented them.

After Karoline explained the situation, the king ordered his guards to collect the crystal clocks from all the citizens. Then he apologized for his poor judgment a year earlier and for depriving his people of their freedom as a result.

But all he got back in response were cries of confusion. The people didn’t understand what the king was apologizing for.

When the crystal clocks lost their magical energy, the people had forgotten most of what happened in the intervening year. One person described the year as like watching a hazy dream. Another was confused, saying he remembered nothing at all.

The year they had spent under the influence of the crystal clocks seemed just like a dream. Everything was indistinct and unclear. Though they retained a few scattered memories, they couldn’t recall anything specific.

From that hazy lost year, only one thing remained, burned vividly into everyone's memories: the night when countless beautiful golden lights had showered down over the city.

"I don't know what I should do. I wanted to atone for my mistakes, but most of the citizens don't even remember what I did," Karoline said, gazing idly up at the deep blue sky. "But even so, I don't plan on pretending none of it ever happened."

She was still dealing with the aftermath of the past year's events, and she understandably looked a little tired. But she also had a look of accomplishment about her.

As part of atonement, she planned to resign as court witch once everything was taken care of.

She told me that it was only natural that she assume responsibility for the matter, and that of course she wouldn't be trying to cover it up or hide what had happened.

She didn't know when she would be finished dealing with the fallout of that year-long blank period, but...

"I'm certain this city will go back to being an ordinary place with nothing special about it."

She was sure that from now on, they would have no more unforgettable nights and no more special currency. The people would go back to their normal lives and would be no different from any other people anywhere else.

Most future travelers who paid it a visit would probably forget all about it in no time.

"Are you sad?" I asked.

"Do I look sad?"

"No, not at all."

She narrowed her eyes against the glare as she squinted out at the city.

The scenery before her was perfectly ordinary. Even without any crystals, or an inexhaustible supply of magical energy flooding the city, it was still dazzlingly

radiant.

Sunlight poured down into a side avenue. People walked by with smiles on their faces. Delicious smells hung in the air.

White buildings stood in rows along both sides of the street, as if looking down protectively over their residents, and the flowers adorning window planters swayed back and forth in the autumn breeze without a care in the world.

Everything was completely ordinary. These were the kind of sights you could see almost anywhere. Common scenes you'd forget as soon as you left the city gates.

However...

I narrowed my eyes just like Karoline beside me.

"It's beautiful," I said.

Very, very beautiful.

Like something from a dream.

Afterword

Jougi Shiraishi, relentlessly pursued by deadlines, came up with a secret plan to escape this sorry fate (or at the very least, delay it for a moment).

If I collect all the side stories I've put out in the past and publish them as a book...would that work?

If I did that, it would give me some leeway on my deadlines and satisfy the people who want to read those uncollected stories! What a great plan! Please! Let's do it! Let's put out one volume like that in between now and Volume 15! It'll be like a special edition of The Journey of Elaina, see! I'm serious! I'm making a special request! Come on!

Jougi Shiraishi burst into tears in the editorial department.

Even as I write this now, it occurs to me that if I had the spare time to do that, I should have been working on my manuscript instead. At any rate, it was several days later when I got my answer from the editorial department.

Editorial: "We passed along your plan for a book of side stories."

Me: "Really?! So then the schedule for Volume 15 has been bumped pretty far back, I bet!"

Editorial: "No, we're putting out the book of side stories as Volume 15."

Me: "...Hmm? Oh, but there's some leeway in my schedule now...right?"

Editorial: "No, since we're plugging it into our existing plans, we'll be releasing it as Volume 15 in December."

Me: "Hmm???"

Editorial: "For Volume 16, we'll use the same deadline we previously had for Volume 15, so your schedule is actually going to get even tighter."

Me: "Why?????"

Editorial: “Oh, and of course, it wouldn’t be fair to the readers to simply rerelease the short stories. So you’ll need to fill out the volume with some new content, too.”

Me: “What?????????????????????????????????????????????????????????????”

Jougi Shiraishi tried to make things easier and ended up making things harder instead. Cue thunderous roar of laughter.

I can’t believe the next volume is coming out the month after next. Though I *am* happy that my long-held dream for a short story volume is finally being granted. I’ve been saying we should put one out forever! And so Volume 15 will be coming out a little early, in December, so please pick up a copy!

Now, let’s get into my comments for each chapter. There will be spoilers, so those of you who haven’t read the main book yet, stop right here and go read it!

• Chapter 1 Special Offer

This is a story I wrote to serve as a prologue to this volume. I think there are multiple ways to interpret where it fits in chronologically.

• Chapter 2 The Country of Stories

This is a story about swindlers getting swindled. As I was writing about the Travelers’ Restaurant, I thought, *The employees of this restaurant seem to have an easy job. How nice!*

• Chapter 3 Sena the Judge

This is a tale about how certain members of the Judgment Squad wound up corrupted because they thought they didn’t have to take their jobs seriously as long as someone else was taking *theirs* seriously, and about Sena, who earnestly tried her hardest in spite of them. If you’ll forgive the change of subject, I often see people on police shows fly into a rage when they get caught by the police. “You can’t just pick on me!” they say. But I always find myself wondering, *How can you insist on fair treatment when you can’t even follow the law...?*

• Chapter 4 The Actors’ Story

This one’s about Elaina’s mom and Miss Fran, who are doing the same thing

Elaina is. This chapter links back to the first story's observation that no matter how much time passes, the same stories are making the rounds at the Travelers' Restaurants.

- Chapter 5 Their Own Private World

This is a story about two weird people finding each other. Their weird ways become normal, and everything outside their little private world seems abnormal. Conspiracy theories can only exist if they have people who laugh them off as foolish nonsense. Recently, I've been holding back, but as you may know, I started writing *The Journey of Elaina* because I wanted to write stories in every conceivable genre, so I intend to continue on with this kind of story from here on out. Thanks for your support!

- Chapter 6 Flowers for Fools

Fundamentally, I am not very good at "lip service," or flattery, and whatever I say is pretty close to my true feelings on the matter, so I live my life convinced that the same must be true of the people around me. In other words, I'm a simpleminded man who takes people at their word even when it's just lip service, and I'm usually happy to do so. I think it might actually be healthier than living in doubt of everyone else.

- Chapter 7 The Moonlight City of Eherias

This story concludes the volume.

I want to live my life in such a way that when I take the wrong path, I can say, "Sorry, my mistake!" The more of an adult I become, the more useless pride gets in my way, and I can no longer say, "Oh, sorry!" as easily as I could when I was an elementary schooler... These days, whenever there's a difference of opinion and things get tense, I always try to solve it with a compromise. When I think about that, I start feeling old and get sad. (I'm twenty-seven years old and self-employed.)

And so that's it for *The Journey of Elaina*, Vol. 14.

And I have news! By the time Volume 14 goes on sale in the middle of October, the anime will already be airing!

Given the current situation, I wasn't able to participate in the recording

process in person, and I made most of my contributions remotely. But my goodness, the footage really is beautiful, and I'm so impressed by the incredible performances from the ridiculously amazing cast.

Every time I see a promotional video, I'm beside myself, and whenever I hear the recordings, I'm filled with emotion. The opening and ending theme songs are just the best, and I'm happy every day.

I'm living each day with my heart dancing in my chest, excited to find out which stories will show up next and how they will be depicted. I bet Elaina also feels like this every day as she goes from place to place on her journey.

Since the person writing the anime script started with the earliest chapters, I always look forward to reminiscing as I watch. And I've also been reminiscing as I go back over the contents of the short story compilation, Volume 15, piece by piece. (Buy it, okay?!)

The anime is full of great selections from start to finish, from comedic tales to serious ones. They're all beautiful and wonderful and amazing, so make sure you enjoy it all the way to the last episode! I'll be enjoying the weekly broadcast right along with you.

By the way, did you know this volume had a special edition with a drama CD included? As always, the CD is packed with comedic stories and strong acting performances from the whole cast, and yet again, I was in the wings roaring with laughter as I listened to the recordings. If we can, I'd like to put out drama CD compilations and new drama CDs as often as possible. I also want to work on the anime, and on movies, too. My days are just overflowing with things I want to do, and I'm pleased as punch. I just wish times like these could go on forever. Truly, my life right now is like a dream.

And there you have it—that was the afterword.

I have a lot of people to acknowledge this time, so if you would be so kind as to let me thank them all at once, that would make me very happy.

To everyone involved with *The Journey of Elaina*, whether the original books, the comicalization, the drama CDs, the merchandise, or the anime: Thank you all so very much.

I hope, from the bottom of my heart, that we can continue to work together for many years to come.

And to all you readers: Thank you for always supporting me and sticking with me. I'll see you next time!

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